



Book III: Daughter of Darkness

# Bella Mia

By

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Author recommends reading books in order of release.

*Daughter of Darkness* by Mandy M Roth

*The Enchantress* by Mandy M Roth

*Bella Mia* by Mandy M Roth

#### Dedication

To the loyal fans of the Daughter of Darkness Series. You've not only stuck with the gang from day one, you've supported me both publicly and behind the scenes as well. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Now, you, with the pitchfork and torches in my front yard, you can go.

## Chapter One

“Check mate,” Giovanni said, his voice smooth.

I stared across the chessboard at him and rolled my eyes. “There’s a shocker!”

He’d beaten me three times in a row, somehow perfecting the art of annihilating his opponents in the shortest amount of moves possible. No surprise, he’d had almost five hundred years to master the game of chess. I’d had less than thirty. Guess who was better.

Twirling the end of his long, black hair, he gave me a wicked little smile. It was entirely too sexy, as I’m sure he already suspected. “I could let you win next time.”

I had a sneaky suspicion he had tried to let me win the last one, which had ended in much the same fashion as the rest—me as the loser.

“Oh, yeah, I want a pity win, thanks ... but, no.”

He laughed and stood with the same grace he had in all his actions. He put his hand out to me, his gaze darting over my body as he pulled me up to him. My long burgundy, belled slacks gave the look of a skirt and the flow of a gown. My overly exaggerated breasts were pushed up towards him in the matching corset top. I looked like I could be starring in a late night soap opera.

For the supernatural and super horny.

Giovanni glanced down at the mounds of white flesh and bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment of my beauty. No, I wasn’t being cocky. He’d done it so many times over the past four months that I was used to it. Trust me when I say getting used to being treated like a queen is friggin’ awesome.

The first time he’d acted like that, I’d stopped and made a point to question his behavior. He simply explained he was paying his respects for being allowed to be near me. I laughed him off, thinking he was joking. I mean, come on, who would buy that response as the right answer?

Giovanni was one I was never able to read well. I knew all about him being a big-bad-vampire and I knew all about his role in killing me my first time on this earth. That was over two-hundred years ago. Wait, it gets even more confusing. He also played a key role in saving my life on two different occasions this time around.

Warning: Concentrating too hard on my own life could lead to an aneurysm.

Being reincarnated was hard enough to live with. Try adding the fact that ninety percent of the people I knew in my past life were immortal and still around. Apparently, I had a history, sometimes sordid, with each of them. Yeah, I was beginning to think I’d make a great movie of the week. If I was lucky, someone famous would play me. Doubtful though.

“Dance with me, *Bella*.” He made no attempt to hide his accent like so many vampires I know did. Giovanni had lived most of his life in Italy and made no bones about it. He was what he was and that was that. I admired him for it.

“Who is this?” I was curious as to what composer I was listening to now.

“Busoni,” Giovanni said, as if this one name declaration would sum it all up for

me. I smiled and gave up trying to figure it all out. I decided to enjoy the moment. “Busoni, had a tremendous range of expression, would you agree? Not to the extent of many of the masters, but I enjoy him all the same. Pity he had to die. Such a mortal thing to do.”

I nodded, unsure what, exactly, I was agreeing to and smiled again. I wouldn’t know range of expression if it bit me in the ass. I also found little shocking about his comment on mortals dying. It was a sad truth. Giovanni was full of many of those.

For the first time in a long time, my smiles weren’t forced. Giovanni made me happy. Italy made me happy. It felt like home.

I let him put his hand on my waist and take my other in his. He led us across the marble floor in such a perfect, fluid motion that it felt as though we’d been doing it for centuries. Perhaps we had. My memories of my past life were sporadic at best. Whatever was happening between us seemed right.

My heels clicked along as I let myself be swept up in the moment. Giovanni had a way about him. He was sophisticated, yet full of humor and charm. He was so very different from the men I’d left behind four months earlier. He was also a great deal more dangerous. Maybe that was part of the lure.

He spun me around and around. Lifting me off my feet, he continued around once more before setting me back down gently. When he was finished, I was left dizzy, breathless, and clinging to him. I knew he enjoyed being this close to me. I enjoyed it, too. More than I should but it was hard not to appreciate the feel of his toned body pressed to mine. We’d been staying together for the last fourteen weeks and in that time he and I had never had sex or even shared a kiss. Horny didn’t even begin to cover my body at present.

There’s only so much Italian stallion a gal can take before she’s biting her lip and thinking of easing her own sexual frustration.

Giovanni was turning out to be someone I enjoyed spending time with. He’d been gracious enough to take me away from the chaos of my father’s--King Kerrigan, Leader of the Dark Realm--home. My father had been well meaning in his attempts at throwing an extravagant engagement party for me, but he hadn’t been aware that circumstances had changed. Caleb, the man I had agreed to marry, and I had had a falling out. My father especially liked Caleb, because he, like me, is a faerie. Being intimate with a faerie is a feeling that cannot be duplicated even with the most loving of partners. As much as Caleb and I seemed perfect for each other, the engagement went sour fast. He’d been running around town with other women and I’d been sleeping with other men. One man in particular that I’d chosen to share myself with had upset him—Pallo D'Alessandro.

Pallo happened to be a master vampire and longtime on and off again boyfriend of mine. Did I forget to mention that Giovanni sired him? You know what they say about the webs we weave.

“What would you like to do today, *Bella*?”

Giovanni had made sure to set it up so that I didn’t have to do anything on my own if I didn’t want to. It sounded very glamorous in the beginning, until two women showed up in my bathroom trying to clean me. I had had to draw the line and set limits then. After a two hour limit setting session Giovanni seemed to understand I didn’t mind living my own life or bathing myself.

"I don't care. You decide."

"My dear, *Bella*, everyday it is the same. I ask what you want and you volley it back to me."

"Volley? My, aren't we the hip vamp? Are you taking notes on how to sound like you come from this century?" I batted my lashes. "Oh, I want to see them."

His smile widened. "Shall we try horseback riding again?"

I let out a long, exasperated breath. "The horses are scared to death of you. Why don't you get some sort of demon-breed? Maybe they'd be less skittish." The last time we'd attempted to go for a ride Giovanni had sent the horses into a dither. They were beside themselves with fear. They could sense he was a vampire and they were not cool with that. Hell, I wasn't always cool with it either. Couldn't really blame the things. Our planned night out ended up with me coaxing an upset horse back to its stable while trying to convince Giovanni that, no, I really didn't need his help.

"How about tennis ... would you like to play?"

This was going nowhere fast. "I don't know how to play. Maybe, if you did you could teach me."

Laughing, he threw his hands up. "*Arrèndere*—I surrender. It is up to you, *Bella*."

"Can I ask you something?" I hedged, unsure how much I wanted to push him because I was positive his answer wouldn't be to my liking.

"Of course."

"Why is it you have a pool, a tennis court, horses and all this other stuff if you can't, or don't want to use them?"

A slight smile appeared on his handsome face. "I told the people who took care of this property that I wanted it kept up to date. They followed my orders."

"That part I get. It explains some of the stuff, but not the horses."

Coming close to me, he touched my cheek and his soft hands ran over my skin lightly. "*Bella*, it is you who liked horses. I simply continued to keep them around after you were gone. They reminded me of you. I used to watch you care for them and go for morning rides to see the sun come up. Though, I was not able to accompany you due to obvious reasons, I did so enjoy knowing you were happy."

I didn't know what to say. He'd kept a stable full of horses around for over two-hundred years because I'd liked them? It was too much even for me. I shouldn't have been surprised. He'd kept a room of the house stocked full of my old clothes. Over the years he'd picked up things here and there that reminded him of me, even though I had been long dead. It wasn't very endearing. It was weird.

"Giovanni, you're creeping me out again."

"I do have a tendency to do that."

A nervous laugh escaped me as I glanced around the large sitting room. It was beautiful. In fact, it was the most beautiful room I'd ever been in. It wasn't just that he had decorated it in antiques that seemed very touchable, it was how much time he'd put into every piece of furniture and artwork that went into his home. He seemed to have a thing for deep, rich colors in the main living area and more subtle ones throughout the rest of his home.

My gaze wandered to the fresco of Jesus tending his sheep. The irony of the devil having Jesus hanging on his wall was not lost on me. A vampire with the desire to have a

holy figure depicted in his home—just another example of Giovanni’s quirks. Part of what made me like being around him so very much. It was also something I’d miss.

I looked back at him with a heavy heart. “I’m going to have to go home soon.”

There. I had said it out loud.

He moved his long black hair over one shoulder and began to take his jacket off. The man wore designer suits almost every day. I wondered if he wore designer underwear, too. Shocked to find myself thinking about him sexually again, I couldn’t pull my eyes away as his long, pale fingers unbuttoned one of the three buttons of the single-breasted black jacket. He casually tossed the jacket onto the sage-colored chair behind him. My cheeks flared red because only yesterday I had been picturing him nude in that very chair. The soft feel of the velvet and the ornate features matched him, so well. Having him waiting naked in it for me seemed like the perfect fantasy.

Giovanni was doing the most casual of things, yet I couldn’t seem to tear my gaze from him. His matching black button up dress shirt was open, down to his mid-chest. My toes curled at the thought of touching him. I was shaken. I’d gotten used to looking at men bare their chests to me since I’d known Caleb and Pallo. Caleb was a fan of the no-shirt look and Pallo liked to show his chest off through the wonders of designer clothing. Giovanni was a lot like Pallo in that respect, but he seemed to think more was better. I had seen him once in a mesh black shirt. It showed off his tanned and toned upper body, but I’d never seen him in anything quite that revealing again.

Moving onto my tiptoes, I tried to sneak a peek into his shirt. He caught me doing it and smiled.

“You have only but to ask me and ....”

I put my hand up to stop him from going any further. I’d been the one to insist sex stay out of our relationship, but being next to an Italian stud twenty-four hours a day could make a nun second guess herself.

I’m certainly no nun.

“No. Really, I’m good. I was just wondering about something.”

He walked over to the side table and poured two glasses of wine, keeping his back to me. I knew it was on purpose. His tall, toned frame and long hair made him slightly androgynous from the backside. Thankfully, his shoulders were wide and his face masculine or people would begin to wonder.

Giovanni turned and handed me a glass of red wine. As I took it, my body reacted to his touch, heating, tightening, aching for more. Yanking my hand away, I gave him a nasty look. “I thought I told you not to use your vamp-mojo on me.”

His black eyes softened and the corner of his mouth dropped into a frown. “*Bella*, I am not using any mojo on you. I promise you that.”

If he was telling the truth, then I was in deep shit. Having feelings for him could be deadly. I knew that for a fact. I set my glass of wine down and walked towards the stairs. “I need some time to myself.”

What I really should have said was that I needed to put distance between us.

He put his glass in the air and nodded to me. “Of course.”

## Chapter Two

Entering my room, I looked around. As much as I loved it, I knew I'd have to leave sooner or later. The pale green on the walls always fit my mood. When I was happy it felt cheery and when I was lonely it had a way of joining me. It was a rarity to find a room that matched my insanity and it upset me to know I'd be leaving it soon.

Admit it, you don't want to leave him ... the room is secondary, by far.

Ignoring my own mental ramblings, I walked over to my wardrobe and opened it. I pulled the bottom right drawer out and poked around at its contents. I never could keep track of what my options were. Giovanni kept the garments rotating almost daily. I didn't want to think about the amount of money he was spending on me while I was with him. I got the impression from most of the two-hundred plus year old immortals I knew money wasn't really an issue any longer. I guess after earning it for so long, you amass enough to last a while, or maybe your decisions had grown wiser over the centuries. Seeking investment suggestions from them would be smart. I'd have to remember to do that.

I needed some alone time and Giovanni had no trouble giving it to me. That also made him different than Caleb and Pallo. They would have followed me around until I tripped over them. Even after that, they'd still have found a way to annoy me. It was a gift they both seemed to possess.

James, a vampire, and someone I considered my best friend, would have also understood my need for space. Shortly before I'd left, James had confessed to having a bond of sorts with me. I wasn't sure what to make of it, but I knew enough about myself to know acting on it would be a bad thing. For some unknown reason his body perceived me to be his mate. Our hearts and minds knew better. I couldn't risk losing the one man who I loved unconditionally and who shared my feelings. Our friendship could survive anything except sex. Not to mention outside forces would no doubt end his life should sex ever come into play. Pallo and Caleb wouldn't stop until James was dead and even if they did somehow decide to allow him to live, I'd only hurt him in the end. It seemed to be my MO.

Meet man. Fall in love with man. Crush man's world.

The night air was cool, so swimming would have normally been out of the question, but Giovanni's pool was heated and had wonderful underwater lights to make it feel warm and inviting. He also had a rocking hot tub, adjacent to the pool that was always toasty and good for relaxing.

I tied the sides of the Brazilian style bikini on my hips. For having next to no material it was surprisingly easy to get on. The top was a different story. Leaning, I let my long wavy black hair fall forward. I pulled the red strings up and tied them behind my head. When I flipped my head back, hair spilled all around me. I grabbed a red mesh wrap and tied it around me, as well.

Standing there looking at my reflection in the full-length mirror made me rethink leaving Giovanni's. My skin had finally begun to regain its natural sheen. My nails had



grown back. My hair no longer seemed to lack its luster. Heck, even the unnatural sapphire blue of my eyes appeared deeper. Most importantly, I no longer had the look of being tired. Giovanni had managed to create a stress free environment for me and my body appreciated it. I appreciated it, as well. If I didn't have to return soon to sort things out with my father I wouldn't.

This couldn't last forever.

That ever present thorn in my side, my inner voice, went and confirmed what I already knew. It was pointless to dwell on things I couldn't change. Giving in, I decided to walk barefoot down to the pool. The walk was short and the night was gorgeous. I headed out the doors in my room that opened onto a large balcony and down the staircase to the backyard. Passing Giovanni's study windows, I spotted him sitting at his desk, talking on the phone. He glanced up, pulled the phone away from his ear and mouthed, "Just a minute." I gave him a tiny wave and continued downward.

He was never just a minute when he was dealing with business. He took a very hands on approach to running his many companies and I was fast realizing how hard the man really worked. He wasn't like Pallo. I'd only rarely seen Pallo handling his business affairs. Giovanni was always neck deep in work. I got the impression he liked it that way. He was beyond rich and had no need to work, yet he did.

Dipping my foot in to test the water, more out of habit than anything else, I smiled. I'd been in his pool at least twenty times since I'd been staying with him and the water temperature was always perfect. My fingers felt along the knot on my wrap and I loosened it. I let it fall to the ground as I put my hand on the rail and climbed down the stairs into the shallow end.

When the water level came up to just under my breasts, I gave in and slid under. I pushed off the bottom and moved my body towards the other end of the pool. Swimming came naturally to me, like dancing. I think many things I'd learned to do in my past life were coming back to me. Avoiding Giovanni just wasn't one of them. No, I felt no need to be leery of him. I wasn't sure what my mind had done with the memories of my previous death, but it sure didn't feel the need to release them for me to see.

Reaching the end of the pool, I stopped at the side, holding onto the edge while wiping water from my eyes. I knew I should wear the goggles Giovanni had gotten for me, but there was something so very unflattering about tiny round plastic discs secured to your head with the world's tightest cord. No thanks, I'd deal with red eyes.

Something moved in the bushes near me. I looked in the direction the noise had come from and saw nothing but knew someone was there. Pallo had been forced to try to make me a vampire to save my life. I'd decided to play the hero and took a massive dose of Caleb's power into myself to save him. In doing so I'd caused my body to shut down and my heart to stop. Pallo had come to my aid, trying to turn me into a creature of the night. While he'd failed in that respect, he had succeeded in saving my life. I'd been experiencing some rather odd side effects since then. One of the side effects had been a heightened sense of awareness. Another was increased night vision. I was positive someone was out there. I just didn't know who or what.

I stared out into the maze of bushes again. This time I heard a snarl and caught a glimpse of something large and furry. Letting go of the side of the pool, I kicked back, making my way to the center of the pool. I kept my gaze trained on the spot where I'd seen the bushes move. Nothing was there, but I could still sense something near me. I

kept swimming backwards towards the shallow end. Going to the side and trying to hoist myself out of the water seemed foolish considering I was pretty sure a yeti or some sort of hairy beast was running around the yard. Okay, a yeti was a stretch but with my lifestyle one never knew if a mythical beast would pounce on them or not. I'd rather face it head on while standing on my feet than to come up over the edge of the pool to find myself staring in the whites of its eyes.

Call me crazy, but that didn't seem like a good idea.

Continuing to visually scan the area where I'd sensed the beast, I could almost feel it there watching me—waiting for an opportune moment to strike. The telltale noise of something sniffing around, as if it were trying to catch my scent, sounded from the very spot I was sure I'd seen something. Being in the water must have acted like a buffer from it being able to pick up on me right away. I paddled backwards again. Better safe than sorry.

Something touched my shoulders and I screamed. Turning, I thrashed in the water at the source of the touch. Two strong hands grabbed my arms and pulled me up.

*"Bella?"*

I stopped and glanced up to find Giovanni holding me. Grabbing hold of him, I threw my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. His hands moved straight out on each side of him. He didn't want to hug me back. I wrapped my legs around his waist and realized he was still wearing his clothes.

*"You're standing in a pool that you hate, wearing a suit."*

He kept his arms out to his sides, looking like a cross and I was affixed to him. Making a religious joke to a man who could never set foot on holy ground seemed cruel so I let it go. What I did not let go of was him. He tried to move his head to talk to me, but I was clinging too tightly to his neck. I eased up and tried to stand. My head instantly went under the water level. Giovanni is at the very least a head taller than I and that gave him extra play in the pool. He slid his arms around my waist and pulled me up to him. I met his dark eyes and searched for answers to the way he made me feel. While I didn't find them, I did find concern etched on his handsome face.

*"You were frightened, so I came to you,"* he said matter-of-factly.

My gaze flickered towards the spot where I'd seen the bushes moving. *"I saw something ... over there. It sounded like an animal or something. It had to be huge, though, to make the bushes move like they did. I know I didn't imagine it."*

Giovanni's arm tightened on my waist as he looked in the direction I was referring to. I knew before he said it that nothing was there, because I no longer sensed another presence. He took a few steps backwards into the shallow end, allowing me to be able to touch the bottom. I didn't put my feet down at first and this made him put his hands out again.

*"Gwyneth, please."*

I understood what he meant. I'd threatened to kill him if he crossed the line with me and here I was clinging to him. How fair was that?

*"I'm sorry,"* I whispered, wanting to offer up more when I felt his skin under his wet shirt. The cool night air had a way of making nipples stand at attention—his were no exception. His nipple ring pressed firmly against my breast. He was full of little oddities that were in sharp contradiction to the Italian suit wearing suave man he portrayed himself to be. The feel of his wet, cold body against mine was too much. My skin

tingled at every point of contact with his and my lips burned to be kissed by him. I wanted to touch him and to have him touch me.

He put his hands on top of his head and took another step back. I was still clinging to his body so I went with him. I knew what he was doing. He was going to force me to be the one to make the first move. He wouldn't leave himself in a position of being accused of having started it.

Smart man.

A little too smart if you ask me.

"You're cold." I caressed his cool skin tenderly.

He kept his hands on his head as he stared down at me. "So, are you." He was right and reminding me of it made a shiver run over me. "I will go and get some towels."

"But, Giovanni, you're soaked. You're going to drip water all over the house."

Lame. Yes, but all I had at the moment.

This made him laugh. He finally gave in and put his arms down. Sliding his hands around my waist, he gave me a quick hug before he tried to pry me off him. Holding tight, I looked into his obsidian eyes and wondered what had made me fall in love with him so long ago.

"I would offer you a penny to hear your thoughts, Gwyneth, but I know you and your tastes run more exquisite than that," he said, smiling slightly, showing off his amazing dimples.

Laughing, I knew that his sense of humor had to have played a key role in me running away with him. Sure, he was hot. I hadn't met too many vampires who weren't, but all the men in my life looked good, it had to be something else, something more.

"Am I supposed to carry you into the house?" he asked, with a wink.

I let go of his neck long enough to poke him in the ribs and tickle him. I knew without needing to be told where to touch him to make him laugh. I pulled his soaked shirt up and went for his low side abs. I stopped dead in my tracks when I noticed the tip of a tattoo poking up from his pant line.

"Giovanni, I don't remember you having a tattoo."

"*Bella*, you surprise me. I did not think you remembered much of me at all." He smiled and moved his hands up and away from me. He looked like he was being robbed at gunpoint and maybe, just maybe, being touched by me could be as dangerous. At least I liked to think so.

Putting my hand on the waist of his pants, I tugged. His leather belt wouldn't let me get much play on them so I moved my fingers over the buckle and undid it. He didn't attempt to either help me or stop me. This neutral status of his wore on my nerves. Never one to admit defeat, I pushed onward, finally managing to undo the belt and pull his pants forward. His narrow toned hips drew my attention to the black ink tattoo of a half moon with a star next to it. The moon and star were enclosed in an odd shaped circle. Upon closer inspection it looked similar to a pentagram. I moved my finger over it and glanced up at him.

"Forever is a long time to have this on you."

His gaze slid down to meet my finger as I caressed his tattoo. If I moved my hand any lower I'd be entering bedroom territory. From the look on his face, he knew that, too. "I had my reasons for having it done. Do you like it?"

I pulled on his pants more. The top of his bikini black underwear were now

showing.

Impressive.

I'd taken him for a no underwear kind of guy. That was Caleb. He loved to just toss on a pair of jeans and go. I often wondered how he avoided a zipper tragedy as gifted as he was. Giovanni's dark eyes pulled me out of my thoughts of Caleb.

"You don't care for it." He attempted to cover himself.

I caught his wrist. "Don't."

He bent his head down ever-so-slightly and my mouth instantly went to his. He drew back from me and I had to yank hard on his pants to keep him close. Running my fingers over the tattoo on his hip, I felt the tiniest spark of heat rise off it. I pulled my lips back from his still closed mouth.

"What the ...?"

Giovanni went to answer me, but stopped at the sound of a high-pitched howling. A rather nasty, threatening, snarl, from something else, followed suit, leaving it sounding as if a zoo had surrounded us. He looked towards the tennis court and then back to me. "Go in the house and do not come out. I keep a gun in my study. There are silver bullets in my desk drawer. Do you know how to load it?"

I nodded. Ken, an ex-fiancé of mine, had made sure I knew how to handle a weapon.

Giovanni turned quickly and got out of the pool. Water came streaming off him. His black dress clothes stuck to him like glue. I wanted to shoot the damn thing from the bushes now, just out of spite for making me miss out on running my hands over Giovanni's wet body. I cursed silently to myself and followed him out of the water. The cold night air hit me, and I shivered.

I'm shooting it for making me freeze my ass off, too. Might as well go for broke.

"You're not planning on going to see what that was, are you?"

He glanced back at me over his right shoulder. "I know what it is, it's an omnimorpheleon. They have a certain," he waved a hand in the air, "vibe about them and it does not appear to be alone."

"An omnimo-what-in?" I asked, blinking several times as if the very act would help Giovanni's words sink in.

"It is sufficient to say that an omnimorpheleon is the ultimate enemy. It can be many things. None of which one would want to run into alone at night."

"You got all of that out of some snarls and howls?" Damn, he was good.

Giovanni let his eyes shift colors, tiny flecks of red danced in them before they returned to their normal obsidian. "No. I got all of that because I am not human. Go to the house now, Gwen."

He called me Gwen. That meant he was serious. I snatched my thin red wrap up and tied it around my waist. "No way. I'm coming with you."

Giovanni rounded on me fast. For a split second, I caught a glimpse of his face growing hard and angry. He'd never looked at me once like that in the time I'd been staying with him, and I hoped he'd never do it again. I took a step back and he stopped himself from going into full vamp change over. "Please, go in the house. Get the gun. If anything comes through the door, shoot it—man, beast, demon, anything."

Another howl came from behind us. I turned to see if one of those omnimorpheleon things was there, but there was nothing. Of course, as far as I knew

they could be invisible or look like a fern. It wasn't like I was an expert on them, and I should have been. With my job as an assistant to a paranormal regulator who also dubbed as an attorney, I'd run across just about every type of supernatural there was. I can safely say omnimorpheleons had never come up.

When I looked back to argue with Giovanni for being reckless, he was gone. A puddle of water was all that remained to show that he'd ever been there.

I sensed something near me and it wasn't Giovanni. It had the faint order of a wet dog. My chest tightened with fear, and I pulled on my power. Being a faerie meant I was magikal, being the daughter of the King of the Dark Realm meant I could be downright lethal. I brought enough of my power up that if need be I could do some damage and ran towards the back doors. Giovanni's study had an exterior door in it, so I headed straight for it. My cold, wet fingers slipped off of the handle three times, before I gave up and tried to dry my hand off on a piece of my wrap.

Suddenly, every hair on my body stood on end. Something was wrong. Very wrong. I knew something was coming in from my right-hand side, and I knew it would be on me before I could get in the room. Turning quickly, I spotted the underside of what looked like a wolf of sorts coming at me in mid-air. Spots on its fur coat mentally threw me as I tried to figure out what exactly was attacking. No wolf I'd ever seen before was spotted.

I put my hand up and sent a blast of my energy out at it. I hadn't wanted to have to resort to using magik, but the situation warranted it. I knew my father had ways of tracing magikal creatures, and I wasn't ready to be found just yet. My attacker had other ideas. It had to be one of creatures Giovanni mentioned—an omnimorpheleon. Clearly, they were hybrids of some form because whatever the thing was, it looked to have a bit of hyena mixed with a wolf. The hybrid shot backwards and let out a yelp. He hit the tiled patio and slid sideways. Finally, I managed to get the door open.

Turning around, I knew I was too late, another omnimorpheleon was there. Its features were slightly off, preventing it from looking like a wolf but certainly leaving it a close cousin. Since he appeared to be thinking I was dinner, I didn't stop to ask him what his lineage was. He hit the tiled patio and slid sideways.

I knew I was too late to make it inside. A white blur came leaping out at me. As my mind registered the fact that a tiger was coming at me, my body froze. It really was turning into a zoo around here.

Its wide jaw opened, exposing a mouth full of razor sharp teeth that clamped down hard on my left arm. I didn't think it broke my skin at first, because all I felt was pressure, but Pallo's bite had given me the ability to smell blood and I knew I was bleeding.

I kicked at the tiger, trying to tug my arm loose. The harder I pulled the harder it bit down on me. I could feel it tearing the muscles and knew the bone would break soon. Bringing my knee up, I drove it hard into the animal's side. It didn't let go of me. It yanked on me and I fell to the ground, giving the tiger the upper hand. It would go for my throat or chest now. I pulled up what little bit of power I had left in me up and loaded my free hand with it. Putting my hand over the tiger's face, I let the magik loose. It let go of my arm and snapped at me as it backed up, rubbing its nose to the ground all the way.

I hadn't used my magik once in the four months I'd been with Giovanni and it

was much like being a marathon runner. If you practice and train every day, you hold up well when race day comes. If you don't work out or put your time in and show up to compete, you're tired before they're done pinning the number on your back.

I was tired.

Rolling over, I tried to push myself up and off the ground. My left arm was officially useless and the more I looked at the gaping wound, the more I wanted to pass out. Pain radiated through my upper body, but I knew better than to give in to it. Using my elbow and right hand to push myself up and into the seated position, I pressed my back against the wall and tried to catch my breath.

The pool lights reflected off a pair of icy blue eyes. My heart instantly rose to my throat. I had nothing left in me. A black wolf stepped out of the shadows. This one actually looked like it only had the makeup of a wolf, nothing else. It came within six feet of me and stopped. I entertained the thought of closing my eyes to avoid seeing it as it tore my throat out, but decided I'd take it like a man. It moved up closer to me and bent its head down to sniff at my leg. I braced myself for impact. None came. Instead, the wolf moved upwards and pushed its snout into my crotch. Gasping, I jerked backwards, causing the wolf to bare its teeth.

I tried counting to ten in an attempt to keep myself calm. It didn't work. The wolf's head went down towards my ripped open forearm. It licked the wound. Leaning my head back against the wall, I prepared myself for pain and possible death. A hot, sandpaper-like tongue ran over my cheek. Blinking, I stared into the wolf's blue eyes and saw my reflection. It was then I realized I was crying. The wolf licked my cheek again, turned and ran off towards the hills surrounding Giovanni's house.

I let out the breath I'd been holding and brought my feet up towards my body, trying to stand up. I had to dig my fingernails into the doorframe to get enough of a grip to stand. Working with only one hand wasn't easy. Losing all the blood I had made it almost impossible. I finally got to my feet and took the last two steps necessary to make it into Giovanni's study.

I pushed the door closed behind me and backed up towards his desk. I had to stop from the dizziness beginning to hit me in waves. Falling forward, I hit the side of his large oak desk. A small lamp I'd seen him use late at night while he was working crashed to the floor. I tried to catch it but ended up falling forward and cracking my right temple on the corner of the desk. The Spanish tiled floor greeted me with a sickening thud. My knees took the majority of the impact, yet my injured arm was where the pain came from.

With my one good arm, I pulled myself in an inchworm fashion to the other side of Giovanni's desk. The distant cries of the various predators surrounding me echoed and I stayed focused on my task—arming myself. I tried to get his top drawer open but couldn't. My hands were slick with my own blood and I was losing so much of it that I only had the strength of a child. I let out a small cry and pulled again. The drawer gave and flew out at me. Its contents scattered across the room.

Something shuffled by the door. From my spot behind the desk, I couldn't see what it was. My newly developing senses made me very aware of it moving around the patio. I just couldn't tell what was moving out there—only that it was indeed there. I glanced around at the spilled contents of the drawer. The gun was across the room now, partially under a bookcase. Going for it would mean exposing my position and most

likely passing out. I decided against it. Giovanni's silver letter opener was close enough to me on the floor for me to be able to grab it with my good hand and not move. I picked it up and gripped it tightly.

The door flew open and I prepared myself to strike. I brought the opener up close to my chest and waited. Something jumped onto the table above my head. I screamed and shot back into the leg opening of the desk. In one quick movement, I saw a pair of black Italian dress shoes and damp pants appear in front of me. The top of the desk masked out the rest of Giovanni's body, but I knew it was him.

"Giovanni!"

"*Bella*, are you okay?" he asked, his voice hoarse. He didn't move.

I glanced at my arm. It wasn't pretty. "No, I don't think so. It's my arm... one of them took a bite out of me."

Giovanni touched the underside of the desk. His normally well-manicured fingers now looked longer than normal and grotesque. He was in full vamp form.

Fear gripped me.

"Giovanni?" I was scared beyond words now. Giovanni wasn't a man I wanted to be around while he was in vamp mode.

"This blood, is it all yours?"

"Y-yes."

His long dagger-like fingernails raked across the underside of the desk. I pulled back into myself further. "Talk to me, *Bella*. Talk to me about anything, *vita mia*." His voice was shaky and deeper than normal.

I wanted to scream like a child, but I knew a little about where he was going with this. He wanted to hear my voice to calm him down. I'd seen something similar happen with Pallo and knew that even in the most desperate of times the powerful vampires could still fight their demons. My mind pushed around hundreds of conversation starters, but I couldn't latch onto just one thing. Somehow, 'how's the weather' didn't really seem to be enough.

Giovanni's nails inched towards me.

It was now or never. "I, umm, I can't do this. I don't know what to say to you. How do you beg someone not to tear you to pieces, Giovanni? I don't practice these kinds of speeches in front of a mirror, but I'm beginning to think I should. Oh, God, this can't be happening. I trust you and this can't be how it ends. I refuse to believe you'd hurt me again. I refuse to ...." Putting my head down onto my raised knees, I did my best to not panic. When I felt his hand on my leg, I let out a small cry.

"*Bella*, come."

I peered over my knee to see Giovanni squatting down on the floor reaching in to me. No sign of the demon he carried within him remained. He had pulled it together and conquered the hunger always present in him. Joy surged through me as I went into his arms.

"Giovanni," I whispered, too emotional to get much beyond that out.

He lifted me in his arms and kissed my forehead. "Your trust means the world to me, *Bella*, as do you."

### Chapter Three

I pulled the white throw blanket up over my legs. The nights had been getting cooler earlier lately, and I didn't want to go back into my room just yet. Closing the book I'd been reading, I sighed and set it on the iron table. I had to adjust myself in the chair again. My body was still a little stiff from all of the omnimorpheleon excitement.

I'd gotten my bandages removed earlier in the day. A doctor friend of Giovanni's had come and tended to me shortly after Giovanni had pulled me out from under the desk. When I saw the amount of blood in his study, I knew why he'd lost control. It was a miracle he didn't attack me. A vampire of lesser years most likely would have.

The doctor he brought in was trained to deal with people like me as well as humans. He was quick to point out to us that if I had been human or just faerie, I'd have bled to death. The omnimorpheleon that had been shifted into the form of a white tiger had hit an artery, explaining the massive quantities of blood I'd lost. Pallo's gift of saving my life by trying to bring me back as a vampire had given me the ability to survive an attack of that nature, but the doctor warned if we'd waited much longer to get me medical attention, nothing would have helped me. I'd also been concerned with becoming an omnimorpheleon.

As wonderful as being able to change into various creatures of the darkness sounded, I was going to have to pass. I had enough issues without adding schizophrenic paranormal tendencies to it. The doctor and Giovanni laughed. They had to explain to me that only humans or half humans could be turned. I was safe.

At least there was an upside to it all. I wasn't going to wake up and need ten packs of disposable razors to find my face.

The doctor had brought a bag full of creams and ointments. Apparently, he'd studied the craft along with medicine and used a nice combination of the two. He didn't confess to it, but I was pretty sure he was part Si because he was able to call on the power of restoration to mend my arm.

It had been four days since the attack and my arm still wasn't perfect, but it was a hell of a lot better than it would have been without the aid of magik. It was covered in raised light pink scars. I touched the biggest one, the one on the crook of my elbow.

"Soon they will be gone."

Glancing up, I found Giovanni standing next to me. I took his hand and patted it gently. "I know and thanks for trying to cheer me up."

He walked out to the curved balcony railing. Putting his hands on it, he leaned forward and visually scanned the grounds of his estate. He'd taken to having the area patrolled constantly. I knew that he, like Pallo, had an overabundance of vampires at his beck and call. The night after the attack Giovanni had the castle crawling with his people. I knew he was only thinking of my safety, but I secretly wished they'd all just go away and leave the two of us alone again.

Leaning over the rail in his gray slacks, black shirt with tiny gray stripes and loafers he looked like he was posing for a photo shoot. If he hadn't been a vampire, he'd



have made the perfect male fashion model. I doubt the fashion industry would want a bloodsucker in their midst.

"It'd serve you right if you fell over." I laughed softly.

Giovanni turned his handsome face towards me and flashed his double-dimple forming smile. He pushed up and off the railing and flipped his legs over it. His long black hair did a reverse waterfall effect as he disappeared over the side. Jumping to my feet, I sent the white throw to the floor. I was barefoot and the cold tiles were slick with the moisture of the night. I tried to come to a stop before I reached the rail but failed. I hit the railing with such a force that my body went right over the top of it.

I grabbed out to catch the curved rail. I missed and a scream escaped my throat. Something seized hold of my body and spun me around. I buried my head downward and readied myself to crash into the ground. I didn't. Instead, my feet touched down softly on the grass.

I stared at the black and gray striped shirt in front of me and rubbed my face closer to it. "That wasn't funny. I thought you were hurt," I whispered, keeping my head down long enough to wipe the tears from my eyes. I didn't want Giovanni to see me cry.

"I did not think you would jump, as well."

I glanced up at him, no longer bothering to hide my feelings. "I was worried. I didn't know, I mean, I do know you can, well, fly, but it just was instinctive. I was ...."

He moved a stray piece of hair away from my eyes and smiled slightly. "You were concerned for me, *Bella*. I like that."

I punched him in the arm and winked. "You made me sick to my stomach. Thanks."

He took me at arm's length and visually scanned my body. "No, what will make you sick, though, is running around in next to nothing."

I stared down at the thin pale pink silk nightgown I was wearing. It hung almost to my feet. It had spaghetti straps and a v-neck line. It covered all of me, but left little room for the imagination.

I snorted. "Like I have a choice. You won't let me leave to go shopping and the stuff you bring in looks like this."

"I believe this has a matching robe."

I growled and went to walk back up to the house. Grabbing hold of my arm gently, he pulled me back towards him. His finger slid over my shoulder and under one of my straps, tugging on it gently.

"I'm sorry," he said, but didn't take his hand away. Giovanni's eyes could get him out of trouble with anyone. His long thick black eyelashes curled slightly on the ends. I'd found myself staring into his eyes all the time lately, wanting very much for them to stare back at me. To see me in the same light. For him to want me as I wanted him. He gave me a wink and a nervous laugh escaped me.

As he moved his fingers down towards my breast, my nipples hardened. My eyes followed his and I found that the silk nightgown seemed all too pleased to show off how erect my nipples were. My body was responding to him more and more as of late. I wasn't sure if it was due to not having sex in four months or because I was really attracted to him. He was hot and I had gotten used to having sex, lots of sex, so there was no telling.

He pulled his hand away and turned his body from me. I stepped in closer to him

and drew his face back around to me. As I stared at him, so many things ran through my mind. I wanted to know our history. I wanted to know how someone so perfect could be so evil, but most of all I wanted to know what it felt like to be naked and in his arms.

Yeah, four months was a long time without sex for me. Maybe going cold turkey wasn't the brightest idea I'd come up with. What else was new?

"Tell me what you're thinking, *Bella*." For some reason Giovanni wasn't able to read my thoughts. He could answer my call for him from anywhere in the world, but he could not scan my mind. I don't understand how vampires get their powers and how they know which ones will develop and which ones wouldn't. I was losing track of who could do what and happy to only be dealing with one vampire at the moment.

"It's nothing," I said, unconvincingly. Giovanni touched my chin and tipped his head to the side. He wasn't buying it. I tried again. "Was it like this before between us? Was it this intense? This overwhelming?"

He thought about my questions for a minute. "Yes, in many ways it was like this. Yet, it was so much more than this and I do not mean just sex, although that was part of it, too."

"More than this?" I had a hard time believing I could have felt more than I already did.

"Yes, *Bella*, it was an amazing time for us, at least for the first seventy-five years or so we were together. The last twenty were not as grand as the years prior."

Hearing him talk about our time together being that long made my head hurt. Being only twenty-five years old, I couldn't comprehend spending that much time with someone. I stared at him, knowing the entire time we had been together we never aged or changed, but something went wrong somewhere. I knew, only from being told, that I'd stopped sleeping with him and started acting more like a roommate than a lover somewhere along the way. That's when I'd met Pallo. Pallo also told me that I was frightened of Giovanni by the time our paths crossed. I'd refused to run off with Pallo for fear Giovanni would kill him then me. According to the stories, my fear had come true, but instead of killing Pallo, he had turned him into a vampire—he sired him. He had no problem killing me, though. I was crazy for letting myself get close to him again and I knew it. But for some insane reason, the idea of leaving him scared me more than the thought of him turning on me.

"*Bella*, what troubles you?"

"I was just trying to figure out how it all went wrong. If, as you say, and I believe you, that our time together was even better than it is now, then why did I leave you for Pallo and why did you ...?" I couldn't bring myself to say kill me and he didn't look like he wanted to hear it.

Giovanni pulled me close to him. Sliding his hands under my hair, he caressed my shoulders. I tipped my head back and rolled it around. My neck muscles were tight from worry and the feel of his hands on my skin was making that go away. I pulled my hair up and turned my body around so that my back was to him. He moved closer to me and continued to rub my shoulders and neck. I bent my head down. Giovanni traced a path down my spine and then returned to my shoulders. I backed up into him, allowing our bodies to press against each other. I let my hair fall and drew his arms around me. I stood, savoring my moment of Zen in his arms.

I heard a noise off near the end of the house. Giovanni pulled me tighter to him.

I knew that he was looking around, he'd heard it, too. We heard it again. He tried to pull back from me.

"No, don't. Call one of your men. Don't leave me."

"I will take you to the house, then I will investigate this further. You do not have to be afraid."

I ran my hand over his leg. "Please, stay with me. I don't want anything to happen to you, Giovanni."

I wasn't sure if it was the please that did it or not, but he pulled me tightly to him and our bodies lifted off of the ground. I never once worried about him dropping me. It seemed silly to trust a man who'd played a key role in my death in another life, but I did.

He set us down on the balcony with ease. I tugged on his hand, doing my best to yank him through the open French doors leading to my room. He seemed sluggish once we entered. Turning, I found him staring out into the night sky. He hadn't gotten to his position by being easily distracted. Something was running loose on his property and he wanted to find it. He was driven. I'd give him that much. I'd been told he was close to five-hundred years old. He didn't look a day over thirty. I would have been jealous, but I knew the same would happen to me. I would cease to age, as well. This was my cut-off point. I would look almost identical to the way I do now, four-hundred years from now. If something didn't kill me before then.

I ran my hand over Giovanni's and tried to draw his attention from the window. I led him over to the large, iron-framed bed that sat in the center of the room. He was still looking off into the night. "Giovanni, they can handle it. Come on."

He turned and his eyes widened when he saw me pulling him towards the bed. "Gwyneth ...."

Putting my finger on his lips, I pulled him close to me. I rose onto my tiptoes to kiss him. At first, I thought he was going to back away. He went to take a step back but stopped. Instead, he artfully moved my body around until my back was pressed against his stomach. His muscular arms wrapped tightly around me and his body swayed, taking mine with it.

We rocked and moved to a beat playing in our heads for what felt like eternity—yet was only seconds. Every time I tried to turn my head to kiss his cheek, he held me tighter, preventing me from doing anything but looking forward. He was being a gentleman, trying to do his best to talk me out of having sex without the use of actual words, to wear me down. At the rate he was going, you'd think he'd be winning. He wasn't. He was only making me hornier.

"Giovanni, if you don't want to do this then just say so."

He pressed his mouth to my ear. "It is not I who does not want this to happen, *Bella*."

"Me?" I snorted. "I'm the one who pulled you in here, remember?"

"How could you want this to happen after everything I have done to you?" The sorrow in his deep voice moved through me.

I ran my hand up the side of his leg and pulled his body tighter against mine. Grabbing a fist full of material, I tugged gently on it. The sheer silk material not only showed off how excited I was to be near him, but it allowed me to feel his excitement in return. His impressive, rigid cock, pressed firmly against my lower back. My body craved sex and I craved Giovanni. The combination left me on the verge of begging him

to enter me. I needed to feel what it was like to have him buried deep within me.

I reached up and ran my fingers through his silky hair. Giovanni moved his hand to my neck, skimming his fingers down the length of my body and over my breast. I pulled at his head to get him closer to me. He kissed the side of my neck and I tipped my head more for him. When he reached my hip he stopped and pulled me tighter against him. A moan escaped me as his clothed cock rubbed my body just right.

“Giovanni,” I whispered.

His breathing grew shallow and the very sound of it spurred me onward. My nightgown rose as he kneaded the material in his hand. Glancing down, I saw that he’d managed to get it up and over my knee. A few pulls later and his hand branded my bare thigh. Turning my head towards his, I met his mouth. I was the one who took the kiss to the next level. I plunged my tongue into his mouth and felt his caress mine. His hand moved higher up my bare thigh to my hip. Our kisses sped up as our bodies continued to sway. Pleasure built within me and we’d done nothing more than kiss. At this rate, I’d explode before we ever made it into a bed.

I found his hand on my hip and put mine over his, easing it over to the apex of my thighs. His breathing was choppy, as was mine. I tipped my head back more. He pulled away from my lips and planted kisses on my neck. It felt so good. Too good. Giovanni’s touch pushed me towards my crescendo.

My eyelids were heavy from the intoxicating allure of promised sex. Desire clung to the air around me and it was all I could do to stay upright. Lazily, I open my eyes and glanced at the full-length mirror. As I closed my eyes again, Giovanni slid his fingers over my pink silk panties. I was moist and eager for him. He pulled the edges of the material and slid his fingers in. Peeking out, I caught a reflection of someone standing behind Giovanni.

Fear shot through me and I spun around quickly. Giovanni’s eyes widened. A look of horror moved over his face. “I am sorry. I thought you were all right with ....”

Putting my hand up, I stopped him from going on. I ran towards the open door. I stopped short of running out it and then stared back at the mirror.

“I thought ... in the mirror ... it looked like he was standing behind you. I thought he was going to hurt you.”

Giovanni looked back at the mirror and then at me. “Who?”

“Pallo.”

## Chapter Four

I made my way down the tiny dirt path. The sun was so bright that I assumed it meant it would be very warm. I was wrong. A slight breeze was blowing that I could feel even through the tan sweater I'd tossed on.

I moved the little, brown wicker basket I was carrying to my other hand, pleased with my yield so far. The basket was half-full and I'd only been out collecting herbs for a little over an hour. Giovanni's herb garden was not in a regular little square formation. No, he'd covered the side of the mountain that his home was built on. Different levels held different bounty and each was more beautiful than the next. It wasn't well kept, but not overgrown. Whatever he had done to maintain the gardens had left them feeling very natural and extremely pleasing to the eye.

I knew that Giovanni was in my room asleep. Dawn had come while he was still trying to convince me that I hadn't seen Pallo's reflection in the mirror. Had I not freaked out, I'm sure we would have slept together. In a sense we did. He lay down next to me and literally slept in the same bed as me all night. I was being silly about the Pallo situation. Giovanni was probably right, but I couldn't shake the feeling he'd been there—with us, in the room, watching us. Giovanni was the one who had sired him and therefore, in theory, would be able to sense when he was near. I understood all of what Giovanni was telling me, but I still believed I'd seen Pallo.

I put the last few snippets of sage into my basket. It rounded out my herb collection nicely. Plus, sage was a favorite of mine, but it could never take the place of lavender. I wasn't finding any of that growing around Giovanni's house. English lavender was tops in my book and I missed my small collection of it at home. I wondered why he didn't grow it. It seemed like it would do well here. I didn't ask, because I knew he'd put it in by the next day. He seemed to like giving me anything I wanted and so far. I wasn't complaining.

"Hmm... interesting choice, I myself prefer the red sage to the common, but it all depends on what you're using it for."

I looked up quickly to see the source of the soft voice. A woman stood twenty feet from me wearing a large white hat and matching dress. Her hair hung to her mid-back and was several different shades of blonde. Upon closer inspection, I saw that it had streaks of pure white in it. Either she had a fantastic hairdresser or that was the real deal. She looked at me through eyes of pale blue and smiled.

She waved at me and lifted a handful of rosemary towards me. "Hi, I'm Malita ... you must be Gwyneth."

I'd never heard Giovanni mention her name before, yet she knew my name and was on his property. She was standing in the afternoon sun so I ruled out her being a vampire. Unless science had somehow perfected a sunscreen with an SPF of a billion, then she was definitely not a vampire. I smiled at her and shifted my basket to my other hand again. "Gwen, is fine. So, Malita how is it you know me?"

"Oh, yes, I see the rumors are true, you are very direct." She gave me a wide

smile as she came towards me. “Well, for starters, Giovanni and I go way back and I’m not too sure of anyone in our circle who hasn’t heard of you. I mean, your father did spare no expense introducing you to the world. Speaking of which, you do know everyone is looking for you, right? The Nocturnal Journal is offering a fortune for pictures of you and your faerie fiancé. I’d certainly rather have them print my photo than the Preternatural Post. They’re as close to a tabloid as you can get in the underground.”

I stood there thinking about everything she’d just said. I didn’t give a fig about the tabloids wanting pictures of me. I was busy thinking about her connection to Giovanni. If she and Giovanni went way back that could mean she was a hell of a lot older than she looked. Her clear skin, perky breasts and slim body were making me think she was in her early twenties, the way she talked so nonchalantly about my father and Giovanni added at least a hundred years to my guess. You don’t run around flapping your gums about the King of the Dark Realm unless you’ve got some years under your belt.

“Yes, I imagine that my father is looking for me. I’m betting he has lots of ideas for the wedding to discuss with me.”

Malita glanced away quickly. I got the sense she knew more about this than she was letting on. “Yes, I know the King has been looking for you, but I’m not so sure it’s to discuss wedding plans.”

This time it was me who began to close the gap between us. “What’s going on?”

She seemed to be trying to find the best way to break bad news to me. This was the first time in the four months that I felt isolated and out of touch with the world.

“Well, Caleb, he’s... umm... I’m not sure how to tell you this.” She bit her lower lip, an action that no doubt made men fall all over her.

“Go ahead,” I said, my chest tight with worry.

“Caleb’s been seen running around with other women, a lot of other women to be exact. His photo’s been splashed all over the place. The paranormal paparazzi caught him in some compromising positions, that is for sure.” She backed up quickly, clearly scared of any backlash. Although, killing the messenger didn’t necessarily sound that unappealing, I didn’t think it was called for in this instance.

I reached down and traced the edges of the fresh sage leaves, doing my best to control my breathing. I had to keep mentally telling myself that I had no right to be jealous or hurt. I was the one who had walked out on him, even though he’d been more than willing to see me go. Hell, he’d pretty much pushed me out the door.

“I’m sorry. When I saw you out here, I knew that I wanted to meet you. I didn’t expect to be the first one to tell you about all of this. I’m so sorry.”

I pulled my head up high. “Don’t be silly. It’s fine ... I’m fine. So, Malita, what brings you out here? We don’t get many guests.”

“No, I doubt Giovanni would want many people around. He’d risk the news of you being here ending up back with your father and I think we all know how your father feels about Giovanni.”

She was right. That was why Giovanni had been so hesitant to bring in his people to help guard the grounds. I was a risk to him. Having me here with him could easily bring the wrath of my father, the King, down on him. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. I didn’t want anything to happen to him on account of me. Malita moved up next to me and offered to take my basket. I’d almost forgotten she was there.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you, though.” I turned and headed back up the path to the house. “You never did tell me why it was that you’re here.”

She let out a bubbly little laugh. “Yep, you’re definitely your father’s daughter. You don’t let up. Giovanni called and mentioned that you two had had some furry company recently and that’s what I specialize in. It worked out that I was in the area. I had to tie up a couple of loose ends, but I’m here to help out.”

“Are you a scientist?”

“In a way, I guess you could say that. I have a degree in zoology, but my expertise in omnimorpheleons is a little more personal ... I am one. My base form is human and my shifter form is that of a tiger.”

A tiger? Clearly there were a lot of them who were omnis.

I stopped walking and looked at her. I had heard her say it, but couldn’t believe it. I wasn’t much on coincidences and meeting two tiger omnimorpheleons in the span of a week was a bit of a stretch. I did my best to sense her intentions. As far as I could surmise, she wasn’t a threat. At least not yet.

“Don’t look so surprised, Gwyneth. I promise I won’t eat you. I already had lunch today.”

I let out a nervous laugh. She might have been kidding, but for the last six months, my life had been straight out of a horror movie. My luck she’d eat me before we made it back to the house. Everyone there would be asleep for another three hours. Maybe I’d get lucky and they’d be able to track down my remains.

\* \* \* \*

Malita was true to her word. She did not try to devour me. Instead, she joined me back at the house for some iced tea. We sat out on the lower level patio table and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon. I did find out that she was one hundred and fifty years old. I hadn’t realized that omnimorpheleons were immortal, as well.

Ester, Giovanni’s head housekeeper, came out and asked about dinner arrangements. She was a little over four foot tall, which meant I towered over her. At five foot five that didn’t happen often, and I enjoyed every second of it. Her gray hair was always wrapped up tightly to her head. She seemed to own every color possible in aprons and enjoyed mixing them up every now and then. I looked down at her red apron with tiny yellow canaries stitched on it and complimented her on how pretty it was. She smiled and bowed her head to me. I tried to convince her that Malita and I were fine and that she didn’t need to worry about preparing dinner just yet, but she was Italian and there was no talking her out of feeding us.

I had asked Giovanni about her when I first came. Ester was a human and as a rule humans weren’t privy to the existence of vampires, fairies, and werewolves. His explanation was simple. For the last four hundred years Ester’s family had worked for him. Several generations of them have had the task of keeping things in his life in order. Each generation passes the secrets of Giovanni and his people on to the next. They take care of him and in return they never want for a thing.

I gave in and agreed to let her fix us dinner. She was going on and on about a chicken dish that I couldn’t pronounce and I told her that that would be perfect. I shook my head as she went back into the house.

Malita stood up and excused herself. She’d spent the greater part of the day on a plane and wanted to freshen up. I offered to show her to one of the guest bedrooms, but

she insisted that she knew the way. I gave her a questioning look, but she just smiled and headed into the house.

I took her lead and decided to head up to my room to get freshened up, as well. I walked around and used the outside stairs. I headed across the balcony to the French doors to my room. I moved the handle slowly and cracked the door open a little. I saw Giovanni's tanned shoulder sticking out of the corner of the white sheets first. His long silky black hair cascaded down and covered his face while he slept on his stomach. I turned around and made sure that the drapes were pulled shut and went over to the edge of the bed.

I moved some of his hair back away from his face. He looked like a painting, too perfect to be real. I bent and kissed his cool cheek. He shifted under the covers and the sheet came loose. I couldn't help myself I peeked under it. For the first time that I could remember, I stood there staring at his almost nude body. The only thing preventing me from seeing the whole show was the black pair of underwear he slept in.

I stood there staring at his perfectly bronzed skin and could no longer fight the urge to run my fingers over his back. He moved again and I knew that if I kept touching him that I'd wake him up, and I'd heard him roaming around in his room during the daylight hours every day since the attack. I knew he hadn't been sleeping well, and I didn't want to wake him.

Turning away from him, I took off my boots. I slid my jeans down my legs and laid them over the back of the olive colored Queen Ann chair that sat in the corner of my room. I did the same with my t-shirt. Tiptoeing past Giovanni, who was still passed out on the bed, I went into the bathroom, quietly pulled the handles and let the sink fill up with water. I picked up the bar of soap and brought it to my nose. I loved the way the products he stocked in my bathroom smelled. Mostly the soap smelled of honey and a touch of ginseng, but I could make out the faintest hint of oatmeal. As unglamorous as that combination sounded it smelled amazing and made my skin so silky smooth that I sometimes found myself running my hand over my arm to confirm it.

Freshening up, I patted my face dry with one of the plush white towels that seemed to magically restock themselves. I walked out and looked down at Giovanni. He was still very much dead to the world. I peeked out of the curtains and gauged that dusk would come in about an hour. Malita had said she wanted to get some rest so I didn't need to worry about entertaining her and the rest of the guests at the house were vampires and they would sleep until nightfall. I made up my mind and decided to climb back in bed until Giovanni woke.

I walked around and climbed in the king sized bed. I didn't bother getting dressed. I was still wearing my bra and panties and they covered more than my swimsuits did. I snuggled in next to Giovanni and carefully moved his hair out of the way. There is nothing worse than having someone lie on your hair.

Reaching down, I pulled the sheets over myself and tried to re-cover him. Then I yanked the down-comforter over us. It was warmer than what was called for, but Giovanni always felt cold to me. I know that he's a vampire and he's cold naturally, but I couldn't stop the mothering instinct in me. I eased the covers over him and moved down into the bed next to him.

Lying there, I stared at his back for a while and knew if I kept that up I'd be molesting him before he woke, so I turned over and put my back to him. I closed my



eyes and let my body begin to relax. Giovanni's steady breathing was soothing and comforting to me.

\* \* \* \*

Something moved over my stomach lightly. Opening my eyes, I found Giovanni propped up on his elbow, touching me. I smiled and reached up to stroke his face. "Hey you, how'd you sleep?"

He ran his fingers over me again and stopped just under my breast.

"Wonderfully, and I am sorry for waking you up, I... umm... was unable to help myself."

"Don't feel bad, I had the same problem. You know you really need to put some more clothes on before you climb in bed with me again."

His fingers traced the underwire of my white lace bra. It was his way of pointing out that I'd done the same thing. He leaned down and I moved my mouth up, expecting him to kiss me. "Does this mean I will be staying in here with you more often?"

I tried to think about what he was asking me, but his lips were too distracting to me. His hand was still on my bra as I arched my back up to him, pushing my body closer to his.

"I take it your silence means no, I am not allowed to ...."

I covered his lips with mine and shut him up. I pushed my tongue into his mouth and his hand moved over my breast. His fingers slid into my bra and my body reacted to his tender touch. Our heads moved around as our tongues searched for one another, locking together briefly then dodging away to begin the game again.

I skimmed my hands up his sides and onto his shoulders. I gave the slightest of tugs to let him know that I wanted him closer. He obliged and moved himself over me. I felt his erection through the black cloth, which was trying its best to enclose it, against my leg as he slid over me. I moaned and went at his mouth harder. His hands found mine and he laced his fingers in mine, moving our hands out and up as he went. This put the full weight of his body against me and sent my skin into a tingling fit of desire. I threw my head back and heard myself making tiny noises of want and need. His lips found my neck and kissed along it. He licked my collarbone lightly before his tongue glided down towards my breasts.

My nipple pushed up and tried its best to poke through the lace that was holding it captive. His mouth covered my bra and he sucked gently. He was teasing me, making my body ache for him. He released his hold on my hands and I grabbed the back of his hair, lifting his head. He kept my nipple in his mouth and tugged it back with him.

"Please," I whimpered.

He smiled and held my nipple in his teeth. I eased my hands over his back and raked my nails across his shoulders. He moved up and kissed my lips again. I tried to reach down the length of his torso and hold him in my hand, but my arms weren't long enough. I attempted to scoot down on the bed. He grabbed my wrists, rendering me immobile.

Thumping my head back on the bed, I let out a frustrated grunt. A low throaty laugh came from his throat.

"You're loving this, aren't you?" I shot a nasty look at him.

"It has been centuries since we last joined, what are a few more hours?"

I lifted my head and tugged on his lower lip with my teeth. "Hours? I can't handle hours of foreplay with you."

He pushed his mouth down on mine then pulled it away slowly. “Then you certainly have changed.”

His head moved down towards my neck again. I knew he hadn’t fed yet, and I wondered if that had anything to do with his attraction to that spot in particular. I wasn’t worried about him biting me. I wanted so much more than just teeth stuck in me.

I let out another frustrated moan and wiggled my hands into his again. His fingers laced through mine and I knew that I had always loved it when he did that to me. It made me feel closer to him. I let him push our hands on to the bed, gently, and knew for the first time that I had been very much in love with him at one point and wondered how much of me, if any, still was.

I got lost in his touch. His mouth moved over my upper body, exploring all that he could with my undergarments still on. He brushed against me and pressed his groin to mine every now and then. I was damp and ready for him to take the next step. I lay there, pinned beneath him, while he toyed with me for what felt like hours. I gave in finally and let him have free run of my body. I moved my hands up and grabbed a hold of the heavy iron headboard. This freed his hands up to aid in his teasing of me.

The smell of vanilla and fresh soap floated in around me. I looked around the dark room, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Giovanni stopped his assault on my inner thigh with his tongue and moved up to my face again. His fingers moved to the clasp on the front of my bra. He undid it and pulled the cups free of my body. I was hit with another wave of vanilla scented soap, glanced up and saw the faint outline of what looked like Pallo above us. My eyes widened and I stared harder. I couldn’t make sense of it. He looked like he was lying on the ceiling looking down at us. His gaze met mine before he descended upon us. I screamed, pushed Giovanni off the top of me and brought my arm and legs up to break the impact. Nothing happened.

“Gwyneth?”

Giovanni moved over me, grabbed me up and held me to him. I was shaking and trying to look around the room for Pallo. There was no one there but the two of us. Tears burst free of me and I did nothing to stop them. My mind was slipping, giving me images of things that weren’t really there. Stopping it didn’t seem to be an option. I told Giovanni what had happened and he pulled me tighter to him.

“What’s wrong with me?”

“You told me Pallo saved your life the night you took Caleb’s full power into you. You also said he had to try to turn you into one of us. He succeeded in saving you and did so without you turning into,” his arms tightened around me, “one of us, but I think in some ways he did manage to bring you over.”

I buried my face against Giovanni’s smooth chest and listened to him go on. “Gwyneth, I think the recent attack brought your natural defenses down. You yourself said you used an enormous amount of magik to drive the omnis away. Now, I believe this opened the door for Pallo to reach you and I believe he has not only found you, but is calling you to him. He is summoning you to him as he would one of his vampires.”

I shook my head and wrapped my arms around Giovanni’s slender waist. “Make it stop.”

He let out a sigh. “I can’t, but I do not think he means to harm you in any way. I think he is just trying to bring you back to him, *Bella*.”

I pulled my face away from him, making no attempt to hide my disbelief. “You

sound fine with the idea. Do you want me to leave?"

He averted his gaze. "I have come to terms with your feelings for Pallo. I am not foolish enough to think I would win over him in a battle for your heart. I fought that match and lost years ago and I know better than to fight it again. I'll understand if you feel the need to go back to him. I would even go with you if I knew it wouldn't upset him so."

I sat there, too stunned to do much beyond try to soak in all Giovanni had said to me. He had just admitted to me that he was more than willing to share me with another man. I couldn't believe my ears. I didn't want to go home to Pallo. I wanted to stay right where I was. As hectic as my life had become, I should have been thankful to hear Giovanni offer to share. I wasn't. I wanted to be loved by one man and love only one man in return. Prior to having immortal men re-enter my life, I thought that very thing was a real possibility. Now, I had to wonder. The fact that I craved monogamy once more spoke volumes to how much Giovanni had helped me heal, both external and internal wounds, over the past several months.

"Do you think he'll come here for me?"

Giovanni touched my cheek and lowered his voice. "I do not think he will show up here."

"Why? He's coming to me now, somehow."

"He is not really here. In your mind he is real, but not physically, and I don't think Pallo would just show up here, because this is the place where I made him."

I glanced around the room and thought about the huge villa I was sitting in. This had been the house that Pallo had sought my freedom from, long ago, only to return a vampire?

Oh, yes, I certainly could weave a web with the best of them.

## Chapter Five

I stepped out of the bathroom dressed in a white pantsuit. It was provocatively low cut and I wasn't sure how my breasts were supposed to stay in it. Giovanni was sitting on the corner of the bed slipping another pair of black dress shoes on.

"How many pairs of shoes do you own?"

He glanced at me as he buttoned the sleeves on his gray dress shirt. "Enough," he said, giving me his two dimpled-grin.

I walked over and picked up my white heels lying near him on the floor. I know that I flashed a breast at him because I heard him take in an extra deep breath. "It's your own fault. You could have alleviated the sexual tension between us, but no—you wanted foreplay," I said, low and with a bit of tease in my voice. "I wanted you deep in me, but no. Mr. Foreplay has to have his way."

Giovanni put his arms out, gathered me in them and pulled me close. Since he was sitting on the bed and I was standing this finally made me taller than him. I wanted to crawl back into the bed and try yet again to be with him—to make love to him, but Malita would be waiting for us at the dinner table, and I didn't want to be rude. Giovanni had sounded surprised she'd shown up. He said he had called her, but the last time he had spoke with her she was tied up and unable to make it in.

Guess her schedule cleared.

"We should probably head downstairs now," I said, not sure I really wanted to. I'd much rather be making love to Giovanni than entertaining female omnimorpheleons, but hey, a gal's got to do what a gal's got to do.

He took another deep breath and blew it out slowly over my chest. "Voglio fare l'amore con te." Giovanni's words were sweet, yet foreign to me. I wanted to ask what he had said, but he smiled and spoke again. "Let's go down and greet our guest, shall we?"

He rose to his feet and once again towered over me. He took my hand in his and led me out the door. When we hit the bottom landing, I spotted Malita talking with one of Giovanni's vampires. I hadn't had an opportunity to learn any of their names yet. He had pretty much told them that if they so much as looked at me he'd kill them. I asked him about this and he told me that they needed only to concentrate on keeping me safe. They didn't need to be my friend. I got the impression there was more to it than that, but didn't ask.

Malita turned to us and I noticed her gaze go to our joined hands. Giovanni held tightly to me and took a step towards her. I had to pry my hand loose to avoid being flung across the entranceway at her. She walked up to him and they both did an odd but well done no-kiss kiss. It was one of those kisses where a person goes in and kisses towards a cheek and then they flip to the other side and repeat it. I'd only ever seen it done on TV and it was a hell of a lot more impressive in person.

"Malita, I'm glad you could make it. On my last check you were preoccupied with work. I gather your schedule is now free."

Malita turned her light blue eyes to him, and I could tell she was attempting to

unleash her charm. “You knew I’d drop everything and come. Don’t be modest, Giovanni. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Ah, you know me all too well,” he said, as he turned back towards me for just a moment. “Gwyneth tells me the two of you spent the afternoon together. I am delighted to hear you hit it off.”

She cast me a soft smile. “Giovanni, why wouldn’t we?”

The look he gave her said she knew exactly why we wouldn’t have hit it off. I wanted in on the reason, too, but didn’t bother to ask. Giovanni put his hand out to me and I took it. We walked into the dining room and found the table set for ten. Giovanni’s gaze moved to me and I shrugged. I’d told Ester it would only be the three of us. I was about to call for her to come out when I heard the doorbell.

Giovanni glanced at us both, “Mi scusi.” He had a weird thing about answering his own door. I had given up trying to figure out all his quirks. I had enough of my own to worry about.

Malita smiled innocently at me. Somehow, I figured she knew who was at the door without having to ask. I wondered how much more time would pass before I stopped liking her. My guess was a minute or two.

Giovanni returned to the dining room followed closely by a man in his mid-twenties and two females. I did a double take when I saw that the women were identical twins. Their bleached out hair and lined, pouty lips made them candidates for hookers, but the way that they carried themselves said they weren’t quite that low. I think they could have pulled off being high society if it wasn’t for the short red leather skirts and tiny black leather tank tops they were wearing.

The man standing in the center of them appeared extremely casual next to them. In fact, I hadn’t seen a guy look that down to earth since Caleb. The man had a five o’clock shadow. The kind that was there on purpose and it looked good on him. His skin was slightly darker than Giovanni’s but his hair was a great deal lighter. It was so light brown that it bordered on blond. He looked like he’d just rolled out of bed and with the two little bimbos he wore on each arm I was guessing I wasn’t too far off with my assessment.

Giovanni glanced at me and I knew he didn’t like the fact that they’d arrived. He forced a smile and turned around. “Everyone this is Gwyneth. Gwyneth, this is ....” He stared at the twins and drew a blank. I was happy to see he didn’t know them.

The one on the left answered first. “I’m Brandy and that’s Candy.”

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. I wondered if they realized their names alone made them too good to pass up for a good chuckle. Add in the fact they looked like stripper dolls and I think you had the punch line from every blonde joke ever created. That or the next two break out stars in the world of porn. I couldn’t decide.

Giovanni’s gaze landed on the man in the middle. Something unspoken passed between them. At first I thought it might be animosity of some sort. The more I watched, the clearer it became. It was friendship. “And, this is Mikhail.”

I stopped thinking about trying not to laugh at the bimbos and started staring at the man named Mikhail closer. His light olive eyes lit up as he looked my way. He smiled at me and took a step forward.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you again, Gwyneth.”

“Again?” Giovanni asked, glancing over at me.

I could tell that he wanted to know more about how I knew Mikhail. I knew that I was in for the Spanish inquisition after dinner. I did a head count and came up short for the number of place settings Malita had set out. As if on cue, the doorbell rang again. Giovanni turned and went to answer it.

Brandy and Candy couldn't keep their hands off Mikhail. His light blue, long sleeved shirt was only buttoned twice, down near his very visible, very fuzzy navel, and the rest of his shirt was yanked out of his blue jeans and twisted. I was having a hard time not staring at his hairy chest. The men in my life now had very little in the way of hair on their torsos. Mikhail noticed me noticing him and made an attempt at appearing a little more presentable.

While it was admirable on his part, it was unnecessary. As sexy as he was, I still had eyes for Giovanni.

I heard Giovanni arguing with someone. I excused myself and headed out towards the front door. Giovanni was standing there in a heated discussion with a man at least six inches shorter than him. The man was dressed very much like the stripper twins, his black leather pants were low rise and I wasn't sure how they were covering anything. His upper half was worse. He didn't actually have on clothes. He had on two silver belts that crisscrossed on his chest. I did a double-take when I noticed the heavy amounts of eyeliner around his dark blue eye. I couldn't see his other eye behind his oh-so-eighties dyed black punk hairstyle.

Geez, I thought James was bad!

"Giovanni." I said his name quietly. He turned his attention to me, so did punk-rock boy.

"Gwyneth, this is Fritz, another one of Malita's people."

Another one? That meant the twins and Mikhail were her people, as well. I tried to force a smile to my lips, but even I knew I wasn't very successful. Fritz nodded at me and followed Giovanni to the dining room.

The doorbell rang again and I turned, visually scanning the room for Giovanni. He was already at the other end of the house. I walked over and braced myself to find yet another character claiming to be one of Malita's people. I opened the door. My mouth fell open. Caradoc and James were standing side-by-side smiling at me. Caradoc had his white-blond hair pulled back tightly from his face. I knew without looking that I'd find it in a braid behind him. His light green eyes matched his green pirate shirt. He always did have a way of looking the part of a vampire. James, on the other hand, never once appeared to be two-hundred years old.

I stared at James' hair. Last time I'd seen him it had been dyed bright blue and spiked an inch or so off his head. Now it was back to its normal bleached blond but was longer than he normally wore it. He had on his signature long black leather trench coat, t-shirt and jeans. Monochromatic was an understatement for him.

My blue gaze locked on his.

"Long time no see," James said rather dryly.

In an instant, I was on them. First, I grabbed Caradoc's tall, toned body and hugged him tightly. He always seemed awkward showing affection and being away from each other for four months had only encouraged that. He patted my back gently and passed me to James.

James picked me up and spun me around. I clung to him and laughed as tears

formed in my eyes. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed him. He and I had become best friends in a relatively short period of time. Setting me down, his gaze snapped to the opening in my white suit jacket that ran down to my lower abdomen. I knew my breasts were at least half exposed. I did a silent prayer that my nipples were at least covered and smiled.

His eyebrow rose and he leaned over. I thought he was going to kiss my ear, but he whispered to me instead. "You have about five seconds to cover up your melons before ...."

I heard a swooshing sound and then a voice I hadn't expected to hear so soon. "I would not bother with covering up now. I think it is fair to say it is a little late for that. I, as well as most of the men here, have seen all you have to offer."

James stepped to my side and kept his hand on my back. I stared at Pallo as my knees threatened to give out. Every emotion I'd ever felt for him came flooding back in an instant. I had to fight to not run to him and throw my arms around him. We had ended things on bad terms. I thought taking this much time away from him would clear my head of the mess we'd created. It didn't. It only served to confuse me more.

I stared up at Pallo's strong face, brown eyes and matching chestnut brown, curly hair. His hair now touched his shoulders. I hadn't remembered it being that long the last time I'd seen him. I could see his pale skin with the tiniest of freckles on it under his very sheer, very snug cream top. I glanced down at his dark brown dress pants. I'd seen him wear those colors only once since I'd known him and I thought they looked stunning on him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ah, yes, I have missed you, too, Gwyneth."

I glanced at James and leaned into him, giving him another good half hug. Pallo let out a small noise. "He gets a hug and I get you standing as far away from me as you can."

"Perhaps she is a good judge of character," Giovanni said from behind me. I spun around and let go of James, sensing the tension in the air. I'd seen Giovanni cut Pallo wide open from across the room before. I didn't need a repeat performance. I stood an equal distance from both men. I knew from the looks in each of their eyes that they were waiting to see who I went to first. It was immature, especially for men who had been alive for centuries, but that's exactly what they were doing.

James made a quick but feeble attempt at helping me. "Well, I could use a drink. I don't know about anyone else here, but I'm parched. Gwen, care to show me where to wet my whistle?" His accent gave away that he was a London native.

"Jameson," Pallo said his name sternly. Everyone knew it was a threat.

"Pallo? I thought I heard your voice," Malita said from behind Giovanni. She pushed her way out into the group and went straight for Pallo. His eyes widened and James moved closer to me. Malita threw her arms around Pallo's thick neck and began kissing him with an open mouth and from my angle, there appeared to be a lot of tongue, as well. I hoped it wasn't too obvious that I was flabbergasted. James nudged me, and I knew it was. I closed my mouth and let myself blink.

Pallo and Malita stayed locked together for what felt like eternity. I took a step back and found someone standing directly behind me. I put my hand back and felt Giovanni's pant leg and let my body relax. His arms came up and wrapped around me. I

turned around into his arms and hugged him back. The tension ebbed out of his body. He had honestly thought I'd push him aside now that Pallo was here.

I pulled back from him and touched his cheek. He turned his face into my palm and kissed it softly. James made a noise of disapproval, but I ignored him. I'd deal with him later.

"Are we going to eat, or are we, like ... going to stand around and make out in groups. Either way, I'm good," I heard a very bubbly voice saying. James made a low whistling noise and I knew one of the twins must have been standing in the doorway.

Giovanni and I hugged each other tighter before we turned to go back into the house. James and Caradoc followed closely behind us. I didn't look back, but I was pretty sure Pallo and Malita were still lip-locked.



## Chapter Six

I stood in my bathroom staring at my reflection, willing myself not to lose control, and I think it was working. Giovanni knocked softly on the open door and took a step in towards me.

“How are you doing?”

I let out a small laugh and felt the tears threatening to resurface. I’d managed to keep them down all through the very awkward dinner. I did my best to avoid making eye contact with Pallo and he did his best to continue making lip contact with Malita. I’d hoped to call it an early night but the busty-twins wanted to go swimming. They managed to convince the rest of the group it was a good idea, too.

“You do not have to go back down if you do not want to,” Giovanni said softly.

I felt like going downstairs and swimming about as much as I felt like having a rematch between the omnimorpheleons and me. Giovanni took a step back. His face revealed nothing about his mood.

“What’s wrong?”

“Go to him, *Bella*. Don’t deny yourself the touch of someone you care so deeply for. I know what that is like. It makes you bitter, twists your mind and leaves you vulnerable to ....” He didn’t finish.

I moved towards him, and he took another step back. My anger got the best of me. Distancing himself from me was ridiculous. “Oh, Giovanni, you’re a fine one to preach about denying your feelings for someone. Why don’t you just turn and run. It’d save you a hell of a lot of time. Every time I try to get close to you, you push me away.” I was hurt he was doing this to me when I needed him most. I wondered how much of it was self-preservation on his part. I pushed past him. “If you want me to go to him so badly ... then move.”

I didn’t want to go to Pallo, but I didn’t want to stand around and watch Giovanni push me away either. He didn’t say a word as I stormed out onto the balcony. My white heels clicked loudly on each stair, announcing my presence to the group below. I looked out and saw James was the only vampire in the water. That didn’t surprise me a bit. Caradoc was sitting with his legs propped up—reading a book, typical, and Pallo was nowhere to be found. Neither was Malita. I’d say I was shocked, but I’d be lying.

I walked over to sit by Caradoc and felt flecks of water splashing up at me. I looked down to see Mikhail treading in the deep end, smiling up at me. Caradoc let out a small grunt.

“If he gets my clothes wet, can I kill him?” Caradoc asked.

Mikhail’s eyes widened. I smiled and shook my head. “No, but if he gets your hair wet you can.”

Laughing, Mikhail dove under and swam away towards James and the two busty, blonde sisters. I waved at James and gave him a big thumbs-up for having two chicks’ hands all over him. He winked and looked towards the box hedge maze. I knew he was giving me an indirect explanation of where Pallo was. I nodded to him again and sat

down next to Caradoc.

“So, how’ve you been?”

“Just fine, thank you for asking.” His tone was so snippy that I wasn’t sure it was him at first. Caradoc was an old-school vampire. He spoke when spoken to and was so full of manners that he could write a magazine column. This wasn’t his norm by any means.

“Hmm... how are things going at the Park?” I wanted to get him talking. I knew Pallo’s amusement park was thriving. He wasn’t a risk taker when it came to his money. No, Necro’s Magik World & Supernatural Theme Park was doing just fine. Pallo was rich beyond his wildest dreams, as were most master vampires, and I was positive that every detail was seen to prior to their journey here, but I wanted Caradoc to open up and this was the only way I knew to get him to talk.

“The Park is fine, Gwyneth.” He shifted in his seat.

“Caradoc, if I didn’t know any better I’d think you were mad at me.”

He closed his book and laid it on his lap. His gaze flickered towards Giovanni’s house and then back to me. “Whatever would give you that idea?”

I smacked my leg and pointed at him. “You missed me, you ol’ stick in the mud. You missed me admit it.”

He pulled his feet down and sat up straight. He adjusted his collar several times before looking back at me. “I suppose I was rather taken aback by the sudden end of our weekly get togethers.”

I jumped up and gave him a big hug. He and James had been stuck on babysitting duty every time that Caleb had to go out of town on business. Being a bounty hunter for the supernatural generally meant that he would be gone for several days at a time. Since my life had been threatened on more than one occasion, my father had asked Pallo and Caleb to keep an eye on me. Because Caradoc and James worked for Pallo, they had ended up coming to stay with me on a regular basis. James generally brought an armful of movies and Caradoc usually sat in the chair reading and pretending to be annoyed with us.

I hugged him tighter to me. “I knew you were a softy,” I teased a second before Giovanni appeared behind us. He glanced down at me and smiled.

“I hate to interrupt you embarrassing poor Caradoc, but would you like to walk with me? I have some things I wish to discuss with you.”

“Of course.”

Caradoc gave me a gentle squeeze before releasing me. I stood and took Giovanni’s outstretched hand.

## Chapter Seven

I was happy the night wasn't as cool as it had been the night before. The breeze from earlier in the day was all but gone and the sound of nighttime filled the air. Giovanni stayed quiet until he had me a good distance from the house. I knew that vampires had amazing hearing. I was betting that omnimorpheleons did, too.

He turned to me when we reached the far end of the grounds and took both my hands in his. "I am sorry. I did not set out to anger you. I really do just want you to follow your heart and after that, if any piece should remain that feels for me I would be a happy man. I am not foolish enough to believe seeing Pallo did not move you and I've already told you I will not try and stop that again."

"Giovanni, what do you want me to do? I feel like you're shoving me at him and shutting yourself down from me. I thought that after all the time we've spent together, you felt something for me, too. You don't push people away that you care about."

He pulled me close to him. "You do if you ever want them to return to you again, *Bella*."

I held tightly to him and willed him to stop trying to shut me out. I knew that I'd grown to care a great deal for him over the last several months, and I didn't want to have the door to his heart shut in my face. I stood there breathing in the scent of his cologne, letting him hold me to him.

"You know, I've spent more time with you than both Pallo and Caleb put together."

"If time was all it took to keep you, then we would not be having this discussion right now. We would be off somewhere exotic celebrating our three-hundredth anniversary."

He was right, damn. It didn't matter that I'd spent only three months with Caleb and Pallo. The short time had been packed full of so much passion and betrayal that I was still trying to get over it.

"Shall we head back now?" he asked.

"Only if we're okay."

"Then, yes, we should head back."

He had to slow his stride so I could keep up. His legs were longer than mine and that meant a nice leisurely pace for him was a workout for me. I let him guide me in the darkness. My night vision had grown stronger since Pallo's attempt at turning me, but it was nowhere near Giovanni's pure vampire sight. He stopped and stood very still. He turned his head towards the maze.

I listened for what he might be hearing and picked up the faint sound of a woman's cry. "*Bella* ...."

"Go, I'll follow behind you." I knew he would beat me there and didn't want to hold him up. He bent down and kissed my cheek and was suddenly gone. I turned and rushed towards the maze. Remembering Pallo was in there gave me an extra burst of speed.

I hit the opening of it and ran along with my hands out, feeling the hedges as I went. I'd been in it enough times with Giovanni to know my way around it, but I'd never attempted it while running or worried. I hit two dead ends before I caught sight of Giovanni. He turned, saw me coming at him, reached out, and grabbed me.

"Come, it's fine." He tried to maneuver me away from whatever was around the corner. I heard another tiny cry and pushed past him. When I made it around the corner, I stopped so fast that I fell backwards. Giovanni caught me and pulled me upright.

I looked down at Malita's half-naked body and saw Pallo under her. She rolled off him and tried to cover herself with her shirt. Even in the dark, I could see and, thanks to my new gifts, smell the blood on her neck. She'd let him feed off her. James had told me that feeding combined with passion was the closest thing to a high a vampire could get. Pallo's shirt was torn open and his pants were unbuttoned. Yeah, he looked like he was buzzing. He stared up at me and his arm rose quickly to his lips. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth and shakily pushed to his feet, lacking his normal grace.

"Missed a spot," I said dryly.

I tried to back up but Giovanni's body pressed against my back. He had tried to keep me from seeing this. Why? If he really wanted to make sure I'd come back to him, then what better way than to expose Pallo's sexual rendezvous.

A small smile formed on Malita's lips as her gaze met mine. It left quickly, but I'd caught it. "Well, isn't this embarrassing?"

"Indeed," Giovanni said from behind me, never once breaking his reassuring hold on me.

Pallo did everything in his power to avoid meeting my gaze head on. Giovanni put his hands to my shoulders and I laid mine over his. It was a little show of affection, but it was enough to get Pallo's attention. He glared out from dark brown eyes. Pallo's gaze fell southward, as Giovanni leaned over me, adjusting my suit jacket. My fear of popping out had come true.

Wonderful.

When Giovanni's hand brushed over my breast Pallo snarled and flew at us. I didn't have time to think before Pallo was in my face. He snarled and I drew back into Giovanni's body.

Giovanni put his mouth to my ear. "He will not harm you. He is just upset." I tensed, not believing him. Pallo looked like he wanted to rip my face off. "*Bella*, he is my creature, I made him, I can read his feelings and he does not wish to harm you, only to scare you."

Pallo glared at Giovanni. "I am not your creature anymore. I am my own master now." His gaze slid to me. "No, Gwyneth, I would never hurt you. Can all parties present claim the same?"

He was being petty and I'd had enough. "Just leave, Pallo. Take your pet omnivor-whatever-the-hell-she-is and go. I don't want you here."

"I can see you are perfectly happy here, but I am afraid you will have to cut your visit short. Your father has asked me to bring you home, and I fully intend on doing so. You have a wedding to get ready for. So, I strongly suggest you stop fucking Giovanni and start packing."

"What, are you mad I might be fucking Giovanni, or that I'm not fucking you?" I spit the words at him. He had said something very similar to me once before and it still

hurt to think about it.

“Gwyneth, would you be so kind as to give me a list of all the men you are having sex with. I am having trouble keeping track of my competition.”

My hand flew up and struck him across the face. It happened so fast that it took me a minute to realize what I’d done. When his head turned back to me his eyes were swirling to black and for him that was a bad thing. Giovanni sensed it, too, and pulled me back from Pallo.

Malita put her hand on Pallo’s shoulder and tried talking to him. She might as well have been invisible for all the mind he paid her. I could see she was hurt by this, but I’d be lying if I said I gave a damn.

“*Bella*, go back to the house. I will be in shortly.”

I didn’t want to leave the two of them alone in the maze. I knew they’d kill each other. They’d been waiting for centuries to get a chance at it.

I grabbed Giovanni’s hand and pulled him back towards me. His body turned slightly to me, but he never took his eye off Pallo. “Please,” I said. “Come with me. Don’t do this. Don’t fight him.” I laced my fingers in his and tugged again.

Pallo’s tongue ran out and over his developing fangs. He sneered at Giovanni. “She begs for you to leave and run. She fears for your safety.”

Giovanni’s arm muscles tightened. Even at five hundred plus years old, he didn’t appreciate being called a wimp. I leaned up and did the only thing I could think to do. I pulled Giovanni’s head down towards me and licked his cheek while I kept my eyes on Pallo. I pressed my cheek up to Giovanni’s all the while staring at Pallo. “No, Pallo, it’s not his safety I’m concerned about. It’s yours. I think we all know who the real master is here.”

Giovanni grabbed me hard around the waist and I saw Pallo come charging at us. My feet left the ground and my stomach dropped out as Giovanni skyrocketed us upwards. We came down next to Caradoc who was still sitting poolside. Giovanni thrust me towards him.

Caradoc leapt to his feet and looked up. Pallo was hot on our trail. He came to a sudden stop right in front of me and made a move towards me. A flash of black struck him and sent them both flying into the pool. I screamed and went to dive in after them. I knew they’d tear each other to pieces, and I couldn’t let that happen.

Caradoc grabbed my waist and lifted me off my feet. I kicked out and caught his shin. He dropped me, and I dove in the water after them. I had to come up for air. I didn’t have the luxury of not requiring it like they did.

Hands grabbed at my shoulders. I turned around and found Mikhail next to me. “Stop them please,” I begged him. He looked at me and at the two vampires entangled and nodded.

“Guys,” he said. James and Caradoc dove in and I scrambled to get out. I turned and watched Caradoc lifting Giovanni out of the water. James and Mikhail broke the surface with Pallo. I pushed off the tile with my knee to stand up and someone pulled on my arm. It was Fritz helping me to my feet.

“Thank you, Fritz.” I turned back to the vampires.

Pallo was being restrained by James and Mikhail. Caradoc was doing his best to hold Giovanni back. I went to head towards them but Fritz’s hand came out and grabbed my arm. He pulled me close to him and leaned into me.

“You must be some piece of ass to make two master vamps go head to head over you.”

I spun around and stared at Fritz with wide eyes. I couldn't believe what I'd just heard him say. He reached out to touch me again and I backed up fast. I didn't like the look in his eyes. He was dangerous, and he knew it.

“What? Not handing it out to the omnis, too?”

I looked at him and narrowed my eyes. I wasn't sure who he thought he was talking to, but it wasn't me. “No, flock-of-Fritz, I'm just not handing it out to you.”

I turned and ran towards Giovanni and Pallo. The second Pallo spotted me, his eyes lit with a fire that made me slow my pace. “You have had your fun! You win. You hurt me. Does that make you happy, Gwyneth? You can stop fucking him now. You made your point. I was wrong.”

I didn't feel the need to clarify the fact that Giovanni and I had not had sex yet. Pallo was being an ass and he didn't deserve an explanation. Giovanni almost broke free of Caradoc's grip. I dove forward and snagged hold of his arm. “No! Enough!”

His dark gaze scanned me slowly before he directed them at Pallo. Turning to face Pallo, I unleashed my anger on him, as well. “No more! Do you hear me? No more!” Pallo snarled and my magik decided to retaliate. It surged through me. I let it spill out and at him. It sent him hurtling backwards out of James and Mikhail's hands. James shot me a look of shock, and I couldn't be positive but I think Mikhail smiled.

Pallo pulled himself up and turned to me. “Gwyneth?”

“Shut-up! I've had enough of you, Pallo. I've had enough. Do you understand that I can't do this anymore? I can't continue to ride this roller coaster with you. I'm done. Stay out of our lives.” Pivoting, I took hold of Giovanni. He was hard to budge at first, but he finally gave in and followed me.

## Chapter Eight

I closed the French door behind us and turned to Giovanni. I wanted to hit him, too, for allowing things with Pallo to escalate to that level.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

He looked himself over. “No.”

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t.”

He took a step towards me and water squished out of his shoe. I let out a laugh and that opened the floodgate for my tears. Giovanni came to me and held me to him. We were both soaked and cold. I started to get undressed and he turned to leave. I grabbed his arm, visually scanning his face.

“No, I’m not sleeping alone in this house with all the things you’ve got spending the night. It’s like one giant, dead sleepover.”

He laughed and stared out the window. “Yes, I didn’t plan on having quite so much excitement tonight. I had rather hoped we could spend a quiet evening together. I had wanted to take you into town. I am sorry.”

I let my wet suit jacket fall to the floor. I undid my pants and peeled them off my legs, along with my underwear. Giovanni turned back to me from the window and saw me standing naked before him. I picked up my pink, silk robe from the back of the chair and slid it on.

I covered the distance between us quickly and reached out to touch him. He caught my wrist with his hand and looked down at me.

“Do not do this to hurt him. There are other ways. This doesn’t have to be one of them.”

Tossing my hands up, I walked away from him. “I give up! What’s the point? You find every reason in the book to keep me at arm’s length and I can’t fight that.” I headed for the door. I’d had enough and was going to go sleep in the guesthouse that sat on the back right corner of the main house. It wasn’t as far away as I’d like to be, but it would do.

Giovanni came to me and touched my arm. I opened the door and headed outside. “I meant what I said, Giovanni. I can’t do this anymore.” He came out behind me and called my name. I turned around, waiting to hear what it was he had to say to me.

“*Bella*, don’t go, please. Stay with me, here tonight.”

I needed some fresh air and time to clear my head. I explained this to him and he nodded and headed back into my room. I heard the bath water running and knew that he was giving me exactly what I’d asked for, time. I put my elbows on the rail and looked out over the back yard. So much had happened there in the last week that it was losing its peaceful charm quickly.

I was about to head back into my room when I heard the busty-twins coming out of the downstairs guest room. They were whispering to each other. I heard them talking about the night’s excitement. One of them said that she couldn’t understand what was so special about me. I believe that her exact words were that I was a faerie-whore. That

was the pot calling the kettle black if I'd ever heard it, but I kept my mouth shut and listened to them.

"What about Malita and Pallo?" one asked. I was angry that I couldn't see them anymore, their voices were alike and I couldn't tell who was who.

"Oh, I know ... how sweet is it that he showed up here?"

"You know he was her first."

"Stop it! God, I wish my first lover was as hot as him. Do you think he was any good? I mean his body is like, rock hard .... What do you think of James?"

"He's got a nice ass. Can you believe Pallo and that girl had a thing? I mean come on, Malita is so much more his thing. I heard they ran together for a few years. That's what Fritz said anyways."

I walked back into the bedroom and left them talking in the shadows. So, Pallo had been the one to take Malita's virginity. My gut clenched when I thought about the two of them having sex. I closed the door to my room and looked out across the yard. I saw Pallo's figure standing close to Malita's. I pulled the drapes and didn't want to see anymore.

I could hear Giovanni moving around in the bathroom. I climbed in bed and waited for him to come out. I was suddenly very aware of how tired I was. It'd been a long night and it had finally caught up with me. I remember hearing the bathroom door open and feeling Giovanni slide into bed next to me and that was it. Sleep overwhelmed me.



## Chapter Nine

I turned around in the all white room and looked for signs to tell me where I was. The soft scent of vanilla filled the area. Pallo stepped out of the white mist and up to me. He was wearing white from head to toe and he took my breath away. I looked down to find myself dressed in a white gown, as well.

“Where are we?”

He put his hand up and looked around me. “It is just a dream.” I knew better, nothing was ever as it seemed with him. “I need you to listen to me, Gwyneth. Malita has told me about the attack on you. I think you should leave and come home with me.”

“I’ll bet she isn’t too big on helping me now. She has a clearer path to your pants if I’m not in the way .... No, I’m safe here. Giovanni has taken precautions to prevent it from happening again,” I said. The mention of Giovanni’s name made Pallo’s jaw tighten.

“Gwyneth, you do not understand how dangerous he can be. I would not put it past him to be behind the attack on you.”

I took a step back from him. “Pallo, don’t do this. Don’t call me to you or invade my dreams to try and plant seeds of distrust in my mind. I wouldn’t even be here if you had opened your mouth and objected to my engagement to Caleb. I only ever wanted to be with you.”

He came to me and touched my hands. “Gwyneth, your father will never allow you to pick a vampire over a faerie for your life-mate. Especially, one that could produce an heir. There is no way to know what kind of child we would have and he would not tolerate anything less than perfection. If I had voiced my objection publicly then he would have been forced to acknowledge me as a possible suitor in front of his entire kingdom. Even he cannot ignore the fact that I, too, am a candidate to be your mate. Kerrigan is many things, but forgiving is not one of them. He would have seen me on the pointy end of a stake before the night was out.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say my father would never do such a thing, but the reality of it was that Pallo knew my father a hell of a lot better than I did.

“Come home with me, Gwyneth. Wedding plans are underway and you need to be present for them. Giovanni is not someone you should be seeking safe haven with. If your father finds out that you are with him there will be no stopping his vengeance.”

I pulled my hand out of his. “My father won’t find out, will he, Pallo?”

“Come home with me, Gwyneth.”

“Why in the hell do you want to marry me off to Caleb so badly?”

“If I cannot be the one to spend forever with you then I want it to be someone who will love you as I would and who would never hurt you. Giovanni is not that person, Gwyneth. He is a monster.”

“And, you’re the expert on those, right?” He jerked back from me. I gave him a wicked smile. “And, by the way, while we’re on the subject of being with someone, I heard you and Malita were quite the item. What was it ...? Oh, yeah, you were her

first.”

He grabbed a hold of my arms and turned me to him. “That was long ago, Gwyneth. It was a darker time for me. She and I shared a common goal—evil. Yes, I took her to my bed many times, but every moment I wished it was you there with me.”

I turned my head away from him. His attempt at clearing that up had only succeeded in pouring salt on the wound. “It’s over Pallo, let me go.”

His grip tightened on my arms. He shook me slightly. “Gwyneth, he is poisoning your mind with lies. That is what he does. He is using you. You are nothing more than a fuck and a showpiece to him. He wants to be the one with the most toys, Gwyneth. He could not handle that you were leaving him long ago. He snapped, not out of love, but out of the disgrace of you picking a mortal over him. Do not listen to him and do not trust him. Please, Gwyneth ....”

I cut Pallo off. “No, don’t turn this into a rally around hating Giovanni. He made mistakes, Pallo. We all did. He’s sorry for them and if you must know, I haven’t had sex with him, so what’s his reasoning for that? Don’t think I haven’t tried. I’ve begged the man and he has resisted. I want him to touch me as badly as I want you to. How can you stand there and tell me that he’s using me?”

Pallo yanked me to him. “Gwyneth, he is luring you to him. He is making you trust him. He wants you to fall in love with him. Once he has you he’ll never let you go. You left him long ago for a reason, Gwyneth. Trust your first instincts and leave him now.” He tightened his grip on me, and I cried out in pain.

\* \* \* \*

“*Bella?*” I opened my eye and looked up at Giovanni. His black hair hung around his face and fell down onto my shoulder. “You were having a bad dream. Are you all right?”

I shivered. Giovanni moved down closer to me and kissed my cheek. I turned my face into him and felt his lips find mine. I closed my eyes and let my body surrender to him. His tongue dove in and found mine and his hand moved up to my hip. I moved my hand down his side and found that he was naked. My eyes flickered open and he was smiling at me. I moved my hand across his low stomach and let my fingers brush through his trimmed nest of hair. I found the object of my desire and ran my cupped hand up and down his shaft. His kisses came faster and my stroke matched his pace. He grew in my hand and drew in a deep breath.

Giovanni’s hand moved down and found mine. He put his hand over mine and stroked himself with me a few times before pulling my hand up and pinning my arms out. I arched my back up towards him. His mouth found my left nipple and his tongue ran around the growing edges of it. He pulled it into his mouth and moved it around with his tongue. I cried out and my legs tightened with the anticipation of having him in me. He moved his body over mine. He pushed his knee between my legs and pried them open gently.

“Giovanni?”

He positioned himself between my legs, moved his mouth lower and kissed my stomach. He planted a continuous row of kisses all the way down until his face was nestled between my legs. He spread my slit and then flicked his tongue across my swollen clit. I slammed my head back onto the bed and pulled at the covers. I bit down on a pillow and cried out into it, afraid if I was too loud that I’d bring everyone running

to us.

The second Giovanni's finger entered me I knew I was moist and ready for him. He varied between sucking and licking my engorged nub and my legs twitched. I screamed into the pillow as a spasm coincided with my orgasm. His fingers kept moving in and out of me, sending more and more shivers down my legs. I grabbed a hold of his hair and pulled his head up.

He smiled and moved his body up and over me like a snake. His face was above mine and I could smell my sex on him. He leaned in and kissed me slowly. He pulled back and looked into my eyes.

"Giovanni." I wanted him to take me.

He pushed his cock into me. I moaned as I took him in. Somehow, my body managed to accept all of him. He held himself pressed deep within me and looked at me. "Am I hurting you?"

I nodded and he began to pull out. "No, no it's a good pain. Don't stop." He smiled down at me and eased himself back in. I grabbed hold of his shoulders and squeezed to help alleviate the mix of pain and pleasure he was causing between my legs. He went to pull back out of me again.

"No," I said and tugged on his shoulders.

"*Bella*, I cannot enjoy being with you if I am hurting you."

I pulled harder on his back. "Giovanni, please it's okay."

"I told you I would never hurt you again, Gwyneth and I meant it. I love you too much to ...."

I grabbed his long black hair and pulled his head back. "What did you just say?"

He locked gazes with me and smiled. "*Ti amo*—I love you."

Another memory came back to me. I didn't get any vision of things that happened in the past, but I did get the knowledge of little pieces of our relationship. "That's the first time you've ever said that to me—ever."

His body tightened in me. "I have changed, *Bella*, for the better." Pallo's words of wisdom from my dream haunted me. Could I trust Giovanni? Was he lying to me and confessing his love for me to trick me? It was too late now. I was pinned under him and had him deep within me.

I pulled his mouth to mine and forced my tongue in. I moved my hips under him and felt him give in and push back. His body moved into mine so gently, all the while he flooded my face and neck with kisses. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my body completely relaxed for him. I cried his name out as he thrust himself into me. His hands found mine and our fingers locked together. He pushed my hands into the bed and moved his hips in a circular motion, I screamed as my toes curled downwards and the tingling sensation that proved he'd done well swept upwards. His body pushed into mine and I dug my nails into his hands. He pushed harder and in my climatic state, I wanted nothing more than for him to finish in me. His body tightened and his rhythm changed, causing me to remember what it was I wanted to tell him.

"I'm not taking any birth control."

He slammed into me and his head arched back. We cried out together as he finished in me. His body collapsed down onto mine and he kissed my neck repeatedly.

"Giovanni, did you hear me? We didn't use any protection." His cock twitched deep within me. The already damp area now seemed to be oozing sexual aftermath.

“Earth to Giovanni...”

He pulled his head up from my neck and smiled down at me. “We spent close to a hundred years together and never once conceived a child.”

His hips moved a little and I could feel him flexing himself within me again.

“But, I’m not the same, we could possibly ....”

He touched my lips with his cool finger. “Gwyneth, I better than you, understand how very much you’ve changed. I never had to be this gentle with you before. I am not complaining. I rather enjoyed the surprise.”

He moved back in and kissed me. I found myself getting lost in him as he rotated his hips again. He picked up exactly where he had left off. Still being inside me saved him a few steps, but by the feel of it, he was ready for round two.

Giovanni pushed into me and I tapped him on the shoulders. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

He touched my eyes lightly. “You’re not responding to me.” I couldn’t say I one hundred percent agreed with that. My body was tightening with each movement he made, but I knew that wasn’t what he meant. My eyes did not warm and start to glow. If that happened I knew that my body was responding to someone I could mate with, produce a child with. So far, the only two potential mates I knew of were Caleb and Pallo. Giovanni could make my body respond to him, but he could never produce a child with me.

“*Ti amo, Bella,*” he whispered as he pushed into me. I gave in to him and pulled him to me.

He pumped in and out of me. The sounds of our joining sexes filled the air. I clung to him, lifting one leg higher, giving him deeper access to my body. He took it, thrusting into me with precision and finesse.

Skimming my hands up the backs of his arms, I bit my lower lip in an effort to control my grunts and moans. It didn’t work. I closed my eyes, savoring the divine bliss he brought over me as he continued to ease in and out of me.

Giovanni kneaded my ass cheek as he lifted my leg even higher, driving himself deeper into me. I cried out, thrashing beneath him, my eyes still closed. They burned lightly at first and I ignored the sensation, sure my mind was playing tricks on me. The burning increased as did Giovanni’s pace. He thrust into me, my slit grasped at his cock, desperate to hold it in.

Giovanni nipped at my neck tenderly. I grabbed the back of his hair and pulled, forcing his head up as I locked gazes with him. For a moment, he looked confused as he stared down at me. My orgasm struck and the walls of my channel gripped him tightly, causing him to come almost instantly. He held tight in me, his eyes wide and locked on me.

“*Bella?*”

Reaching up, I touched just beneath my eyes, wondering if they had indeed shifted fully to another color and if so, what did that mean for Giovanni and me?

He withdrew slowly from me and wetness oozed from my body. “It would appear,” he bent, sucking gently on my nipple, “you have even more tricks up your sleeve this lifetime, *Bella.*”

I ran my hands through his long, silky hair. “Does that mean you liked it, too? Because I know I did. You should be warned that if you tell me you’ve had better, you

won't be leaving this bed with all your body parts."

A warm smile washed over his handsome face, causing his dimples to show. "Ah, *Bella*, as far as bed partners who are unforgettable, you had only yourself to compete with and you have held your own." His cock flexed against my inner thigh. "If you do not wish to take my word for it," he reached down and held himself, "take his. He is most pleased and desires even more of you."

"More?" I asked, disbelief evident. "You just managed to pull off a back to back session. Don't you need a break or something?"

He thrust into me, spearing me sweetly.

I guess not.

## Chapter Ten

I shoved past Brandy, or was it Candy? I couldn't tell the two of them apart and I didn't want to bother to get to know them. I reached for the coffee pot and poured myself a cup.

"Isn't it kind of late in the day for that?"

I finished adding sugar and cream, trying to decide if responding to Mikhail's remark was worth my time or not.

Mikhail stood in the kitchen doorway with no shirt on and wearing only a faded old pair of jeans. He reminded me of Caleb in so many ways. I tried to remember how I'd let things get so out of hand with Caleb. I did care greatly for him. And, at one point I did want to be his wife, but now he hated me and even I couldn't blame him.

"You're going to be up all night," Mikhail said. "You never were good with stimulants."

And he knew this how?

"That's the plan. I've noticed my days and nights are completely twisted. I need all the help I can get now." I raised my mug to him and smiled. I thought about his assessment of me and stimulants. It was true. I loved coffee, yet it made me restless. I glanced at him and thought about asking how he knew so much about me.

"Oh, what smells so good?" Malita asked, appearing behind Mikhail in the doorway. She saw me and grew quiet. I glanced at Ester, who was piling stacks of pancakes onto plates for everyone.

"Will Giovanni be joining us?" Mikhail asked.

I glanced at the clock. It was pushing eleven o'clock. No, Giovanni would sleep until at least three or four p.m.

"No, I doubt it."

"What about James?" the twins asked in unison.

Malita looked over at me. "No, Pallo took his vampires and left late last night."

I spilled some coffee down the front of me. I'd thought that Pallo had stayed through the night. I had no idea he'd left already. I put my cup on the counter and excused myself.

I made it as far as the end of the hallway and fell back against the wall. What was my problem? I was the one who had told him to go. I was the one who had pushed him away, and I was the one who had slept with Giovanni. Why did I suddenly feel empty inside?

"You know, I almost believed you when you said you wanted him to go last night. I really thought you'd finally had enough of the game playing."

I turned around and found Mikhail standing behind me. He leaned against the wall and matched my posture. He put his hands into his pockets and pushed down on his pant line. I would have had to be dead to not notice how low his pants were. I turned away slightly and grabbed his belt loop instead, pulling his pants down even further.

"Well, okay," he said.

I ignored him and moved his silk blue underwear out of the way. Yep, I was right I had caught sight of something. I let my finger trace the edges of the crescent moon tattoo. It was identical to Giovanni's in every way. Mikhail grabbed my wrist. I stared up into his light brown eyes and gave him a stern look.

"Later," he said and walked past me towards the front door. I put my back against the wall and listened to the women in the kitchen. They were discussing Pallo's early departure. The twins were adamant I was the devil for chasing off their precious boy-toy, James. Malita scolded them and told them Pallo and I had a long history and that he respected my wishes and left. I was surprised to hear her rising to my defense. I had liked her right up until I found her half-naked on Pallo. Maybe, she wasn't so bad after all.

Yeah and maybe I'd win the Miss Monogamy award.

I felt like a heel eavesdropping on them. I turned and headed up the stairs to change my blouse. I pushed my bedroom door open and slipped quietly in. Giovanni was still sleeping. I pulled my shirt off and walked over towards the bed. I touched his long leg that was hanging out of the covers and he rolled over onto his back. The sheet pulled almost all the way off him. His tattoo was left uncovered. I crawled up and over him and took great pains not to wake him.

My hair kept falling forward and I knew it would tickle his leg if it hit it, so I pulled it back with one hand. I reached down and ran my fingers over the tattoo. It was as cool as he was. My hand slipped and dropped onto his leg. He shifted a little and I found myself staring right at the bulk of his being. His cock was large even not erect. As much as I wanted to let him sleep, I wanted to touch him more. I gave in and lowered my lips to him. I planted tiny kisses all along him, until I reached the tip. I drew him into my mouth and brought my hands up to help arouse him. He hardened as my mouth moved over him. His hand touched my shoulder and I looked up to see him watching me. I kept my eyes on his and continued to take him into my mouth.

Having my gaze locked on his seemed to do it for him. His eyes rolled back and his hips pushed upwards. I was thankful that I was using both hands to help bring him or he could have choked me to death. I felt him tightening and he lost control of himself, coming into my mouth. I stared into his dark black eyes and swallowed.

He pulled me up towards him in the bed. His arms opened wide and he held me close to him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up, I ...."

He kissed my head and pulled me to him tighter. "Don't be sorry. You have nothing to apologize for. It has been a long time since I woke to find you there."

I lifted my face to his and he kissed my lips softly. The dream I'd had with Pallo in it had been bothering me all morning. If Giovanni had been like he is now with me and snapped, what would prevent him from doing the same thing again? I didn't like second guessing him, but history spoke for itself. I just wished I could remember more of our past. Giovanni held the key and I decided it was time to see if he'd unlock that door for me.

"Giovanni ...."

"Yes?"

"Tell me about what happened to us. Tell me why I had an affair with Pallo and tell me why I left you. I can't think of one reason why I'd give you up."

He stiffened and pulled the blankets up to cover us both. He was quiet for a

minute and I thought he was going to ignore the question. Instead, he caressed my arm.

*"Bella, I do not want to push you away. We have found something wonderful again and I do not wish to lose it so soon."*

I pulled his hand up and laced his fingers in mine. "You told me that you loved me. Is that true, or are you trying to manipulate me? Am I just another toy to you ... a showpiece?"

*"I see that Pallo has paid you another visit."*

I didn't deny it. I pulled his fingers up to my lips and kissed them. "If what you say is true and you do love me, then you'll tell me about us. No more lies and no more secrets." I was proud of myself. I'd done it. I had put him on the spot and if he decided not to answer my questions then that would prove Pallo was right. It was a crappy thing to do to him, but my life was possibly at stake.

He turned his head away from me and looked towards the window. The thick dark drapes were drawn to keep the sun out. He let go of my hand and moved away. I sat up and crawled off the bed. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to keep it together. I stormed across the room and snatched a rusty colored peasant shirt from my drawer. It was luck that it matched my long black skirt, because I didn't care. I just wanted to go. I headed for the bedroom door.

*"Gwyneth."*

I turned and stared at him as he sat on the edge of the bed, naked, with his head lowered. His shoulders moved up and down slowly. I walked over to him and touched the top of his head. He glanced in my direction and I fell to my knees when I saw his eyes full of tears.

*"Do not make me tell you what I've done. You will leave and never return. I will be the monster the others told you of. I was that person, Gwyneth. I was evil."*

*"Giovanni, I have to know I can trust you and if it means hearing all the ugly details of our past, then that's what it means. I'm not that person anymore, and I hope you aren't either."*

*"I will gladly walk into the sunlight to show you I mean what I say and that I will never hurt you again. Dying to prove this to you is better than living for eternity knowing you see me as a monster."*

I wiped his cheek and came away with tears. I pulled his chin up and stared into his dark eyes. "I don't think bursting into flames is the answer. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, but I will be leaving tonight. I can't continue to be here with you. I don't want to believe Pallo, but part of me knows that there's some truth to what he says. I need to know how much."

*"Why?"*

I felt my own tears beginning to trickle down my cheeks. "Because, I'm falling in love with you and you've only ever proven you couldn't be trusted and I don't need to put on an encore performance this time around." I pulled away from him and headed for the door. He came up behind me fast and pulled me to him.

*"Bella, did you just tell me you're falling in love with me?"*

I nodded, afraid if I spoke I'd break down.

*"What of Pallo and your Caleb?"*

I was the one preaching about lies between us and saying that I could love only him would be the biggest lie of all. I touched his face and leaned against his chest. "I



want to stand here and deny that I still love them, but I can't. I can only tell you the truth, Giovanni. I'm falling in love with you, but I can't trust you. I want to, but I know I can't."

He held me to him and pulled me back towards the bed. The sun was up and that meant he was weak. I felt horrible for doing this to him now, but it had to be done. He sat down on the bed and pulled me down on his lap. He pulled my head against his shoulder and rocked us back and forth.

"I am having a hard time figuring out where to start," he said. I felt my heart skip a beat. He was going to tell me. He wanted to prove himself to me and this was the only option I'd given him.

"Start by telling me how we met."

He let out a little laugh. "Yes, that will do."

I sat on his lap and listened to him tell me how we had come to know each other. He and my father had known each other for almost a hundred years prior to my arrival. On rare occasions, my father would come and visit me. No one knew that the King had a daughter and he wanted to keep it that way. Giovanni was his head enforcer. He was the one my father called in to do his dirty work. Giovanni's specialty was torture, but he was an excellent warrior, as well. He and my father hit it off from the get go. My father had trusted him enough to tell him his dearest secret. He told him about me. Giovanni was sent to watch over me from a distance. No one was to know he was there and for many years it stayed that way.

He had spent so much time in the Dark Realm, watching me from afar, that he'd found himself an honorary member of the court. A woman came into his life about the same time I was celebrating my tenth birthday. He'd found himself drawn to her. She was a powerful sorceress and was well-respected in the court. They had an affair and continued to see each other as I grew up. He honored my father's wishes and continued to pay me visits to check on me. He watched me grow into a young woman and he watched Caleb appear on the scene more and more.

Giovanni blushed slightly when he told me about finding Caleb and me in a field of flowers making love for the first time. He had sensed that we'd been getting closer and he expected we'd soon take that next step, but he watched in spite of himself. He was so captivated by my love for Caleb that he found himself coming around even more than he had been sworn to. This went on for years and years.

One night he was following me. I was on my way to meet with my soon-to-be husband, Caleb. The sorceress Giovanni had been sleeping with had followed him. They had an argument and she called his demon out and left him—leaving him in vampire form. The horse I was riding had been spooked by something near us and threw me from it and I'd fainted. He came to me to make sure I wasn't hurt.

He'd kept his face hidden in the shadows for fear of scaring me. When he finally did emerge, he was normal again. The first thing I said to him was that I could tell he'd been standing in the dark hiding his rage and wondered how a man with such a loving heart could harbor so much hate. This took him by surprise and when I told him I could sense his heart was also conflicted, he had feelings for two women, he knew I was definitely my father's daughter.

Giovanni gave a small smile, pausing in his story. "You were so powerful for a faerie, Gwyneth. I could tell you were your father's daughter."

I returned his smile and slid closer to him as he went on with the tale of how we'd met.

Apparently, we immediately hit it off and his visits stayed constant only now they were no longer a secret from me. Caleb found out about my new friend and was leery of him. He knew Giovanni from the Dark Realm courts and knew what kind of monster he could be. The harder he tried to prove this to me, the more I pulled away from him. Pressure for the wedding to take place started and I was unable to understand the King's interest in me. I didn't know at the time that he was my father. Giovanni didn't tell me. He was already betraying my father's trust enough by spending so much time with me. Revealing that I was a princess and daughter of the most powerful King in the land would have pushed my father over the edge and put my life in jeopardy. Others would have stopped at nothing to assassinate me.

Caleb found Giovanni and me sitting together under the night sky. He'd had enough and demanded I never see Giovanni again. I wasn't one who liked to be told what to do, so I sent Caleb away. Giovanni knew Caleb would go to the King about his future wife's sudden interest in a vampire, so Giovanni told me he was leaving. He headed off and I followed him like a whipped puppy. He sensed me during the journey and stopped to tell me to go back to my mother and to Caleb. I pulled him to me and kissed him.

He did his best to try to persuade me to leave him. He finally broke down and admitted to being a vampire. I laughed and told him I'd seen him the night we'd first met, and I'd known all along. I also told him I could see into his heart, and I knew he was a good man. We ended up making love for the first time that night and I left with him.

Giovanni contacted my father and told him I was safe. My father was powerless to stop us. If he tried then Giovanni told him he would expose the truth about who he was to me and to the Dark Realm. My father made him swear to continue to watch over me. He did and we lived together happily for seventy-five years. The other twenty years weren't as grand but Giovanni avoided going further with his story so I didn't know the details of those last years.

Giovanni shifted under me. I moved over to sit next to him on the bed. He looked exhausted. I touched his arm and he turned to me. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

He leaned back and kissed me. "I have not shared everything there is to know with you. I have only told you of happy times between us."

"I know but you need some more rest. We'll talk more later."

"Later? Does that mean you're staying?" he asked. I could see the hope in his black eyes.

I kissed him and stood up. "That means we're off to a good start and we can talk more about it later, when you're up and feeling better."

I walked towards the door and glanced back at him before I left. He was still sitting on the edge of the bed, but he was looking at the closed windows. I wondered if he was reliving the events of our past in his head or if he was debating on how much more to tell me. I pulled the door closed and headed downstairs.

## Chapter Eleven

I had just hit the bottom stair when one of the double-dumbs found me. She was carrying the cordless phone in her hand and chomping on a piece of gum. I almost suggested she spit it out and use it to cover the pink part of her nipple that was sticking out of the top of her tight blue top, but refrained.

"There ya are. I've been looking all over for you. Here." She shoved the phone in my direction.

"Thanks...umm...Brandy."

"Candy."

"As if it matters," I said softly under my breath as she walked away. I brought the phone up to my ear and wondered why she hadn't just taken a message. I know ... I know that would involve her actually writing something down, silly me.

"This is Gwen."

"Gwen, it's about time ... that one is thick as a brick, isn't she?" James said softly, following it up with a quick whistle.

I laughed, knowing he was telling me that Brandy, I mean Candy, was a moron. I walked into Giovanni's study and closed the door. The place had been scrubbed clean and the faint smell of bleach still hung in the air.

"What's up, James? You ran out of here before I could say goodbye." I was hurt by that fact but didn't bother to voice it. I was sure James already knew as much.

He let out a small groan. "Gwen, I think you should come home and, before you say anything, you should know that Pallo isn't aware I'm calling you. I'm at your house. I hope that's okay."

I walked over to the window and stared out. Mikhail was standing near Fritz by the edge of the pool. They looked like they were arguing but I couldn't tell.

"Gwen?"

"Yes, sorry ... James, you know you can stay at my place anytime you want. Hell, you can move in. I'd love to have you."

"Right then," he said, absently, as if he wasn't really listening to what I was saying. "I'm calling because of Caleb. We found him dumped outside Pallo's place. He's fine, a bit banged up and three sheets to the wind, but he's all right. Anyway, I know the people who did this to him. This was just a warning. He's been getting in over his head with the bounty hunting and the ...." He was searching for a way to break bad news to me.

"And, with the ladies I know already."

A sigh of relief made its way through the phone. "Anyway, he's in some deep shit and Pallo's trying to help him, but the two of them well ... you know how well they get along, so I'm asking you to come back and help get Caleb straightened out. I know the two of you had your problems, but Gwen, this is serious. These guys mean business. They'll kill him if he keeps it up."

"Have you told his mother?"

"Yeah, I walked up to her front door and announced that her son was turning into a womanizing alcoholic .... Hell, no I didn't! Sorcha would fry my insides and feed'em to me on a stick, Gwen. You know her. Besides, if Caleb even thought I'd go to her, he'd have another pop at me."

That caught my attention. "Caleb hit you?"

"Yeah, that's puttin' it mildly. I was here the other night, feeding Diablo and he showed up. He was dead drunk by the time he got here, and I didn't want him driving around. I told him to go upstairs and sleep it off. He went on and on about you, your bedroom and me being in the house. He... umm... sort of implied that you and I are a good deal more than just friends .... anyhow ... it ended up with the two of us fighting."

I stood there and tried to soak in everything he was telling me. Fighting, Caleb drinking and Diablo? "James, who the hell is Diablo?"

He laughed. "He's the puppy I bought for ya, luv. He's a good boy. I've been staying here almost every night to take care of him. I had a friend of mine watch him when we came to Italy for the night. Pallo thinks I got him for you as an excuse to see you more, but seeing as your how you're halfway around the world, enjoying Tuscany, he let the argument go."

I had a puppy now? Great, I needed one more male wanting to mark its territory. I sat down and opened Giovanni's laptop. It only took a minute for it to boot up, and I was able to access departure times for flights.

"I can't catch a flight out of here until tomorrow night, James. Shoot, can you keep Caleb under control until I get there?"

"Gwen, you could cut through the Dark Realm, you'd be here in less than two hours."

I thought about taking the very mystical short cut James was suggesting, but that would mean I'd pass my father and right now I didn't want to deal with him. I also didn't know my way around the supernatural subway of the Dark Realm. My luck I'd end up sitting in Australia having dinner with a demonic dingo. No, I'd stick to modern mortal traveling for this.

"James, I ..."

"*Bella*, you will take my jet. I'll arrange for someone to take you Stateside by tomorrow morning," Giovanni interjected from the doorway of his study.

"Gwen?"

"Yeah, James, I'll be home soon. I'll call you back with the details later and thanks for the puppy."

I hung up and glanced at Giovanni. He was already moving towards me to take the phone. I handed it to him and walked out the patio door to give him time to make all the arrangements.

It was almost dinnertime, which meant the sun would be going down in about an hour or two. I looked back at Giovanni, he was sitting close to the window, but I knew he'd be all right. His home had windows that had been treated for maximum UV protection. He'd explained it to me my second day there, but it was one of those things that went in one ear and out the other.

"You will not disobey me on this, or there will be hell to pay," I heard Mikhail saying as I stepped out onto the patio. He saw me and stopped talking to Fritz.

Fritz stared over at me and made a V-shape under his mouth with two of his

fingers and flicked his tongue out at me. Mikhail let out a low growl. Fritz either didn't hear him or didn't care. I turned around and saw that Giovanni's back was to us. It wasn't like he could have done a thing about Fritz during daylight hours anyways. I glanced back at Fritz and decided that I'd had enough of the punk rock boy behavior.

I walked down the stairs, towards Fritz and let my power build. I needed to use it more than I had been and he was giving me the perfect excuse. He brought his fingers down slowly when I reached him and smiled.

Mikhail stepped forward. "I'm sure he didn't mean to ..."

I put my hand up and stopped him. "No, it's not you that's been being an ass since you stepped foot here."

Fritz stared wide-eyed at me. "I'm sorry did you say ass? Are you offering to let me have some of it? I prefer doggie style, how about you?"

Mikhail brought his fist up quickly. The last thing I wanted was a fight to break out.

"No."

He stopped. He had amazing self-control, I was impressed. I took another step closer to Fritz and put my magik packed hand on his groin. He licked his lips and glanced at Mikhail.

"I told ya the bitch would do anybody."

"Yeah, you got one thing right. I am a bitch." I let my power run through my hand and into his groin. I sent enough of a charge into him to give him a hell of a shock. He screamed and his right hand came up fast to strike me. I ducked and reached up and under his arm. I stood quickly and moved my body into his. I wrapped my foot around his leg and twisted around, jerking the weight of his body over my back as I went. He flipped over me and landed on his back on the hard, tiled patio. I glared down at him as he clutched himself between the legs and I smiled.

"I'm sorry, where were we again? Right, I believe you were calling me a bitch."

He gave me a look that told me exactly how much he hated me. I returned it. I felt energized and I wanted an excuse to beat the crap out of him again. Mikhail touched my arm. I flung around and grabbed his wrist.

"Hey, I surrender, Gwen Lee, master of the martial arts," he said laughing slightly.

Letting Mikhail go, I shook my head. "Sorry, I lost control of myself. Guess I don't know my own strength."

His gaze went to Fritz who was rolling over trying to get up. Mikhail laughed from the gut. "No, I guess not."

"So, is it later?" I asked, referring to our meeting in the hallway earlier. I wanted to know more about the tattoos and I had to leave soon, so time was of the essence. Mikhail nodded at me and put his arm out for me. I took it and was impressed with the fact that he was wearing silk. Since he'd been at Giovanni's I'd only seen him in jeans and faded shirts. He had a definite rugged quality about him. I liked that, but enjoyed silk better.

\* \* \* \*

We walked out to the stables. I tried to go in, but Mikhail pulled me back. He explained that he wasn't too sure how the horses would react to him. I hadn't thought about it, but he had a point. In shifted form, they were his lunch. We settled under a tree

near the stable and I looked over at him.

“Malita, is she your pack leader?”

He smiled and pulled a blade of grass up. He rolled it around between his fingers and looked up into the trees. “Omnimorpheleons don’t have pack leaders per se. We have a master, similar to vampires. I’m the master, the alpha of the pack. Malita doesn’t like knowing anyone is above her, let alone me.”

From the way Malita acted around them all I’d thought she was the one who was in charge. Giovanni had even referred to the girls as her people. I thought about it for a minute then it hit me. “She’s your mate. She is the dominant female.”

“Yes and no. She’s not my true mate. I’m not even sure if I have one of those. She is, however, what you would consider my significant other. While we’re not wed in the eyes of our kind or human law, we’ve been a couple for a long time.”

“But, she was with Pallo. They almost ...” How do you tell someone that their life mate almost had sex with another guy?

Mikhail ran his hand through his ear length sandy brown hair. “We haven’t been intimate in many years, Gwen. I should have replaced her at least twenty years ago, but our pack is large, we have hundreds of omnimorpheleons and she’d been doing well at running things.”

“Had been good? What changed?”

“Well, you brought me out here to ask about this, right?” He unbuttoned his black jeans and pulled them down, exposing his tattoo to me. I reached my hand out and stopped just before I touched it. “It’s okay, it won’t react to you.”

“React?”

“Yeah, here I’ll show you.” He took my hand and put it over the shape of the moon. I felt like I knew him, really knew him, but I’d only just met him. Yet, somehow touching him felt so very comforting. His body was a heck of a lot warmer than Giovanni’s, but I got the point. It was just a tattoo. “Now, think something wicked or evil while you touch it, be sure to pull your magik up when you do it.”

I gave Mikhail a funny look. He tightened his grip on my hand. I couldn’t come up with anything. “Sorry ....”

“Think about Fritz.”

That worked. I felt myself getting agitated with the thought of him acting like a jerk every time he was around me. He thought he had a right to call me whatever he wanted and to continue to insult me. I wanted to drag him by his flock-of-omni hairdo and drown him in the pool. I thought about how good it felt to throw power at him and felt my fingers tingle with my magik.

Mikhail’s tattoo heated. He drew his lips in. I knew it must be painful so I yanked my hand away.

“What happened?”

It took him a minute to compose himself. He looked down and touched his tattoo. His hand came away quick. I felt like a giant boob for causing him pain.

“I’m sorry, Mikhail ... I ....”

“No, it’s all right. It’s good to know it still works.”

“What do you mean?”

He glanced at the stable, put the blade of grass in his mouth and used his tongue to roll it around his lips. I never wanted to be a piece of vegetation so bad in my life. He

looked like the poster boy for cowboys incorporated lying there. If I wasn't neck deep in men with issues I'd have made a move on him. He did have a steady pulse and that was a plus. Turning into a monster puppy dog on a monthly basis was an issue.

"Your dad's the King of the Dark Realm right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Right and well we all know he can be a son-of-a-bitch when he wants to be and since you're his daughter you ...."

I knew what he was getting at. As much as I didn't want to admit it, it was there. "I'm the King's daughter and he heads what humans think of as the underworld. He can be a bastard, I get that and since I'm of his blood I'm one, too."

Mikhail sat up and shook his head. "No, Gwen, you have the potential for evil, we all do, but you've got a weird situation. For thousands of years your bloodline has kept the creatures of the night in order. It takes a certain type of person to do that and well, you're next in line for the throne, so you do the math. I'm not saying you're evil, if anything, Gwen ... you fight your dark side and keep it beat down. I think you're attracted to Pallo and Giovanni because they represent everything you don't allow yourself to be. They're the darkness to your light."

"That's great and I know you're right, but what does that have to do with your tattoo heating up?" I was suddenly very uncomfortable talking about my ability to scare the crap out of demons. Being feared by all wasn't something I strived for. Most of the time I was happy when I shooed a spider and it left my area willingly.

"Sorry, I needed to explain that to you before I just blurted out the fact the tattoo is to ward off or warn of dark magik."

Dark magik? I possessed dark magik? I was happy he'd gone into the family tree spiel prior to dumping that on me. I don't think I'd have taken his tattoo reacting to my anger so well if he hadn't warned me.

"But, why do you and Giovanni have them—the tattoos?"

Mikhail leaned back on his elbow and tried to avoid looking at me. "Not just Giovanni and me, Caradoc and James do, too."

I pulled my feet in and sat with my legs crossed in front of him. I pushed my black skirt down to avoid giving a peep show and pushed my hair behind my ears. I liked to do that when I was trying to soak things in, as if it would help. It was amazing I hadn't been doing it non-stop lately.

Mikhail continued, "I've known Giovanni as long as you have. Your father gave me to him as a pet."

I blinked several times, sure I'd heard Mikhail wrong. When he made no move to amend what he'd said, my jaw dropped open.

"My father treated you like a dog?" I couldn't hide the disgust in my voice. I wanted to smack my father. The very thought of him behaving that way sickened me.

"Well, in hindsight, I deserved it. I was newly made and having problems controlling myself. I... I killed innocent people more than once and your father gave me to Giovanni for punishment."

Shifting positions, I tried my best to keep my legs from falling asleep. Mikhail smiled at me. I was enthralled and he knew it. "Well, Giovanni taught me a lesson and I knocked off the killing of innocents. It only takes one night at the mercy of Giovanni to get a point across." He shuddered as if remembering exactly what that night had been

like.

“I didn’t hold it against Giovanni. I was thankful he’d broken my urge to hurt innocent people. He was... is... considered my master, but now more than anything he’s my friend.” He rolled onto his back and put his hands behind his head. “James and Caradoc used to be Giovanni’s, too, and well ... we sort of had a problem with dark magik affecting some of us and when it was done we vowed to never let it happen again, so ... we found help from a powerful white magik faerie and here we are today, marked and all the better for it.”

I had so many questions for him. I wanted to know about the dark magik they’d encountered. How long Caradoc and James had been with Giovanni and so many other questions. The one that popped out my mouth surprised even me. “So, if you’ve known Giovanni since before me, then did you know me?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t remember you.” My body tensed. “No, that’s not true. I sort of know you, but something is different now.”

He pushed himself up off the ground and extended his hand down to me. “We were all close friends for many years, you and I had a different bond for many, many years until ... let’s just say our bond was our downfall.”

I had opened my mouth to ask him to clarify that when I heard Malita’s voice. “Mikhail ... oh, I didn’t realize you were busy.” She sounded like she wanted to be throwing fireballs at us. If I had thought she had a bit of faerie in her I would’ve been scared.

“What’s up?” he asked obviously annoyed by her presence.

She stepped towards us and her gaze fell on me. I was losing my urge to smack her upside her blonde head every time I saw her. I was impressed with myself.

“Giovanni said to get packed. We’re leaving in the morning and heading back with Gwen.”



## Chapter Twelve

I sat at the dinner table and stared down at Giovanni. He knew I was pissed at him, and he was avoiding making eye contact with me. He sat down there sipping his blood and listening to something Candy was saying to him. I could see the effort in his jaw as he tried to avoid screaming from sheer boredom. I pushed my carrot parfait around my plate. It was as disgusting as it sounded. The lamb Ester had made was good, but I wasn't hungry.

Glancing down at Giovanni, I excused myself. Mikhail stared up at me as I walked out. I felt bad for being a bitch in front of him, but there was no way that I was riding in a plane for close to seven hours with them. Mikhail I could stomach, but the other four I couldn't take in confined quarters that long.

I stormed upstairs and made sure to slam my door hard. I wanted the world to know I was pissed. Heading straight for the bathroom, I took the box of scented bath salts out and dumped them in the tub. I turned the knobs and let the water run, undressing as the large old petal stool style tub filled.

Someone knocked softly on the door. I turned around and peeked out. Giovanni was standing there with a tiny half-smile on his face. He batted his long black lashes at me and I felt the corners of my mouth give into a smile. I opened the door all the way and turned to get in the tub.

The water was hotter than I'd been aiming for, but it'd do. I climbed in and sank down. Giovanni moved to the edge and sat. He had to push the white shower curtain back out of the way. I giggled as he fought with it. He was smooth in so many ways and human in so many others.

"Are you going to tell me why you are upset with me? Or will you leave without me knowing?"

"No part of me wants to sit on a plane with those people. Don't get me wrong, Mikhail is fine, but the rest? Come on, Giovanni, you can't be serious."

"Oh, *Bella*, I am serious. Have you forgotten about the attack? I do not wish to send you home alone. Once you are safe and Pallo and his people are looking over you, then the omnis can go."

He leaned over and picked up the bar of honey-scented soap. He dipped it in and got a rich lather going on his hands. Brushing my hair aside, he washed my shoulders and back. I forced my body to relax. As his fingers moved lower, I turned and looked at him.

He was wearing, shock of all shockers, a dress shirt. This one was white and I'm sure hundreds of dollars. I put my hand on his wrist.

"You keep getting your clothes soaked and you're going to regret having me here. I won't be allowed back on the grounds that your dry cleaning bill went through the roof while I was with you."

"I think that we both know that you will always be welcome here, Gwyneth. This is your home, too." He unbuttoned his shirt. I loved the show so I didn't say anything.

He tossed it onto the bedroom floor. "Better?"

"Yes." I noticed the tiny white scars on his chest. I knew he had them. I'd seen them at Pallo's house. I'd almost forgotten about them. They were so faint that you could only see them in the right lighting. "You never told me what happened to your chest."

I put my hand up towards him and he took hold of it. He extended my fingers outwards and placed them over the tiny white scars. He pulled my hand down his stomach and I curled my fingers in shock. His scars matched my hand exactly.

"You wanted to know the truth and this is part of it," he said, moving my fingers over his chest again. "You did this to protect yourself from me, and I have worn the mark of my betrayal for centuries. You made sure I would wear them forever, as a reminder. See, Pallo is right about me, I am wrong for you. Go tomorrow with the omnis to your Caleb. You have a new home now and people who love you there."

I turned in the tub and got on my knees. I put my hands over his scars and let the water run down his washboard abs. Sliding my fingers over his belt, I began to undo it. He tried to pull away.

"Gwyneth, have you heard nothing I just told you? You had to resort to clawing at me for your life and in the end, that wasn't enough. How can you stand to touch me now, after knowing this? Go home to the people who love you."

"I have someone who loves me here, too, or at least I think I do," I said, working harder on his belt. I finally got it undone and then had to start on his pants. "That's what you told me right? You said you loved me. Is that true?"

Giovanni grabbed my elbows and pulled me up and out of the water. His mouth moved close to mine. I thought he was going to say something. He caught me off guard when he planted his lips against mine and kissed me with so much passion that my knees got weak. When he was done, he lowered me back into the tub. I had to hang onto the side because I was still shaky.

He stood quickly and headed towards the bedroom.

"Giovanni," I called out, but he continued to walk away. I jumped out of the tub and tried to take the bathroom in two strides to avoid falling on the now sopped floor. I failed miserably. My right foot gave first. It moved out from under me and my left foot give way as well. I put my elbows back to break the fall, but that was all I could do.

Scented cologne and black hair overcame me, as Giovanni's arms moved in and around me. His hands moved behind my head and back and he managed to stop me from falling onto the bathroom floor. He had grabbed me at an odd angle and my very slippery body caused him some difficulties. I felt our bodies going backwards. First, his back struck the dresser and then we bounced off that and headed towards the bed.

Giovanni let out a small grunt when his body landed on the bed. I landed right on top of him and tried to roll off him. We were entangled in a snare of arms and hair.

"Running on a wet floor can be dangerous. I would have thought you'd have learned that one already," he said, looking up at me with his onyx eyes and a sexy grin on his handsome face.

"So can trying to walk out on me! That's what you were doing right? I assume your little tell-all about the scars followed up by an earth moving kiss good-bye, meant that you're trying your hardest to get me far away from you." I was so mad I was shaking. He was doing his best to untangle us, but I wasn't helping. Having him pinned

beneath me on the bed equaled having his undivided attention and that was just what was called for.

“Damn you for thinking you know what’s best for me. My father’s the same way and look at what a mess I’m in. Damn you, Giovanni!”

He shifted his body weight enough that he was able to flip me over, leaving him in charge and on top now. He snatched both of my wrists and pushed them up and over my head. Cold hard energy radiated from him. His long black hair covered most of his face, but I knew a change when I sensed one. I struggled to break free of his grip. Pallo’s warnings had fallen on deaf ears and now I was about to learn my lesson the hard way.

Giovanni’s face came down fast. I thought he was going to take a chunk out of me. Instead, he stopped just above my face and stayed still.

“*Bella*, look at what you wish to keep.” His voice was a least two levels lower than normal. I closed my eyes tightly, having no wish to see him like this. I’d seen Pallo’s demon come through and would never forget it. No part of me wanted to remember Giovanni like that.

A sharp fingernail ran down my cheek. He wasn’t hurting me and that said he had phenomenal control over his demon, but I still didn’t want to see him like that. His finger moved down between my breasts and started moving in a circle. My mind started to fog. My chest grew cooler and cooler. I kept my eyes closed tightly and tried to push his fingers away from me. He grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand to his chest. My fingers traced over the old scars that I had given him and his breathing changed.

“I could leave you no option but to do this again, *Bella*. I have the power to induce desire, I am sure Pallo has warned you of this. I could make you want to touch me in my full demon form.” He moved my hand lower and I felt the top of his open slacks. I pulled my power up and didn’t need to think of Fritz this time. Giovanni’s trying to push me away was hurting me enough already. I let a small spark of magik free from my fingertips. I could feel his skin warming by his tattoo. The magik behind it knew that my magik was turning darker. Giovanni released my hand and it fell away. He let out a gasp and I opened my eyes. I caught the tail end of his vampire performance. I watched as his nose narrowed to its normal size, the red specks in his eyes leave and his fangs recede.

He stared down at me, normal and beautiful once again. “*Bella*, how did you know?”

“About the tattoo? I saw Mikhail’s and forced him to tell me about them.”

Giovanni looked horrified. I grabbed at his shoulders and tried to pull him down to me. He wouldn’t budge so I ended up hanging from his still raised body. I planted tiny kisses on his jaw and neck.

I could feel him fighting to not surrender to me. He was trying his hardest to send me running from him. I didn’t know or care why. He was four months past getting rid of me now. I kissed along his cheek and moved back down to his neck. I bit down and applied enough pressure for him to take notice. He moaned and I knew that I had him. It was his nature to want to combine sex, pain, and blood. He fought his demon every second to try to be normal and I knew that every now and then it needed to come out and play.

Giovanni shifted the support of our bodies over to one arm and moved his other

lower. I brought my legs up and wrapped them around his waist. His hand brushed past my inner thigh as he worked himself free of his pants. I let up on the pressure and licked a long line to up to his ear.

“Come with me. Come Stateside.”

“You are going back to your faerie and Pallo. You will not need me.”

“I’ve never stopped needing you, Giovanni.”

His body stiffened and he tried to stand. I knew I couldn’t let it end like this between us. I pulled my head back enough to move down his neck and then I slammed my mouth down on it. I bit down hard and felt my teeth break through his skin. Instantly, my mouth filled with his blood. He let out a cry and thrust himself into me. I wasn’t quite ready yet, so I was tight and not nearly wet enough to help Giovanni slide in easily. I drew in a deep breath and in the process filled my mouth with more of his blood. This sent him into a fit of hard dives into me. He dropped me to the bed and rode my body all the way down.

I let go of his neck and fought the urge to throw up from the taste of blood in my mouth. Looking up at him, I noticed that the red flecks were back in his dark eyes. His lips came down on mine and he lapped up the blood in my mouth. I pulled his head closer to me and kissed him back. My body loosened for his and the pain that had been emanating from between my legs turned to pleasure.

His body pressed firmly against mine and he moved one of my legs down. His hand slid under the other and his fingers caressed my ass, as he moved in and out of me. His head moved to above my shoulder and he struck out at the pillow next to my head like a snake. My face was left pressed into his upper chest and I kissed the tiny white scars that my fingers had made so long ago.

His lower body was rubbing against my swollen spot, caressing it, enticing it and the full length of his cock was sheathed within me. I grabbed at his back and fought to get air as my body tightened with his every thrust. He was biting the pillow instead of me and that proved he did care about me, but he was suffocating me in the process. I put my hands under his body and tried to shove him up a little, he wasn’t budging. My vision blurred and multi-colored spots appeared out of nowhere. My chest burned and I gasped and got in the tiniest of breaths. The lack of oxygen combined with him in me sent my body into orgasmic convulsions. The pain in my chest was countered with the pleasure from my lower abdomen.

Giovanni made animal noises and rammed me harder into the bed. I raked my nails down the back of his arms and knew that I was hurting him. I reached for his hands and grabbed them in mine. I forced my fingers into his and held tight. His head shot up off the bed, as he threw himself against me. I sucked in a huge breath of air that felt ice cold while he came in me—filling me with his seed. I was seized by a coughing fit and cried out in between each one.

Giovanni looked down at me and then jumped off me. “*Bella*, I didn’t ... I thought that I was ... *Bella*?” His hands wrapped around me and he pulled me up into a seated position. My chest was hot and hurt each time the cool air entered it. I put my hand up to my breastbone and pressed lightly. Giovanni attempted to back away from me and I grabbed at him.

“I’m ... okay.” My voice was raspy but there. I moved my hand away and stared down at myself. At first I didn’t understand what I was seeing. I was covered in

something red and wet. Giovanni moved closer to me and tossed his hair back. His neck had a very nasty open wound where I'd bitten him. I didn't have fangs so my bite was messy and must have hurt like hell.

The blood all over me was his and when I realized that, I felt sick. I fought to get out of the bed and couldn't muster the strength. "Bathroom!"

He moved his arm under my legs and one under my arms and carried me to the bathroom. He helped me stand and I leaned down and threw up in the toilet. It wasn't pretty and I sure the heck didn't want him standing there watching it happen, but he was and he did, so I had to deal. I felt his hands moving into my hair. He pulled it all back away from my face. He squatted down next to me and tried to rub my back. I pushed at his hand as I threw up to get him away from me. I was so embarrassed.

"*Bella*, I'm not leaving. This does not bother me. What does is that I hurt you and I swore I would not."

I stopped trying to force him away from me and started grabbing for his hand. He took mine and I held his until I was done. I finally moved to dry-heaving and he ran another bath for me.

I stood and moved over to the sink. I fished around for my toothbrush and started scrubbing. The taste of the foam in my mouth threatened to set my stomach back off. I spat and splashed my face with the cool water from the tap.

Giovanni touched my back and I jumped. I regretted it the second it happened. I spun around too fast and got dizzy. I had to put my hand on the edge of the sink to keep from falling flat on my face. He tried to storm past me and leave the room. I put my hand out and touched his chest. He could have tossed me across the room with one hand tied behind his back. Having me lightly touch him in no way should have stopped him, but it did. His hand came to me and his head dropped downward.

"Saying that I'm sorry does not fix this, *Bella*." His voice was so low and soft.

"There's nothing to fix. You didn't mean it. You were going out of your way to not hurt me, *dolcezza* ... honey. Besides I took a nice chunk out of you."

He turned to me and moved closer to me. "*Bella*, did you just call me honey?"

I thought about it and laughed a little. I guess I had. I didn't know that I was one for pet names. I guess I was wrong. Giovanni pulled me close to him and hugged me tightly. I could feel his body letting out a silent sob. I didn't try to pull back and look at him. He needed this minute of breakdown.

It passed as quickly as it came and he stroked the back of my hair. "I had always thought I disliked being referred to as a food product until you were gone, then I missed it."

I had called him honey before? Hmm, I was wondering how much I liked my former self. "Sorry, I promise not to do it again .... It just sort of fell out. I've never called anyone a pet name before."

I felt him wiping his face over my shoulder before he stepped back and stared at me. "We should get you cleaned up. You have to head out soon."

I pulled him with me towards the tub. "Yes, we, should, because we have to leave soon."

Giovanni let his pants fall to the floor. He stepped into the tub and I followed. I sank down into his arms and put my head back against his chest. His arms reached around me and found the scented soap. He ran his hands over my chest and up my neck.

The smell of honey hit me. I turned to look up at his face.

“You planted these in here in the hopes I’d remember what I called you,” I said, grinning at him.

Two dimples appeared on his face as he flashed me his white smile. I leaned back against him and let my naked body rest against his. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my ear.

“We’d better get cleaned up. We have to leave soon.”

I turned into him and went for his lips. “Grazie—thank you,” I said, hoping silently that I didn’t screw it up.

His lips curved into a smile beneath mine. “Prego—you’re welcome.”

## Chapter Thirteen

I sat in the cream colored leather seat and clutched its plush arms for dear life. This was my first time on a plane, and I wasn't sure that I liked it. Sure, I'd flown in the arms of a vampire before, but this felt different. I felt less in control sitting in this giant machine than I did in the arms of a vampire. The flight attendant kept asking me if I needed anything. She meant well, I know, but I just wanted to tell her to leave me the hell alone.

Candy and Brandy were sitting in the back hanging on Fritz. I left my chair facing forward and had been doing a damn fine job of ignoring them. I was still pissed that they'd shown up to go with us. I thought that since Giovanni had agreed to come with me that that meant they wouldn't be joining us.

"Relax, *Bella*. We will be landing within an hour," Giovanni said, handing me a drink. I took it but didn't think I could drink a sip of it. He sat down in the seat next to me and reached over to touch my leg. "You don't seem to mind when I leave the ground with you."

"That's because I know you won't drop me."

"Even if we crashed, there is a good chance that we would all survive it. Unless of course we were decapitated, or impaled, or ...."

I handed him the drink back. "God, Giovanni... you are so not helping."

"Sorry."

"So, what's the game plan?" I asked.

He leaned back in the chair and tossed his ankle up on his other leg. He was so at ease with flying and I was jealous. "The game plan, as you call it, is that Pallo is sending cars to meet us at the airport. From there it is your call where we all go. I assumed by your lack of interest in the omnis that you would rather they stay with Pallo." He glanced back towards Mikhail and Malita and nodded.

I thought about Malita being around Pallo everyday and my stomach turned. "I don't know. Do you think I have room for everyone?"

"I wouldn't know."

I had never even thought about the fact he'd never set foot in my house. He really didn't know if I had enough room to fit everyone. I touched his leg and smiled. He took my hand in his and I knew it was his way of saying it was okay.

I thought about the sleeping arrangements and decided I would leave it up to everyone. I could fit everyone in my house somehow. It would be tight, but it would work. I had Giovanni go back and toss the option out there.

\* \* \* \*

I slid on my baby blue sweater and took Giovanni's hand. I noticed him take a minute to straighten his jacket. He was as concerned as I was about what kind of reception we were about to receive. I wasn't so sure about letting Pallo send cars for us.

Giovanni squeezed my hand lightly and followed the others off the plane. Early Spring in the mid-west meant that snow was still a very real possibility. The frigid air hit

me and I suddenly wished I'd gone with my gut and worn something warmer than the blue jeans and sweater I had on now. A shiver ran up my back and Giovanni turned to me.

*"Bella?"*

Four black cars picked that moment to pull up. They formed a semi-circle around us and came to a stop. I didn't recognize the first two drivers that stepped out, but I knew the other ones.

"Caradoc! James!" I smiled and glanced at Giovanni nervously. I was afraid he'd be jealous. I'd gotten so used to Pallo and Caleb's erratic behavior that I had come to expect it. He winked at me as he took off his coat. He placed the dark gray blazer over my shoulders and pulled me closer to him.

I tried to take it off. "You'll freeze to death."

He bent down and kissed my cheek. "I love that you forget what I am."

Someone cleared their throat and I turned to see James looking at me with the 'not now' look. I took Giovanni's hand and headed towards James. He opened the back door for us and we climbed in. I sat down, glanced up and saw Pallo sitting in the passenger seat. He was facing forward and his massive shoulders looked stiff. Giovanni moved in next to me and noticed what I was staring at. His hand touched my leg and gave it a squeeze.

"I will go and ride with Mikhail," he said, making a motion as if he was going to exit the vehicle.

"Giovanni?"

"Gwyneth, if he would like to ride in another vehicle then by all means let him," Pallo said, still facing forward.

"That's it. Everybody out!" I yelled and opened the door. They all listened. James looked at Pallo and he shrugged. Pallo looked at Giovanni and he smiled.

"I think we set her off," Giovanni said softly.

"Whoof ... yeah, the girl's got a temper like a rabid pit bull," James said. We all stared at him. He put up his hands. "Just tell me when you sort this all out, okay."

My gaze went to Giovanni and Pallo. I pointed my finger at them both. "This ends here and now, or neither one of you are riding in here. I'll take the damn thing and drive home alone. I've had a long day and I want to go home and get cleaned up and," I glanced at James, "meet Diablo."

James tried not to smile because Pallo was watching him. "Did I make myself clear?" I asked, glaring at the Italians, daring them to protest.

They nodded and I climbed back into the car. Giovanni got in and tried to sit far away from me. I covered the distance to him and touched his arm. He glanced at Pallo and back at me and shook his head. He didn't want to provoke Pallo, and I could understand that.

James climbed in and I leaned forward. "How bad is Caleb?"

Pallo let out a snort. I shot him a nasty look. "You got something on your mind, Pallo?"

He turned his big brown eyes to me and let them grow cold. "As if you really care what happens to Caleb. You took off and left and never looked back. If James had not called you I can guarantee you would still be ...." He let the last part go.

Good, boy!



I leaned back and turned my head to stare out the window. Pallo could think whatever he wanted. The fact was that I was home now and I was here to help Caleb. I didn't have any desire to fight with Pallo and that in itself was rare.

"What? You have nothing to say in your own defense?" Pallo asked.

Giovanni shifted in the seat and I put my hand out and took his. I gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand. He was trying hard to maintain his cool and I was proud of him.

"What was the final decision on the sleeping arrangements?" I asked Giovanni. Pallo turned and focused his disgusted gaze on me. I didn't mean it the way he was taking it. I just wanted to know where the omnis were bunking. I felt Pallo's cool static energy around me and I saw his face relax.

"All will be bunking at the farm," Pallo said in a low voice.

Giovanni glanced at me and must have sensed Pallo had gotten that from reading me. He grunted. It didn't used to bother me so much that Pallo could hear what I was thinking, but that was before we sat on opposite sides of the fence.

"I'm not sure I can fit everyone in. What do you think, James?" I purposely avoided asking Pallo to keep Giovanni from being jealous that Pallo had been in my house and he hadn't.

James glanced at Pallo and Pallo nodded to him. That ticked me off. Pallo had been tightening the leash on James ever since I'd known them. It was getting out of hand, but I decided to pick my battles and today that fell low on my list.

"Forget it," I said.

## Chapter Fourteen

“We’re here,” James said.

I lifted my head and looked around. I had dozed off during the ride. Sitting in the silence had gotten old and I was exhausted, so it worked out.

The first thing I noticed was that the car wasn’t making a crunching noise, which usually happened when a car drove over the stone driveway. I leaned up and looked through the windshield. The driveway was cement now. I glanced at Pallo. His face revealed nothing. James on the other hand had a face that showed that this was just the beginning.

“What’s going on?”

Pallo sat quietly and James followed his lead. I threw my hands back and sat back against the seat. Giovanni touched my leg and gave me a questioning look.

“Don’t ask me. Ask these two,” I said, pointing the direction of Pallo and James.

James pulled the car up in front of my house and I took a good look at it. Everything seemed normal with it. It was the same large square white farmhouse with a wraparound porch as when I left. I opened the door and got out. I glanced back at the rest of the property. I noticed right away that there were outdoor lights set up all across the grounds. When I’d left I’d only had porch lights and one security light by the barn closest to the house. I looked back there and right away felt my jaw drop. When I’d left I’d had five barns that were in decent shape. I only used the closest one and that was to park in so I didn’t worry about them. Now, I had five brand-new structures in their place. They were all white like the house and had the same green shutters. They now had garage doors where there had once been sliding wood doors. I also noticed that they all had exterior doors and stairs leading up the second floor. I turned to Pallo and gave him the evil eye.

“What have you done?”

“Caleb had been in the middle of remodeling when you ... went on vacation.” He tipped his head to the side and smiled. “So, I thought it would be nice for you to return home and have the house done.”

I turned and stared at the house and then back at Pallo. I spun on my heels and walked on the new, brick, curved walkway. Grabbing the front door, I threw it open. It took a minute for my eyes to register where I was. It looked the same layout-wise, but all of the furnishings and all of the walls were different. I glanced into the dining room on the right. I had been using it as an office for a while. Now it looked like a dining room. A large cherry colored table sat in the center of the wine colored room and a matching hutch sat against the wall.

I stared in at the living room. The walls were now covered in a yellow plaster and all of my furniture was gone. Large white sofas, like the ones I’d had in my apartment before hellhounds destroyed them, were there now. A huge white ottoman sat in the center with a wicker tray on it. I looked over and saw that where my TV used to be was now a gigantic armoire. I shook my head and went for the kitchen. James walked in next

to me.

"I tried to stop him," he whispered, putting his hand on my shoulder.

My heart sank when I saw Pallo had gotten rid of the old faded white table that had been there forever. My adoptive father, Paul, and I used to play board games there and eat meals together. The cupboards had just been redone by Caleb and Pallo left those, but he had my countertops and floor tiled with white tiles.

I turned around and felt a tear roll down my cheek. I should have been grateful to have my house redecorated for free, but I felt violated. Pallo had no right to come in and do this without my permission.

Pallo appeared in the doorway and walked in towards me. "Do you like it?"

James put his head down and went further into the kitchen. Pallo glanced at me and his face changed. "Gwyneth, what's wrong? I thought this would be a nice surprise for you. Do not look so sad. I only wanted to please you."

I wiped my cheek. "You erased every memory I had here. You came in and you wiped the slate clean. Did you ever think that my father, the one who raised me, had a hand in what was in this house?"

Pallo looked around and registered why I was upset. He walked towards me. I backed up and bumped into James.

"Careful, you'll squish him," James said softly.

I turned around and saw the cutest little yellow lab puppy. He stared up at me with big sleepy eyes. "You named him after the devil?" I asked shocked that something so cute was named Diablo. James smiled. "Christ, I thought you got me a rottweiler."

"No, but I thought the wee-piddler would want a more manly name, so I gave him Diablo. But he answers to Dibby, too, just in case ya want to sissify him."

Snorting, I took Dibby in my arms and pulled him up to my face. He was so warm and soft. He made a sound that sounded an awful lot like a purr and yawned. I rubbed his head to my face and turned around to see Pallo smiling at me. Seeing him standing there happy for once made my feelings come flooding back. I had missed him, more than I thought I did. I would never have left if he'd stood up at the engagement party and objected. I would have gladly come home with him and tried to start a life together, a family, but then I wouldn't have gotten to know Giovanni. I would have kept on believing that he was an evil monster. I guess it's true. Everything does happen for a reason.

Pallo's smile faded and he walked closer to me. He put his hand out and touched the puppy's head. "He still is a monster, Gwen."

I ignored him and peered over his shoulder for Giovanni. He wasn't anywhere to be found. "Giovanni?" I called out.

Pallo gave me a knowing smile. One that said he was up to no good. "He cannot come in until he's been invited."

Shit, I'd forgotten all about that. I went to walk around Pallo. He caught my arms and pushed me back against the hallway wall. I held my arms firm to try to prevent him from smashing the puppy. His face came down and his full lips met mine. I had every intention of pushing him away, but found myself returning his kiss. Diablo squirmed in my arms and Pallo drew back. I looked down at the puppy and kissed the top of his head again.

"I think we upset him," I whispered.

"He isn't the only one," James said from the kitchen. I turned and glanced at the front door. Giovanni was standing on the front porch glaring at me. I handed the puppy to Pallo and ran down the hall to Giovanni.

"Giovanni ...."

He turned and walked away. I ran out after him and grabbed his arm. "Don't, Gwyneth. Go back to your Pallo. I told you once that I would walk away and leave the two of you alone and I meant it."

"I'm sorry. It just happened. He kissed me and I ...."

"Made no effort to stop him. Yes, I deduced as much."

Giovanni was right and I knew him enough to know that once he left he'd never be back. I tugged on his arm and he half-yanked me across the yard. Mikhail, who was taking suitcases out of one of the trunks, set them down to watch us.

"Please, Giovanni, I'm sorry."

He kept walking. I tugged harder on him and tried to dig my heels into the ground. "Stop!"

He turned around and grabbed my arms. "I told you, but you did not want to hear what I had to say. I should not be here with you, *Bella*."

"He is right, Gwyneth, let him leave," Pallo said walking out next to us.

I turned and glared at Pallo. "Don't put yourself in the middle of this, Pallo. You will not like where you end up."

His brown gaze went from me to Giovanni. "I know what you're thinking, Gwyneth. I know you care for me. You cannot tell me this little friendship you have with him is worth jeopardizing what we have."

Giovanni let go of my arms and turned away from me. He walked away and I rounded on Pallo. "Don't ever read me again and use it to hurt him, ever! Are you so jealous that he and I are friends that you have to stoop to these parlor tricks? God, you're a real piece of work, Pallo."

"He's a monster, Gwyneth. If he stays, he will lure you into bed with him and then he will have you right back where he wants you. Have you learned nothing from your history? He cannot be trusted. He will hurt you and all those you love. I know this for a fact. Let him go before you do something you'll regret."

My blood boiled. Giovanni turned towards Pallo. I didn't think it was possible to look even more pissed than me, but he was doing a fine job.

"Pallo, he's changed. Stop throwing the past in my face. I can make my own damn decisions without you and you're wrong."

Pallo took a step towards me. James appeared close to me. I watched Pallo's eyes darken. He was losing his cool and fast. "Why don't you let him fuck you? Then you will see how wonderful he really is when he turns on you... again."

"You're right about one thing, Giovanni is wonderful, but he didn't fuck me."

Pallo let out a small snort. I glanced at Giovanni. He looked so hurt and so confused that I couldn't help but go towards him.

Pallo snorted. "Fuck him, Gwen, and you will see his true colors. Once he thinks he has you he will show you what he is made of and you will come running back to me to clean up the mess again!"

I kept my gaze on Giovanni, but spoke to Pallo. "When I said he didn't fuck me, I wasn't implying we haven't had sex. I was just stating a fact. He didn't fuck me Pallo."

He made love to me. There's a huge difference, not that you'd know."

Giovanni's eyes widened and a look of relief washed over his face. His gaze flickered to something behind me and he opened his mouth to yell. "*Bella!*"

Pallo yanked me around and held me up at least a foot off the ground. He was so mad his face was shifted into his demon form. I closed my eyes and tried to swallow down my fear. It didn't work.

"You let that monster inside you? You gave yourself over to him after what he did to you, to me, and to our child? How could you?"

"Pallo," James said sounding very worried.

Giovanni appeared next to us and he didn't look pleased at how Pallo was treating me. I put my hand up. "It's okay."

Giovanni shook his head. "No, *Bella*, it is not okay. He wants to harm you. He is fighting the urge to snap your neck. I believe that for the moment you are safe, but ...."

I froze. Giovanni sired Pallo so he could read him like Pallo could read me. I knew what Giovanni was saying was what Pallo was thinking, but I still couldn't bring myself to believe Pallo was capable of hurting me. Now that I had been presented with the facts I realized that Pallo was no different from the monster he made Giovanni out to be.

Pallo dropped me quickly and backed away, appearing confused. "Gwyneth." He turned and walked towards the barns. James went after him.

Giovanni put his hand out to me. "Do you understand what you just did?"

Unfortunately, I understood all too well what I'd just done. "Yes, I picked you."

## Chapter Fifteen

My first night home was shaping up to be weird—rather thirteen o'clockish. You know, that spot on the clock you think should be there but isn't. There was no other way to describe it. The place no longer felt like my home, yet it was. Pallo had obviously taken time to pick things he knew I'd like. The master bedroom was the only room I think he'd done more for himself than me. It was identical to the bedroom we'd shared over two-hundred years ago. The walls were a pale yellow, the trim all done white and the bed was a large wooden four-poster bed.

Getting used to the remodeled farmhouse was one thing. Ironing out sleeping arrangements was another. It turned out Pallo had living quarters constructed over each new barn. James told me that he and Caradoc had set Mikhail's group up in two of them. Pallo had taken another and James had been sent in to sleep in the room next to mine. I had little doubt that he was told to listen in on everything Giovanni and I did.

I looked over at Giovanni. He was laying his shirt across the footboard. He moved around and sat down on the edge of the bed to take his shoes off. He'd been pretty quiet since our little spat with Pallo outside. I had no intention of screwing up his reflection time so I tossed my jeans and sweater aside. I walked over to my, now large, wood dresser and searched around for my favorite oversized t-shirt. It was gone. All I could find were outfits that would make underwear models blush. I rolled my eyes and decided I'd just sleep in the t-shirt I had on. It came to just above my navel and was snug, but it was a hell of a lot more comfy than the stuff Pallo had loaded me up with.

I reached up and unfastened my bra. Years of changing in the girls' locker rooms and being the only one with breasts will make you an expert at removing a bra from under a shirt. I walked over and climbed in bed. Giovanni was still sitting at the foot of the bed. His shoes were off, but he hadn't moved.

He let out a sigh. "Gwyneth, you know if I lie here with you tonight, Pallo will be lost to you forever?"

I didn't answer right away. It wasn't one of those questions you can just give an automated response. He was right. Being in the same room for the night while Pallo slept in the same vicinity would mean the end of any chance I had with Pallo. But really, what chance had I ever had with him? He'd perfected the art of pushing me away and distancing himself from me. He seemed convinced I could never love the monster he'd become. I not only had been more than willing to love it, I ended up sleeping with the one who had made him that way. I was completely screwed in the head and I knew it. That had to count for something. First step to recovery, right?

"Is what he says true? Will you hurt everyone I love?"

Giovanni turned and looked at me. "I already have."

"Tell me more about it." I opened the covers up for him. He stood, unzipped his gray slacks and pulled them off. Seeing him standing before me in his dark gray bikini briefs brought a smile to my face. He climbed in and moved his body close to mine.

It took us only seconds to find a comfortable way to lie facing each other. It was

plain to see we'd had nearly a hundred years of practice. I ran my foot over his leg and snuggled closer to him. I was suddenly cold and the idea of being in his arms warmed me. I know it was silly, but hey, that's what I'm all about.

"Spending the night with me here will end any chance of a future with Pallo. I told you I am more than willing to share you with him, but he will not do the same in return."

"I wish I could say that I'm ready to toss everything I could have with Pallo out the window. I don't want to be that girl who can't make up her mind forever. But I need to know more about you. Are you willing to share that with me?"

He kissed my forehead. "What if I told you there was a way for me to show you."

I grabbed him tightly and waited for him to go on. He did. "I know you have the gift of visions. You've always had that. When I saw you at the nightclub with Pallo at first I could not believe it was you, then once I knew it was really you, I pulled my power around me to keep you from reading me. I've been doing it every moment I've been near you. If I let it down you will be able to follow along and see our past together with your own eyes. But," he grew quiet, "there is a chance your mind will not be able to understand it is just a dream, a memory of a life long ago. You may feel every emotion and your body may react like the events are truly taking place." He stroked my cheek. "This is not something I recommend, but it is only a matter of time before Pallo realizes I am shielding myself from you and he will twist it to look as though I'm trying to deceive you."

I pulled the blanket up and over us more. I was still shaking, now out of a mix of fear and excitement. "Why do you sound so against it?"

"Gwyneth, suppose I let you in and you can't pull back. It is a well-known fact you died. Do you think I want that to happen again? Do you think I want to know that two times I could have prevented it and I didn't?"

"No, but ...."

He pulled my chin up to him. "But, you want to know all the answers to a life you can't remember. You may not like the answers you get and you may not like me when you are done."

"If you're so sure I'm going to hate you, why do it?"

He gave me another quick kiss. "If I do not then you will forever wonder if Pallo was right about you not being able to trust me anymore."

"Will I remember everything?"

"I believe if your powers are still the same, you will receive bits and pieces and perhaps that will jar your memory."

"How do we do it?"

"We bring in someone you trust first. Then I will open up to you."

I looked at him as my face drew into a scowl. "Why do we need someone else in here?"

"What if I do this and you cannot get back. I'm not strong enough to sustain you through my essence along with pulling you back from the edge."

I ran my fingers over the faint scars on his chest. Did I really want to know everything about my past? I was happy with Giovanni in the here and now, but he was right. I'd always wonder if he was being honest with me. Pallo had made me doubt him and I would always question his honesty.

"I want to do it and soon."

"Why soon?"

"I'm home now and that means the wedding is on unless I can talk my father out of it. I don't have a lot of time to prove my case. I need all the ammunition I can get."

Giovanni's hand slid up and under my t-shirt. "Would marrying Caleb really be so bad?"

I'd already spent enough time thinking about that to not need long to ponder.

"No, marrying the Caleb I knew wouldn't be bad at all, marrying the green-eyed monster I turned him into would. He hates me Giovanni. He wants me dead. He forced me to go. He left me no choice."

"Yet, you come home to him when he needs you and it will most likely cost you the freedom to live your life the way you want."

I had no rhyme or reason, and he knew it. It made no sense for me to have flown half way around the world to help a man that hated my guts.

I stopped trying to over analyze my life and planted tiny kisses on Giovanni's face. I felt him smiling under each one. This wasn't a moment I wanted to spoil talking about any more ex-boyfriends. I just wanted to concentrate on the here and now.

He slid his hand around and under the front of my shirt. His fingers grazed my breast and made my kisses come down on him in droves. His mouth came to mine and we found ourselves locked together.

Something loud crashed from the doorway. I turned and looked at the door. The handle shook for a minute then it flew open. The light from the hall backlit the tall slender figure that filled the doorway—it staggered slightly and came crashing into the room.

"Gwen?"

Caleb?

I lay there, with Giovanni's hand still under my t-shirt fondling my breast, in shock. Caleb picked himself up off the floor and took a large step back. He looked down at the two of us and his green eyes widened.

"God, no Gwen ... not him," he said as he dropped to his knees.

"Caleb!" I jumped up and ran to him. It was plain to see he was intoxicated. James had told me that Caleb had taken to drinking heavily and now I could see it for myself. Giovanni rolled off the bed and came to help me try to lift him.

The two of them were the same height and close to the same weight. I think that Caleb was actually a hair more muscular than Giovanni, but I wasn't planning on pointing that out to anyone. I tried to lift him and failed miserably. Giovanni lifted him under his shoulder and made Caleb look like a sack of potatoes.

"What's a dead guy got to do around here to get some sleep? Crimey... what the...?" James said from the doorway. He was standing there in a pair of his dark blue boxer briefs. He was obsessed with them. Once he'd even made me feel them through his pant leg. He had issues and that's why we made great friends. Maybe we could get a two for one deal at a therapist. He looked at the two of us trying to hold Caleb up in our underwear and his eyes widened.

James turned around fast and mumbled to someone in the hall. I heard a loud booming voice and knew the night was getting better and better. Pallo pushed past James as if he was nothing more than an irritating fruit fly. Part of me agreed with him on that,



but the rest thought he was an ass for pushing James around.

Pallo looked at Giovanni in his bikini briefs and me in my tight little short tee and white silk undies and his face hardened. I thought about ducking in case he began spitting nails. Caleb let out a small groan and Pallo noticed him there for the first time. He walked over to where I was standing and moved past me. Together he and Giovanni lifted Caleb up off the floor.

Pallo glanced at me briefly. "Where do you want him?"

"In the room across the hall."

I followed them over and was the one who moved in to take Caleb's boots and jeans off him.

"Gwyneth, I think he can safely sleep this off with all his clothes on," Pallo said, sarcasm dripping from his every word.

"Yeah, probably, but I'd do the same for you, so tough."

Pallo tossed his hands up and rolled his eyes. I was happy to see him walk out. I didn't want to fight with him anymore. Giovanni moved over and aided me with undressing Caleb. I expected to see him struggling with the knowledge that this passed out man was to be my husband very shortly. He wasn't. He gave me a wink and eased Caleb out of his shirt. I undid Caleb's pants and started pulling them down. My face was instantly right in his very exposed groin. I'd forgotten he didn't wear underwear.

"My, I can see why you like him," Giovanni said, leaning over to get a better view. "He is gifted. But I am more so." He grinned, letting his tongue run over his fangs.

I tried to hide my surprise, but I failed. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know you're into guys, too. And I'm not getting into a 'who is bigger' contest."

"*Bella*, I am from an era of bed hopping that could make adult film directors blush and so are you."

I hadn't ever thought about it, but it was true. "What's your view on monogamy now?"

He leaned closer to Caleb and smiled. "It's lengthening by the minute." I tossed Caleb's jeans at him and he laughed. "Seriously, *Bella*, if you wish to be with these men I understand, my only concern is they will force you out of my arms."

"How can you stand there and say you're cool with the idea of me having sex with other guys? I'm sure the hell not all right with you being with other ...." I almost said women, but after his last comments, I rephrased it, "people. I really don't think I'd be all right with that."

He came around to me. I was trying to lift Caleb's body. He was dead to the world and his limbs were heavy. Giovanni picked his feet up and put them onto the bed. He pulled the covers up and over him, slowing as he neared Caleb's parts in question. He glanced over at me and smiled, wagging his brows playfully.

"Jerk," I said through a laugh.

He covered Caleb and turned to me. "I would not ask you to share me with anyone else. But how can I deny you your two soul mates? Pallo and Caleb can give you a life I cannot." I was about to object when he put his hand up, halting me. "No, it's true, *Bella*. I cannot give you a child. They can. Caleb can offer you a life with someone who is not a monster and Pallo can offer you a second chance at the family you should have had. What can I offer you?"

I moved into his arms and hugged him tightly. “Yourself.”

“If that were enough, we would not be having this conversation,” he said as he walked towards the door.

“Gwen?” Caleb mumbled my name. I turned and looked at him. I noticed for the first time that he had grown a goatee. He’d never had any facial hair when we’d been together and this was new. I reached down and moved a strand of his long, straight, white-blond hair out of his face.

“I will wait for you in your room, *Bella*.” I turned to follow Giovanni out, but he put his hand up and dismissed me. “No, you spend some time with your faerie. He’s earned it.” He gave me a wink and a double-dimple smile and left. He closed the door softly behind him.

“Gwen, what ... where ... Gwen?” Caleb said softly. I sat next to Caleb on the bed and continued to pull his hair back from his face. He, like me, had hair that hung to the top of his butt. It was sort of the norm for fairies. Sure, we could cut it, but it would grow back in a few short weeks.

I stood up to let him rest and his hand came out and wrapped around my waist. He pulled me down to him and cuddled against me. “Gwen, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Caleb.”

He yanked me against him more and drew in a deep breath. “It hurts.”

I arched a brow. “What hurts?”

“Heavy press,” he whispered before nodding off for just a moment. “Like magik pushing in on me all the time.”

He’d never mentioned anything like that before. “Caleb, are you okay?”

He mumbled something I couldn’t quite make out but I could have sworn it was another woman’s name. I also thought it sounded a lot like he mentioned developing feelings for her and drinking to make the pain that came with those feelings go away.

Had Caleb found someone new? Someone he cared for?

## Chapter Sixteen

I woke to find a warm arm draped over me. I stretched and let out a small yawn. The arm tightened around my waist. A scratchy chin nuzzled my neck and I felt the tiniest of kisses being placed near my jaw.

“Hey, I thought I was dreaming,” Caleb said, his voice smoky and heavy from sleep.

I froze. I hadn’t remembered falling asleep with him. He had pulled me close to him and held me for a while. I must have dozed off. I turned a little and looked up into his face. It was still strange to see him sporting a goatee. It was a little darker than his light blond hair and in truth it looked nice on him. He’d always been one who seemed comfortable with a rugged appearance—even though he was destined to be baby faced from the get go.

His hand moved across my stomach and slid under my t-shirt. I caught his wrist and smiled up at him.

“How are you feeling? Do you have a headache?”

He’d been so drunk when he got in I was amazed that he was even conscious.

“No, I’m fine. You know how it is for us, we heal fast. Did I do anything stupid, or did we just kiss and make up?”

I didn’t know what to say to him. We had hardly spoken let alone sorted out our differences. He tried to slide his hand under my shirt again and I pulled it away.

“Caleb ....”

His mouth came down on mine. I let out a tiny grunt in protest then felt my leg wrap around his. His hand moved up and found my breast. He hardened against my thigh. Stripping him down for bed seemed dumber and dumber as the kiss went on. A naked horny faerie was not what I needed next to me at the moment.

Caleb let a smidge of his magik up and over me. I carried a piece of his magik within me and he mine. When he’d asked me to marry him we had exchanged a part of our magikal essence. This took the place of rings for fairies and gave us the ability to share magik completely someday. He yanked on that little piece of him that would forever remain in me and I felt my body turn in to meet his.

Making love to Caleb was so very different than Giovanni and Pallo. Giovanni and I had fiery passion and love. Pallo and I shared something based on being soul mates. Caleb, now that I’d been brought back, was also my mate, but being a faerie meant that magik could be exchanged between us during sex and there was a lot to be said for magik in the bedroom.

Caleb moved his hand down towards the top of my underwear. I sucked my breath in and my stomach muscles tightened with delight. I pushed on his shoulders and dropped back against the pillow.

“Stop,” I said.

“You don’t sound so sure about that.”

“Caleb.”

He gave up and looked at me. "I could raise my power in you again, it answers to me .... you are going to be my wife soon, you know. I'd be within my rights."

I turned and stared blankly at him. He looked the same, except for the beard thing, but he wasn't acting the same. "What's with you? You never tried to pull that wifely duty crap on me before, what gives?"

"I was joking, Gwen." His lips drew in.

"I'm sorry, I just ... well, after everything I've been hearing about you lately I'm not sure what to expect from you."

He lay back on the bed and put his arms out. I watched his nude body as the morning sun hit it and wondered again where it was that I'd let it all go so very wrong. He caught me staring at his body and gave me a not so innocent grin.

"Have you talked to your father since you got home?" he asked. I shook my head. "You know, after you left, I tried to get him to change his mind about the wedding. I explained that we were taking a break."

My heart sank. I knew that we were taking a break. I was the one who had decided to call the thing off. Too bad my father hadn't gotten that memo before announcing to his Kingdom that Caleb and I were going to get married. I knew full well that when I left Caleb hated my guts, but hearing him say that he had tried to talk my father into letting us out of the wedding stung. It shouldn't have. But it did. I turned and stared at the door. I had to blink several times to choke back my tears.

Caleb leaned over me and saw the emotion on my face. "Gwen, what's wrong?"

Licking my lips, I tried my best to not burst into hysterics. "So, what did my father say? Did he agree to cancel the ... wedding?"

Caleb let out a tiny laugh. "No, he told me that we had exactly six months to enjoy our little break then we were to meet back in the Dark Realm to wed."

"And, how do you feel about having to marry a woman you hate?"

He moved his body over me. His long straight hair fell all around our faces. He bent his head down slightly. "Gwen, I have never hated you, ever! I was hurt by what you did with Pallo, but I don't hate you for it. I was being an ass, and I'm sorry for that, I am. I've been thinking a lot about us for the last few months and I can understand your attraction to Pallo. I can understand ...."

I sat up and he grabbed hold of my waist. "Gwen, shit I'm pouring my heart out to you here and you try and leave."

"No, it's not that, Caleb. I think you should get dressed. Things are different now."

He pulled me down onto the bed and kissed me. I pushed on his shoulders to get him to let me up, but he refused. His hot magik called to mine. I found myself caressing his tongue back with mine. My fingers dug at the back of his arms in an attempt to get closer to him. He let his power fade and pulled away from me.

"See, nothing is different," Caleb said with smug smile.

I rolled out from under him and fell onto the floor. He laughed as I sprang back to my feet. I flipped my hair back out of my face and let out a sigh. "Caleb, you've been running around drinking, starting fights and ..." I couldn't accuse him of sleeping with other women. I'd lost my right to judge him on that.

He climbed out of bed and came towards me. "Let me guess, Pallo sent one of his slackies to fill you in on me?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "James, yeah, I bet it was

James. Whatever he told you is right. I'm sure he wouldn't exaggerate. Vampires are real trustworthy." He put his hand out towards me and I backed up into the door. "What the hell do you want me to say? I wanted to forget you, Gwen. I wanted to make myself numb. I tried, Lord knows I tried, but nothing's worked."

Caleb was quiet a moment. "I thought I found ...." He closed his eyes and tipped his head.

"Found what?" I thought back to the words he'd whispered before falling asleep. Had I heard him right? Had he found someone else? "Caleb?"

He touched my cheek and I turned my head away. "James told you about all the women, didn't he?" I nodded. "Did he give you any numbers?"

"No."

"Do you want them?"

The last thing I wanted was to know exactly how many women Caleb had been sticking it to. I turned my head and closed my eyes. I didn't want to cry. I couldn't bring myself to. I had Giovanni now, and I couldn't love more than one man with all my heart, could I?

Caleb ran the back of his hand up my stomach. "You look hot. Taking a break from this mess did you good."

I blinked, positive my hearing had gone haywire. "Did you just say that I look hot? Who are you and where the hell is my Caleb?"

He smiled. "Your Caleb? Hmm, I like the sound of that."

I pushed him off me. "Forget it. I need to get a hold of my father. This can't happen. I can't marry you. You're a stranger to me now and from what I've seen of you, I don't like you anymore." I stared into his green eyes and wondered what he been doing to himself all these months. "Caleb, I tried to fix things with you and you pushed me away. I tried to make it right and you spit in my face. Now, I come home to find you a mess and a jerk to boot. This isn't you and this certainly isn't something I want to spend the rest of my life with."

He put his nose to mine and locked gazes with me. "I am what you made me, Gwen." His tongue came out and licked my closed lips.

"This is not you. When you decide to start acting like yourself again, let me know. Until then, I can't help you, no one can." I pushed him away from me and walked out of the room. I headed across to my room and opened the door slowly.

I stepped in and closed the door. A wave of black silky hair was spread across the bed. I walked closer and saw that Giovanni's back was to me. I climbed in behind him and wrapped my arm around him. My chin fit nicely onto his shoulder, but my feet only went to just below his knees. I liked how familiar his body felt to me.

He shifted a little and turned his head to me. "*Bella.*"

"I'm sorry I didn't come back in. I fell asleep in Caleb's room. Nothing happened."

Giovanni turned his body to me and wrapped his arms around me. "I know nothing happened and even if it had, I've already told you that I will not be angry with you." He didn't sound fine with the idea and for some reason that made me feel better. It was silly to think Giovanni's jealousy could calm my nerves but it did.

I closed my eyes and was thankful I didn't have another battle to fight. He pulled me to him and kissed my lips. "You taste of your faerie."

Drawing back from him, I covered my mouth. When I had told him that nothing happened I'd meant that Caleb and I didn't have sex. We had kissed. I went to climb out of the bed when Giovanni sat up and wrapped his arms around my waist. He moved his body up my back, leaving us both on our knees with my back to him. He reached around and pulled my chin towards him.

"I did not say that to upset you. I am not even sure why I said it. I am not upset with you, *Bella*. I know nothing happened ... I could hear the two of you sleeping."

His hands moved around to the front of me. He pulled my shirt up a little and let his fingers slide down my stomach. He moved his hand down the front of my underwear and found what he was looking for. I cried out and grabbed at his legs and butt. He was completely nude. He'd only slept nude once since I'd known him and I was shocked to find he did it with so many people around us. I ran my hands over his smooth skin as our bodies swayed slightly. His fingers worked tiny circles on my lower region, sending my legs into spasms.

Giovanni pressed firmly against me. I let go of his leg and leaned forward for him to take me. He pulled my underwear down and ran his fingers up my spine. When he got to my neck, he slid his hands up into my hair and wrapped them in it gently. He pushed himself in me and made me cry out for him. He moved himself in and out of me and held my hair as he went. He was so impossibly large from this angle that for a moment I wondered if he'd rip me in two or leave permanent damage. I felt my body relaxing around him, and I knew he was being gentle with me.

His sac slapped against me as he filled me up. The head of his cock hit my cervix. Each time I received him I let out a moan. His size was still very much an issue. Having him in me like this was such a mix of pleasure and pain that my body didn't know how to react.

His hand slipped out of my hair and slid down my back then over my side and down. He moved his body against me and spooned me from behind. He reached down between my legs and found my sweet spot and ran his fingers over it as he continued to pump himself into me. I felt something building up inside me and I wanted to share it with him. I moved my hand down over his and let him trace my own fingers over me.

I turned my head up to his face and licked his neck. "Fuck me, Giovanni, Fuck me."

He sped up and his body tightened as mine exploded. I felt him release himself in me. His breath was short and shallow. "No, *Bella*, I make love to you. There is a difference, remember."

I stayed with my body pressed against his and kissed his mouth. He bent forward and grabbed the sheet quickly, pulling it up over the front of me.

"Gwen, hey I forgot to tell you about this dream I had last night. I dreamt that you were in bed with ...," the bedroom door burst open and Caleb froze, "Giovanni."

Caleb stared at the two of us and his face paled. He backed out the room and slammed the door shut. Giovanni hugged me tightly to him.

"Do you regret him seeing us?"

"I should have told him about us. He shouldn't have had to find out like this."

"Ah, I agree, but you did not answer my question," he said, pulling himself out of me slowly.

I touched his leg and stayed against him. "No, I don't regret us, not at all. I am

concerned about one thing though.”

He moved back and planted kisses on my shoulders. “What is that, *Bella*.”

“Honey, if Pallo is right about you, then I don’t think, no ... I know, I won’t recover from being hurt by you. I love you so much already and it grows every second I’m with you. And the very fact I’m not running after Caleb right now proves that.”

Giovanni wrapped his arms around me. “Pallo is wrong about me, *vita mia*.”

God, I hoped Giovanni was right.

## Chapter Seventeen

Having my days and nights mixed up was beginning to take a toll on me. Giovanni and I took a rather eventful shower together and laid back down for a couple of hours. He kept asking me if I wanted to go after Caleb to sort things out. I was torn. Part of me did, but the sensible half of me won out and knew that I'd be adding fuel to the fire. No, I'd give Caleb the time he needed to think things over, then I'd talk with him.

I felt Giovanni get out of bed. He was being very quiet about getting dressed. I don't think I'd have been able to hear him if it wasn't for Pallo's attempt at turning me. I rolled over and watched him slide on his black dress pants. He went over to his suitcase and took out a long sleeved, black, pull-over shirt. It wasn't as dressy as his normal clothes, but I loved it on him. Black suited him, not because it was supposed to, but because his features lent themselves well to the darkness of black.

He pulled his hair out of the back of his shirt and looked out the window. The sun had set already and I knew that he was getting hungry. He could go longer between feedings than Pallo. I think his age had something to do with it. I heard him let out a long sigh, and I shifted slightly under the blankets.

"Mi dispiace—I'm sorry, I did not mean to wake you," he said softly.

His back was still to me and I wanted very much to see the look on his face. Not that it mattered. I could rarely read his emotions. His face was schooled to never reveal anything he didn't want it to. I got a gnawing feeling in my gut and was very concerned that he was having second thoughts about us.

I climbed out of bed. I walked near him, but didn't disturb him. If he wanted to talk to me he could. I opened my closet and pulled the light cord. It took a few minutes for me to verify the closet was indeed still mine. I could make out some of my clothes, but most of what I saw in there were things I hadn't purchased. But I was pretty sure I knew who had bought them—Pallo.

I settled on a pair of wide leg blue jeans, a light tan, taffeta blouse and a long, denim duster. I fished my brown suede boots out and hugged them. For a few seconds I thought Pallo might have thrown them out. They were low on his likeability scale.

Giovanni turned to me. He let his surprise show in his eyes. "*Bella*, you look like you are about to ride off on your horse and herd the cattle home."

I smiled and turned to walk out of the room.

"*Bella*, wait. Why do you look so sad?"

I put my hand through my hair. It was a nervous habit that I'd never break. I looked at him and tried to hide my lie. "I'm not sad, really. I'm fine. Let's go down and grab something to eat."

He was on me in an instant. He had me swung around and facing him before I could utter a word. "Don't hide the way you feel from me, *Bella*. Something troubles you."

"Giovanni, I'm fine." My lip began to quiver. I bit down on it, refusing to give



in. The feeling in my gut was coming back. It was telling me that something was not right with Giovanni and I knew I could not handle finding out what it was.

He touched my cheek and brought his face close to mine. “*Bella*, please don’t try and deceive me. I can sense that you are lying to me.”

I surrendered. “You’re going to leave me aren’t you?”

He pulled his hand away quickly. That was all the proof I needed. I let my head drop forward, feeling like someone had kicked me in the chest. “Okay. It’s okay I understand,” I said more to myself than to him. No part of me understood or was fine with the knowledge he was leaving me.

Giovanni took me in his arms and held me close to him. “Perhaps, it is not I that you should ask about my travel plans.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He grabbed my cheeks and kissed my lips. “No, *Bella*, *mi dispiace*. I should not have said that. It means nothing and I have no plans of my own to leave you. I’m not sure you could get rid of me even if you wanted to.”

I let out a half-laugh, half-cry and kissed him back. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Dinner had been a disaster. I helped James make spaghetti. None of the vampires, except James ate any. They all sipped quietly on their glasses of blood. Mikhail and Malita joined us. I was shocked to see that the twins and punk-rock boy were no-shows. Malita spent the entire dinner rubbing her foot up Pallo's leg. He spent the entire meal trying to ignore her to talk with Caleb.

Caleb and Pallo were more than acquaintances but not exactly friends. Putting a label on what they were was hard. Watching them look down at Giovanni and me with utter disgust was harder. They didn't team up on me often, but on this they were.

Giovanni rose above their behavior and sat with me while I ate and we talked about taking me back to his home for a while. He seemed to think that it was less stressful on me. He was right. I wanted to go. I missed his villa. I missed Tuscany. After Pallo's redecorating job, the farmhouse no longer felt like home. Tuscany did.

Caradoc and James helped me clear the table and James insisted on cleaning the kitchen. He told me that he'd rather wash a thousand dishes than to go back into that room. I understood where he was coming from. I kissed his cheek and smiled at him.

"You're too good to me, James."

"Don't I know it, luv."

I grabbed a couple bottles of wine and headed back out into the dining room. Malita was practically under the table. For a split second I thought she might be giving Pallo a blow-job. My gaze flickered toward Mikhail and he put his hands up. She was out of control and he knew it. I walked past her and handed the bottles of wine to Mikhail.

"If you would be so kind as to do the honors," I said.

He smiled. Malita rose up slowly in her seat and gave me a dirty look. I wanted to take one of the bottles of wine and smash it over her blonde head, but hey, I had new furniture now. I had to treat it nicely and red wine on it wasn't so nice.

Pallo and Caleb were leaning in talking quietly to each other. Caleb looked up at me. "Gwen, what's this about an attack?"

My denim duster covered the now almost gone scars, but I still wore traces of the attack. Pallo looked at Giovanni. I knew he still blamed him for it. I walked over to Giovanni and stood behind him. I put my hands on his shoulders and rubbed them. Both Caleb's and Pallo's faces' hardened.

"It was nothing, really ... well, it was kind of serious, but we never saw them again, so it's fine."

Pallo lifted a brow. "I would not say nearly bleeding to death and needing my strength to survive was fine."

His strength to survive? What the hell was he talking about? Giovanni touched my hand. "*Bella*, it is why you saw him so many times. Your body had to borrow the strength of your maker for a while to heal."

"Borrow strength? My maker? So, what are you guys telling me? Is Pallo my

master now?”

Giovanni tightened his grip on my hand. Caleb looked sick to his stomach. I'm sure my face matched his. Pallo on the other hand appeared pleased with himself.

“Gwyneth, no one leads you around, right?”

Malita peered down the end of her nose at me. “You really are an ungrateful bitch. He saved your life more than once and this is the thanks you give him?”

Mikhail put his hand on her arm. She tossed it off. She rose to her feet and her long yellow floral dress was wrinkled from trying to play footsie with Pallo. I watched as her eyes changed slightly. I wasn't the only one who noticed. The whole room stood. I pulled my power up and stared at her. If the bitch wanted to play, I'd play.

“No ... it's fine,” I said to everyone. They looked uneasy but sat back down.

Malita's mouth curved into a smile. She showed me that she was partially changed and that her teeth were growing larger. When she spoke, her voice was a touch deeper. “You take everything in your life for granted, Princess. You have the love of three men and have caught the eye of a fourth.” She glanced at Mikhail, so did everyone else. He squirmed in his seat, but didn't deny it.

You have got to be kidding me.

Malita kept her gaze on Mikhail and her voice lost its edge. “They have all had her and she twisted their minds. She has no soul, no conscience. Look what she did to Pallo all those years ago. She got knocked up by that one.” She pointed at Caleb. He glanced at me. I tightened my fist. “That's not even good enough for her, no she's got to figure out a way to show back up, alive and try and ruin their lives again. What, Gwyneth, the first time not enough for you? You planning on turning them all against each other again? Maybe it will end the same, with them finding you dead ... again.”

I was so furious with her that I could feel the tiny hairs on the back of my arm standing on end, anxious to get to attack her with my power. Most of my anger came from the fact that she was right about so many things. Things I hated about myself and my situation. I wanted to say something to her, but she continued.

“Look at you standing behind Giovanni for support—for protection. You know he once told me about you while he was fucking me.” She waited for the shock on my face. It came and she smiled. “Yeah, he fucked me and so did he.” She pointed at Pallo. “You're not the only one who can lure the men to you, Gwyneth.”

I let my voice drop lower, as well. “Very true, Malita, but they've never once mentioned you while they were fucking me, so what does that say?”

Mikhail spit his wine across the table and Caleb slid his chair back. Malita turned her attention to Caleb.

“How can you stand to be near her? Her whoring around cost your unborn baby its life... Oh, don't look surprised, we all know the story. Maybe if she could have kept her legs shut, she'd have kept Giovanni from wanting to kill her, but then she couldn't have tossed them open for you. Since the baby never saw the light of day anyways, I guess that would have been better. That bastard of a child would have been a whore like its mother and ....”

Pallo jumped up and grabbed Malita by her throat. Caleb was two steps behind him grabbing his arm. “Don't do this, Pallo, she's not worth it.”

Pallo loosened his grip on her and backed away.

Malita was livid. “Oh, sure protect her and her bastard spawn, but you know it's

true. The baby would have been a lying, manipulative, weak, slut like her mother.”

Pallo slapped Malita’s face. I normally don’t condone that kind of behavior, but I wanted to slit her throat so it was best I wasn’t consulted. Giovanni grabbed my hand tighter. He turned and locked gazes with me. “His mother is none of those things and he was not a bastard.”

“He?” Pallo’s face paled. “I had a son?”

Giovanni nodded and my legs shook. Malita glanced at Pallo. “No ... no, you couldn’t have been the baby’s father. You told me she got pregnant by the faerie.”

Caleb stepped in. “As much as I wanted to be the father, I wasn’t. It was Pallo, and I was okay with that. I couldn’t have a child with Gwen, but I wanted one desperately.”

Malita glanced around the room wildly. “You’re all crazy. Every last one of you is crazy.” Her focus settled on me. “It’s in your blood to try and control us. You think you’re so much better than us all .... You’ll never be my leader. I’ll never bow down to you .... You’ll get what’s coming to you.” She pointed at Caleb. “He’s got so many people gunning for him and they’ll all come for you ... the woman he’s supposed to marry.” She smiled. “They may have had a little help with knowing where to find you.”

I watched in horror as her face began to morph. White fur sprouted all over her body as her nose lengthened. Her shoulders hunched and her dress ripped off her. It seemed like minutes, but I’m sure it was only seconds before she was in full shifted form and leaping at me. Mikhail tried to stop her, but she thrust him backwards. Giovanni shot up out of the chair and went at her. Her mouth opened wide. I pushed Giovanni to the side and put my hand up. I sent enough power through her to light a small country’s electric plant for a week. Her body jerked and she yipped. She kept going and went straight through the dining room window. I turned and watched her fall in the grass. She got back up on all fours and took off running towards the woods.

Giovanni grabbed me. “Gwyneth, what were you thinking trying to take her on by yourself?”

Caleb walked up to the glass and touched it. His finger came away bloody. “My guess is she was thinking of killing that bitch.”

“Good guess,” I said.

## Chapter Nineteen

I sat wrapped in a blanket on my bed. Caleb had seen to my needs after the shock of what had just happened had sank in. I had tried to kill Malita. I'd killed before and I hadn't felt bad about it. But almost killing her was bothering me. I wondered if it was because she was telling the truth or the truth as she knew it.

Giovanni came and wrapped his arm around me. I looked up into his dark eyes and shook my head.

"What just happened?"

He kissed my temple. "You just received verification I am truly the monster Pallo depicts me as."

I pulled away from him a little. I was confused and wanted to be comforted not concerned that when I woke up he'd be gone. "No, don't do this ... What? You think because you told everyone that you know the baby was a boy that makes you a monster in my eyes? Giovanni, you took note of the fact he was a he. I've seen a vampire in a rage before ... they don't stop and take inventory. You did, which means you cared."

A soft knock came on my door. Giovanni touched my leg and went to answer it. His body language told me that it was someone he didn't necessarily want to be opening the door for. That didn't tell me much, half the damn house was against him—against us. He pushed the door open and stepped aside.

Pallo stood there. His white shirt was unbuttoned and his chest was showing. His normally perfectly put together outfit looked like he'd slept in it for days. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what he'd been doing. He glanced at me and then at Giovanni.

"May I come in?" he asked dryly.

"I thought you guys could go anywhere you wanted once you'd been invited in?"

Giovanni stared at Pallo and then at me. "We can."

Pallo was being polite, and I had totally missed it. I looked at his head of brown, wavy hair and his dark brown eyes and wondered again how all of this had gone so very wrong. Was I doomed to spend this life cleaning up the mess I'd made in the past? Karma wasn't getting me—it was biting me in my ass. I nodded at Pallo and he stepped in.

"I would like to speak with you, privately," he said.

My gaze flickered to Giovanni as he headed out the door. "No, wait!" He stopped and turned to me. "I'll go back home with you, Giovanni—to Tuscany. I don't belong here anymore." I knew that what I said was the truth. I was ready to give up my life here to be with him.

Giovanni's face lit up as he walked out of the room.

Pallo came to me and dropped to his knee in front of me. "Gwyneth, now you are thinking about going home with him for good?"

I pushed his hand away. "I told you once that I couldn't do this anymore and I meant it. Pallo, you've broken me down with expectations of having what we had before, so has Caleb. Giovanni ... he and I were together for close to a hundred years

and he has never put any pressure on me to remember how we were or to be what we were.”

Pallo let out a snort. “I believe that would be because he was the reason your life ended, Gwyneth. Why would he want you to remember?”

“But, he’s offered to give me what memories he could back, even if those aren’t ones he wants me to have.”

Pallo moved next to me and sat on the bed. He was quiet for a moment and I wondered how much grief I was going to catch over this. “Gwyneth, I think you should take him up on his offer. Let him show you what he is... what he did.”

“I thought ... I thought you’d say no. You’re good at that and after finding out about the baby... it being a boy.... I just thought ....”

He leaned over and touched my arm. “Gwyneth, the very fact you refer to the baby as an it, tells me that you have little to no memories or feelings from your past. We have all been holding you accountable for your behavior then and in truth, all you have now are vague feelings for us and random memories. We are expecting you to cram close to three hundred years worth of living into your twenty-five short years now.” He moved and put his arm around me. “I have no idea what horrors Giovanni put you through. No one but he does. But I do know when your body was found in the field, you had not been treated kindly. It is for your own safety now that you know who you are dealing with.”

I touched his knee. “Giovanni told me to have someone in the room with us that I trusted. Will you be there with me?”

“I think perhaps you should pick someone else. I am not sure I could watch him touch you and not want to reach over and tear his heart out.”

It was bold of me to ask him to sit in on something that would cause him so much pain. I didn’t want to hurt him. I loved him and would always love him, but he’d never let me love Giovanni, too. I had thought Pallo was an all or nothing kind of guy until he had told me to come back and marry Caleb. He was beginning to loosen his hold on me, but only for the right people.

I wanted to trace his dimpled chin and kiss along his soft, full lips. I missed his touch so much, but was not willing to sacrifice my feelings for Giovanni for him. I was being selfish and I knew it. But that didn’t stop me from wanting to trace along his overdone body and feel every curve of every muscle. His open shirt showed off his six pack abs and I had to make an effort to hold myself back. I wondered if it’d always be this way between us and if he felt it, too.

He took his hand and ran it down his chest and stomach. My eyes followed his every move and I found myself wanting to see his hand dive below his waistline. He looked over at me and moved it up to my face. I grabbed for his large hand and brought it to my lips. His skin felt so cool and soft against my warmth. I kissed along the edges of his center finger. When I reached the top I moved my lips over it and drew his finger into my mouth. His eyes closed and his mouth opened slightly.

He pulled his wet finger out of my mouth and drew it down my chin, neck, and chest. I sucked in and felt as my entire body shook slightly for him. He leaned into me and brought his lips just shy of touching mine. He picked up my hand and brought it to his hard chest. He ran it down himself and let it trace tiny circles on the thin line of dark brown, almost black hair that ran up to his navel.

“Yes, I think that we will always feel this way for one another,” he said to me softly. He was reading me again, but I wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or not. “I have felt this way for you since the moment you found me asleep during my many trips to spy on you. I have felt the need to have you near me and to touch you every moment of everyday since then.”

“Why... why is it like this?”

He moved his free hand up and over my heart. “Because we were destined to be together in the life you lived so long ago.”

I leaned in and put my lips against his. Pallo’s mouth opened for me and I slid my tongue in to find his. I felt his pushing at mine. His hands came around to each side of my face and he pulled me close to him. I went ahead and let my guard down. Caleb had taught me how to keep it up enough so that the two of us would not end up expecting a child. Caleb had way more control over when his body shifted and by that I mean really just his eyes, than I did. I knew enough about my body to know that it had reacted once to Pallo, so it was possible that he was still very much a mate for me.

He pulled at my face and for a minute it felt like he was trying to drink me down. I moved my head to match his and felt my body tightening and my eyes warming. I grabbed one of his hands. I pulled it up towards my eyes and then pulled out of the kiss with him.

“Look,” I said, softly.

His eyes opened and he looked at me. His face changed as he touched the corners of my eyes softly. “Gwyneth, how long have you known this?”

I kissed his lips quickly. “Since the first time we were together, but I didn’t know then that it meant what it did.”

“So, here is our proof you and I are still meant to be together.” He knew more about faeries than me. He could read and speak the ancient language and he could answers questions for me that I didn’t even have yet. He was very aware of how rare it was for a faerie’s body to react to someone. In a faerie’s lifetime they would be considered lucky to find that one person who they matched with. It was how our population of immortals was kept in check.

“Pallo, do you understand that now that I’m back, I am living a new life with ties to an old one?”

He nodded. I smiled and continued. “Then you understand Caleb is now also a match for me and that means I’m drawn to him the same way I am to you?”

He drew me closer to him. “Do you feel the same pull to be near Caleb as you do me?” I nodded my head slightly. He seemed to think about this for a minute. “And you have been pulled between us. Gwyneth, how have you survived these past few months away from us? I have only felt this way for one person, you. To feel this way for two and to deny those feelings must be difficult.”

I slid back from him. This was heading down a path I wasn’t sure I wanted to take. “Pallo, it was hard, some nights it was downright hell, but I got through it. I’m trying to learn to move on. I can’t have you both, so I ....”

“You found someone you thought would push us both away.” His jaw hardened and I knew that his mood was souring.

I wrapped the blanket around me more. “In the beginning ... yes... after I first left with Giovanni, that’s exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be far away from the ‘meant

to be' bullshit. I couldn't do it anymore, and it was destroying the two of you. So, yeah, I started out using Giovanni as a springboard to forgetting you two."

Pallo shifted and put his hands on the bed. "I sense a 'but' coming on."

I let out a small, nervous laugh. "But, he didn't let me use him for that, Pallo. He kept me at arm's length, emotionally. He provided what I needed most ... friendship."

Pallo turned his head away from me and his neck muscles tightened. "I can be your friend, too, Gwyneth."

"Can you?"

When he met my gaze I saw the hurt on his face. "I can be a better friend than the man who took you from me. He made me a monster and I lost you and our son. I thought it was forever and now that you are back in my life, I cannot bear to see you be close to him. Gwyneth, to lose you at his hands again would be my undoing."

"Pallo, what you and Caleb don't seem to understand is that Giovanni is more than just a friend, he's my *vita mio*, my *amore eternal*."

Pallo lurched back from me. He stood quickly and stared down at me.

"Gwyneth, what did you just call him?"

I shook my head. I wasn't really sure why I'd said that. Pallo moved down and glared into my eyes. "Gwyneth, during the time he tortured me, he would say those words under his breath and then when he could go no further without killing me, he told me he was going to take from me to punish you ... *occhio per occhio*, *vita mia*, *amore mia* ... *amore eternal*."

I leaned back. He was scaring me. "Pallo, I don't know what that means."

"It means ...." He was so close to me now that he could have bit my lip off if he wanted to. "It means an eye for an eye, my life, my love—my eternal love ... it is what one would call a love between two immortals. Giovanni made me this way because he thought you would be unable to stay with me as a vampire, like what had happened to him."

Pallo pulled back from me fast and I let out a small scream. He spun around and looked down at me. "By all means, Gwyneth, take him up on his offer and I will be more than willing to watch you learn what he truly is."

He came at me fast and I put my hands up to protect myself. The door to the room swung open and Giovanni appeared. Pallo grabbed my arms and yanked me up. "It is not I you need to be frightened of. It is he." He let go of me and I dropped to the floor with a loud thud.

I pushed myself up off the floor and tried to stand. Fighting Malita with my power and going on an emotional roller coaster with Pallo had left me drained. I stood and lost my balance. I put my hand out to Pallo to steady myself. He was so busy staring Giovanni down that he didn't seem to notice me.

"We are not finished talking," Pallo said sternly to Giovanni.

"I think that you are," Giovanni answered back, his gaze hard.

The tension in the room was thickening. I could feel both their cool powers rising up. It was impossible for Pallo to beat Giovanni and I knew it. Giovanni was twice Pallo's age and the one who had sired him. He could tear Pallo to pieces and not lift a finger. I needed to stop them.

"Leave us," Pallo said, loudly.

"If *Bella* tells me to go, then I will go."



Something cold and sharp brushed past me and I watched as Giovanni's upper arm ripped open. He looked down at his arm and then at Pallo. "You've been holding out on me, my child."

I made an attempt to go for Giovanni and another icy blast of power passed me. This one caught my right shoulder on the way to Giovanni. My skin pulled apart and I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. I fell forward into Giovanni's arms.

He pushed my hair out of the way and let out a gasp. He lowered me to the floor and laid me on my side. "Pallo ... what have you done to her?"

Pallo appeared behind me and touched my shoulder tentatively. I winced as my magik grabbed hold of the power he'd used to cause the cut. My magik didn't understand it, and I could feel it acting much as humans' white blood cells would. It began attacking Pallo's power. I screamed and Giovanni clutched my hand in his. I tried to get up and run away from the pain. I knew it would follow me, but I didn't care.

My skin ripped more. The magik that was waging a war within me was pulling my shoulder to pieces. Giovanni moved close to me and kept whispering my name.

"Pallo, you must pull your power out of her, quickly."

Pallo touched my back again. "Gwyneth, I am sorry. I did not intend this for you. I ...." His voice was shaky.

I wasn't so sure about what he was telling me. I thought of the look on his face whenever he saw me with Giovanni. It wasn't a look you give someone you love. Hurting me might very well be the only thing he had left to do. Maybe, hurting me would bring him closure. Maybe, now he would find peace.

Pallo grabbed hold of me and I screamed. "Gwyneth, no ... I would never try to hurt you ... no ... this is not closure, this is torture."

Giovanni pried him off me. "Pallo, you must pull your power back! Look it is getting worse."

"I ... I do not know how." His voice held something I'd never heard before, he was ashamed and scared.

"Give me your hand," Giovanni said. For a moment, I thought there was going to be another fight. Pallo put his hand out and Giovanni took it and placed it onto my shoulder hard. I screamed out again and he tried to soothe me. Static radiated from his body and moved down his arm. Pallo's body began to give off the same feeling. It felt like someone was taking a vacuum cleaner hose and placing it directly over my shoulder. The icy cool power receded slowly from me. My power washed up and over my back. I knew I was beginning to heal.

Giovanni let up on the pressure he was putting on Pallo's hand. They moved their hands off me. Pallo pulled my ripped blouse aside and then ran his fingers over my skin.

"It is gone." He sounded shocked.

Giovanni leaned down and touched my cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Better ... fine," I said softly.

Pallo took his hand away from me and stood. Giovanni put his hands under me and helped me stand. I let him wrap his arms around me tightly and I buried my head against his chest. I didn't look at either of their faces. This was a moment between a master and his student—his child. Pallo was a master himself now, but he had just learned a valuable lesson. If he was not careful with the power he now possessed and learned to control it, people would be hurt. I knew that their silence spoke volumes. It

told Pallo that even though he had grown into his full powers—Giovanni was still superior to him.

“Gwyneth,” Pallo said, from behind me. I pushed my face down further against Giovanni’s chest. I didn’t want to hear what Pallo had to say to me. He spent his time preaching to me about Giovanni being so dangerous and he was the same as him. He possessed all the same powers of his old master, but lacked the discipline needed to control them. That made him a bigger threat than Giovanni in my book. That made him deadly.

“No, Gwyneth, I ....”

I cried softly against Giovanni’s chest. Everyone had changed so much while I was gone. Caleb was acting like an arrogant ladies’ man and Pallo was now lethal. I wanted to get as far away from them as possible and I knew that Pallo sensed as much. I was able to feel when he was reading me.

I heard him in speak inside my head. *I am sorry that I hurt you, Gwyneth.*

I didn’t respond to him. I kept my face buried and listened to his footsteps as he left the room. I heard the door shut softly and reached around to hug Giovanni. He let out a small moan and I pulled away.

His arm was still ripped wide open. His black shirt was wet with his blood and the gash was making no signs of healing.

“I thought you could heal yourself,” I said, desperate to hear him tell me, yes.

He drew me closer with his good arm and kissed the top of my head. “Yes, but some things are more important.”

He had used his power to help Pallo control his and now Giovanni could not heal himself. I could see his bone through the cut. It was nasty and needed to be tended. Normal medicine was pointless with vampires. They were dead already, so nothing any doctor could do would help them. They needed power—magik and right now Giovanni and I had little to none left to spare.

“Caleb!” I shouted and pulled away from Giovanni fast.

## Chapter Twenty

I ran down the stairs and missed the bottom three. I crashed into the server that sat on the opposite wall across from the stairs and bounced into the wall next it. I heard the glass bowl that held fruit crash to the floor. I glanced back long enough to see the wine that had been sitting on it was still there. James came running out from the kitchen. I looked down at him wearing my adoptive mother's old apron and shook my head. I'd comment on that later.

"Caleb. Where's Caleb?"

James motioned towards the kitchen. I ran past him, expecting to find Caleb there. It was empty. I spun around and stared at James.

"He followed Pallo out back."

I ran as fast as I could to the backdoor and threw it open. The early spring air was cold yet and my blouse was ripped open in the back. I would have been better off naked. At least I wouldn't have been wet with blood soaked clothes, too. I sucked my breath in and ran down the back porch steps. I almost fell in the giant hole that was in the ground. Before I left, Caleb had put in a Koi pond. He got as far as digging a mega-huge hole and that was it. Apparently, Pallo hadn't felt the need to fix that undone renovation project. No, that would be silly to fill in the big giant hole while you could fix the perfectly fine kitchen instead. Yeah right!

I ran past the hole and visually scanned the yard frantically. I lived on two hundred and fifty acres of mostly woods. I hoped that they hadn't gone too far or I'd be looking all night.

I spotted Caleb's light hair near the edge of the back barn. I took off in that direction. I ran up behind him, out of breath and sweating, even though it was cold out.

"Caleb ...."

He turned around. I must have looked like quite a sight. He grabbed a hold of my arms. "Gwen?"

Pallo stepped out from the other side of the barn. His gaze flickered over me quickly. I made no attempt to try and fix the problem between us. If I dared, I'd only make it worse.

"Caleb, I need your help."

Pallo stepped forward. "No, Gwyneth, it is not you who needs his help. It is Giovanni."

I glared at him. "And why is that, exactly? Who couldn't control their own power?" He backed up and averted his gaze.

Caleb shook me a little. "What does he need?"

"His arm ... there's a huge gaping hole ... I can see the bone through it ... he can't heal it because he ..." I was so out of breath. I really needed to start running daily again. I glared at Pallo to signify that he knew exactly why Giovanni was unable to heal himself. "Caleb, please, he helped me ... and ...."

"Calm down, Gwen. I'll help him."

Pallo moved up and touched his arm. "Caleb?"

Caleb shrugged him off and smiled. "Don't worry." He turned and looked at me. "I'll help him only if you do something for me."

I didn't care what the price was. I wanted Giovanni to be all right. "Anything ... just help him, please!"

"I want him out of your bedroom, for a week, and I want you to give me your undivided attention for that time."

My jaw dropped open and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're going to force me to be with you or you won't help him?"

Caleb smiled. "I wouldn't call it forcing you. We're getting married soon. We'll be spending the rest of our lives together. I would hardly think that having you spend a week with me before that would be constituted as forcing you." He stared down and I saw his face change slightly. He looked more like the Caleb I'd fallen in love with now. Though, the rugged one wasn't so bad. "And, if at the end of that week, you still feel the same way about having Giovanni in your life ... I'll be okay with that. He'll be welcome to remain in it, even after we're married, Gwen."

"No!" Pallo shouted, his voice booming all around us.

I leaned in and looked at Caleb. "Are you telling me that you'd share me with Giovanni if my feelings for him don't change?"

He nodded and I felt like I'd just won the lottery. Pallo stepped in and grabbed Caleb's arm. "No, make him swear to reveal their past together to her before the week is out. She needs to know."

"Fine, if at the end of a week and after he shares your past with you, if you still feel the same for him, then I will allow you ... my bride-to-be, to keep him in your life—forever." There was an underlying tone in his voice. One that made me wonder again what Caleb had found on his journeys far from home. Had he found someone else?

I felt a tear come to my eye. "And my father, you'll make my father understand that if it is fine with you then he's to leave Giovanni alone?"

Caleb glanced at Pallo and then back to me. "Yes, but Gwen, you can't sleep with Giovanni or seek comfort from him during our week. I need you to focus on me and me alone. Can you do that?"

I thought about it and nodded. "If you'll help him, I'll do anything."

## Chapter Twenty-One

When Caleb and I got back to the room Giovanni was lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood. I yelled for James to bring up a supply of the blood they kept on hand and ran to Giovanni.

Caleb lurked behind me.

I rolled Giovanni over and looked into his face. He was almost gone. He'd given up his chance at saving himself to help me. I bent down and kissed his now blue lips. Seeing him like this hurt me so very much. I blamed Pallo for it and knew that if anything ever happened to Giovanni I'd never forgive him. He'd almost cost me Caleb once already. He would not cost me another man I loved.

"Help him, please."

Caleb dropped down next to me and put his hand over Giovanni's heart. I could feel his very hot flood of magik wash over Giovanni's body. Caleb was powerful beyond words and fixing Giovanni would not leave him drained. Giovanni's body twitched and he gasped as his eyes shot open.

I grabbed the back of his head and leaned in to him. I let him see my eyes and my love for him. His back arched as Caleb shot more power through him. I tried to soothe him, but nothing I did was working.

"Caleb!" I knew he was being rougher than called for. I pleaded with him with my eyes to stop. He needed to set aside his feelings for Giovanni and help me like he'd promised to do. He stopped and Giovanni's body relaxed. I looked down and watched his muscles mend and his skin pull together.

James appeared next to us holding a coffee cup. I knew without looking that the cup contained nothing close to coffee. I picked Giovanni's head up more and took the cup from James. I tried not to dump it down Giovanni's chin, but he was having problems getting it down. James touched my shoulder. "Gwen, he's in bad shape. This is pigs' blood and it's not going to do the trick. He needs something stronger."

Caleb rolled up his sleeve. I grabbed his arm and shook my head. "No, I owe you enough already for helping him. I won't let us be indebted to you anymore. Go, you've done enough for him already and I'll never forget that. I know it was hard for you to agree to this ... and Caleb ...." I reached out for him. "Thank you."

He touched my shoulder and stood up slowly. "Caleb," I said. "I'll meet you in the morning and tomorrow will mark the start of our agreement."

"Thank you, Gwen."

"No, Caleb, thank you."

He left and James followed close behind. I looked down at Giovanni and used my sleeve to wipe his chin clean. I put my wrist to his mouth and told him to drink. He tried to shake his head. I stared down into his dark gaze and cried. I watched his eyes flicker closed, and I dropped my head to his.

I whispered more to myself than anyone else, "I can't do this without you. I can't go back to the way it was ... I can't ...."

His eyes flickered and his fangs punctured my skin. He sucked softly on my wrist. His tongue pushed against my flesh as he went. I watched the color return to his lips and face and the twinkle return to his eyes. He let go of me and planted a soft kiss on the bite mark. It healed almost instantly.

I helped him up and pulled him to me. "You ... you..."

"No, you, *Bella*. You are the stubborn one."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Giovanni took a shower while I finished cleaning up the blood from the floor. His clothes were ruined and so was my shirt. I bagged them up and set them by the bedroom door to go out to the trash. I wondered what my garbage collectors would think if they ever actually went through my trash. I had at least twenty empty bags of blood or used containers of pig's blood each week and when I was home I seemed to be shipping more and more ruined clothes their way. They probably thought I was a serial killer or into sacrificing animals. Either way, they couldn't think I was a mild mannered woman in her mid-twenties.

Giovanni had been in the bathroom for a while. I was a little concerned about whether or not he was strong enough to be up and about. I walked over and tapped on the bathroom door.

"Come in."

I pushed the bathroom door open and walked in to see his outline through the shower curtain. "How are you doing?" I watched him rubbing soap all over his body and I touched the cool countertop to remind myself that the man had just had a major ordeal and would not be ready for sex.

"*Bella*, come here."

I walked to the other side of the shower curtain and stopped. He pulled it back and let me watch him washing his body. He looked at me and smiled. Oh, he was enjoying this. I forgot I was dealing with a five-hundred-year-old vampire that could induce desire at will.

"You look like you need to join me." At first, I thought he meant that it showed that he was turning me on, but then I realized I was covered in blood, as well. I bent down and took off the rest of my clothes. I stepped in and went to him.

He wrapped his arms around me. The warm water beat down on us. The first thing I noticed was how warm Giovanni felt to me. I'd noticed that after Pallo fed his body warmed as well. My faerie blood must have been heating things up nicely for him. He moved his hands downward and washed the length of his erectness. Yep, everything was moving up, temperature and all.

"There's something I need to tell you," I said, trying hard not to stare at him.

He let out a small laugh. "I know what you did. I can read Caleb and he was thick with thoughts of the agreement he forced you into."

"I had to. I couldn't lose you."

He stroked himself more. Soapsuds fell off him and splattered the bottom of the tub. I had to focus hard on remembering what it was we'd been talking about. "I would be lying if I said that I wasn't disappointed in the way he went about it, but I am fine with it if you are, *Bella*." Something was off in his voice.

I managed to tear my eyes away from him long enough to look at his face. "I thought you'd be mad."

"I am upset you felt the need to do something that I know you don't want to do in

order to help me, but I am not angry with you.”

I moved in closer to him. His hands came around me and I felt him pressed firmly against my mid-stomach. “Giovanni, I can’t be without you for a week.”

He let out a laugh. “I will still be staying here and we have gone centuries away from one another. A few days will not hurt.”

“Easy for you to say! I guess this means I’m more in love with you than you are me. I can’t imagine not waking up next to you. The thought of you not holding me for an entire week is killing me. I...”

He leaned down to me and kissed me. “I love you, too, and we still have tonight.”

I dropped to my knees and let the hot water beat down on my back. Soap suds pooled around my legs as I reached up the length of his thigh. I closed my eyes to prevent any more flecks of soapy water from going in them. I didn’t need to see to do what I was planning on doing. I ran my hand over the length of his glistening shaft that was so near my chin. I put my mouth over him and wanted to make our last night together a memorable one. As he slid his hands in to my hair and moaned, I knew it would be.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

I woke to someone knocking softly on my bedroom door. I glanced at the clock. It was only five a.m. Giovanni had gone to the bedroom down the hall only an hour ago. We'd spent the night making love and promising to be there for each other still in one week's time. He'd told me to give myself over completely to Caleb. He didn't just mean emotionally. He thought it would be wise to see how I felt about him after Caleb, and I had sex again. I didn't agree with his thinking and planned on avoiding sex at all costs.

"Gwen?"

I poked my head out from under the covers. Caleb was standing by me dressed and ready for the day. His hair was pulled back in a rubber band and he was wearing a white t-shirt, jean jacket and jeans. I leaned over and glanced at his feet, yep, he had on his black boots. I yanked the covers back over my head and moaned. "Come back in an hour."

He ripped the covers off of me and bent down next to my head. "Nope, it's morning and a promise is a promise."

Growling, I rolled over. He stared down at me and smiled. "You've got fifteen minutes to get cleaned up, then we're leaving."

"Where the hell are we going now? Normal people aren't up yet."

He chuckled. "I'm taking you out for the day and first we'll start with going out for breakfast. See ya in fourteen minutes now ...."

I tried to yank the blanket out his hand. He held it tight and laughed harder. I closed my eyes and wished him away. I peeked out and found him grinning like a fool.

"Argh, you're still here ... go away! Where's a genie when you need one? I need an annoying faerie wished into another realm for a few hours."

His hands moved under my legs and back. Caleb picked me up before I had a chance to protest and carried me straight into the bathroom. He plopped me into the tub and yanked the cold water on. Screaming, I tried to climb back out. He blocked my path. The look on his face said he was happy. I hadn't seen him this way in almost six months.

My teeth were chattering and I glanced down to see that the t-shirt I had slept in had become a second skin. Caleb looked down, too. His gaze stopped when he noticed my nipples. He leaned in and turned the hot water on.

"Not that I don't like the show, but I feel bad for you," he said laughing all the way.

I pushed his head out and closed the curtain. I adjusted the water temperature and did a small dance to warm myself up. Peeling off soaking wet clothes always looks so easy in daytime soaps—it's a pain in the butt in real life. My hair got twisted up in the shirt and I was left bending forward in the tub trying to detangle myself.

"Need some help?"

I lifted my arm and saw Caleb poking his head in. I rolled my eyes at him. There was no point in being modest. He'd seen what I had to offer so many times I'd lost

count. I gave up and turned towards him.

“Help!”

He laughed and reached in to free me from my cotton capture. He accidentally pulled some of my hair out. I could sense that he felt bad, but I had more than enough hair to spare. I stood and let the water run over my head.

“Are you going to stand there the whole time?” I asked caught between being amused with him and annoyed all at the same time.

“Maybe, unless you’d rather I get in, too.”

I turned and washed my face. “No, I wouldn’t want to mess up your schedule. What am I down to now? Ten minutes and counting?”

“You’re funny in the morning, aren’t you?”

“I do try. Now, about that genie who can wish you away?”

\* \* \* \*

Caleb waited down in the car while I tossed on a long jean skirt. It was low cut and showed off my belly button nicely. Every so often I had it pierced but it tended to close the minute I took it out. I didn’t bother with earrings anymore. What was the point? My healing power didn’t seem to care much for poking holes in my body. Can’t say I blamed it.

I debated on wearing a light, acrylic, red top or my navy, thin three-quarter length sweater. I went with the sweater and grabbed my black leather, ankle high boots. I had to run back into the bathroom quickly and brush my hair again. I had given up trying to blow dry it years ago, but if I didn’t run a brush through it at least twice while it was drying it tended to develop a serious case of the tangles.

I turned to head out and walked past Giovanni’s suitcase. I missed him already and we’d only been apart hours. I wasn’t going to make it a whole week. I knew he’d be in to grab some clothes later today and I wanted him to know that I was thinking about him. I ran back into my bathroom and rummaged through my medicine cabinet. I found a pack of honey scented bath crystals and I set them on the top of his suitcase.

I was pleased with myself for coming up with a clever way to let him know that I was thinking of him. I headed downstairs to find Caleb. I opened the front door and found him sitting in his red truck waiting for me. He climbed out and walked around to get the door for me.

I wasn’t one of those women who liked having doors opened for me, but I didn’t see the point in pitching a fit about it. We had bigger problems. I got in and buckled up. He climbed back in and looked over at me.

“You look nice.”

“Thanks and that’s definitely better than telling me I look hot.”

He put the truck in drive and headed down the long driveway. “That’s odd. I thought most women liked to be told they were hot.”

I gave him a sideways glance. I’m sure most women did like that, but I wasn’t one of them. It wasn’t even so much that he told me I looked hot. It was the fact that the comment was so very unlike him. I stared out the side window and decided it was best to just ignore him. Saying nothing at all was better than saying something I’d regret later.

“Come on, Gwen. I was joking. I don’t know what came over me the other night. You just caught me at a bad time.”

I let out a small snort.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Turning, I stared at him. “Caleb, from what I hear, hell, from what I’ve seen, your bad time has been going on for four months and what was it Justin told me about you? Hmm ... I know, that you liked the ladies.” I should have felt bad about tossing things I’d heard about him from a co-worker of mine in his face, but I didn’t. Justin, a friend of mine, had known Caleb for ten years or so. I, if you count the life I could remember, had known Caleb for less than a year. Justin had told me all about his buddy, Balec, which was Caleb’s name jumbled around. He told me that Balec had a real thing for dark haired women. If I hadn’t seen Caleb making out with another woman I’d have never believed him.

Caleb pulled the truck over to the side of the road. He put his hand on my knee. “Defending myself is pointless. I was an ass and I know it. But can we please try and get past all this crap? We’re supposed to get married soon and I’d like to be on speaking terms when it takes place.” He didn’t sound pleased about the prospect of marrying me and I almost opened my mouth to ask him more about the mysterious woman he had mentioned. I should have been jealous. The me of six months ago would have been, but a little piece of me wanted to know more about the mystery woman if for no other reason than to know Caleb was okay without me.

Fucked up way of thinking. I know. Story of my life, really.

Caleb looked a little uncomfortable, and I realized I hadn’t answered his question yet.

I moved his hand off my knee. “I’ll get past this crap when you tell me what you’ve been doing for the past four months.”

His shoulders dropped down. Reaching up, he gripped the steering wheel tightly. “I left, shortly after you did, on a job in California.” He glanced over at me to see if I was interested in hearing this. I was, so I nodded. I knew that his bounty hunting took him out of town. I hadn’t realized it took him states away.

“Well, I found my target there and brought him in. Since I had no one to come home to I decided to stay and ... play for awhile.” He continued to tell me about his trip as I sat with my hands clutched into a tight ball. He’d gotten himself involved with a pack of Paranormal Regulators out there. They were supernatural law enforcement officers. They were good people, or so he thought. Turns out, the lot he fell in with were rogue—killing for sport and killing indiscriminately. The Caleb of old might have gone along with their ways. One dead vampire or lycan was as good as the next—or at least that had been close to his way of thinking before I had come back into his life.

He didn’t agree with what they were doing and when he threatened to go to other Paranormal Regulators, or, Para-regs, who were on the level, all hell broke loose. He ended up getting into a showdown with several of them. He came home, only to find out that they had ties in our area, as well. He had ended up getting jumped again and dumped off in front of Necro’s World.

I tried to make sense of what he was saying. “So what does this have to do with you and other women?”

Biting his lower lip, he glanced sideways at me. “They were kind of like groupies for the Para-regs out there. I found out later that most of them were supernaturals who had decided to join up with the Para-regs or risk death.”

I must have appeared lost because he went on.

“Think in terms of a pack of shifters or a den of vamps. That kind of size.”

My eyes widened. “Caleb, how many women did you ... sleep with?”

He averted his gaze. “Almost all of them.”

I thought about Mikhail telling me that his pack consisted of over four hundred members. As I stared at Caleb my stomach twisted into a knot. “How many exactly, Caleb? I want a number.”

When he seemed more interested in the upholstery than me, I knew he was trying to decide whether or not to tell me the truth. I opened the car door and he grabbed my arm. “I know that it was over ten, but no more than twenty. I think ... or, I hope.”

I sat there and tried to absorb what he’d just told me. My hands picked then to begin to shake. He tried to touch me and my temper flared. “Don’t! You’re disgusting!”

“Gwen, I’m a faerie. I can’t catch anything. I can’t even catch a damn head cold. It’s not like anything could happen. You’re my only match, so I can’t even produce a child unless it’s with you.” He was quiet a moment and I could have sworn a ‘so they tell me’ fell from his lips. Did he know something I didn’t?

Another thought struck me and the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach grew worse. “Are you telling me you slept with that many women and didn’t use protection?”

He reached out to me again. “No, Gwen. I used it with most, but some ... some I woke up with the next morning and had no idea what I did and didn’t do. But I told you that it doesn’t matter. I lost my mind. I don’t know what came over me. The same thing happened after you died. I spent the next two hundred years ....” He stopped talking abruptly.

“You spent the next two-hundred years doing what, Caleb?” I opened the door and went to get out, needing to put distance between us. The truth was more than I could bear, yet I still found myself longing to hear more. “Did you spend it fucking every woman you could find?”

“No,” he said, softly. “Only the ones who reminded me of you.”

I jumped out and ran to the side of the road. Bending over, I clutched my gut, positive I was going to vomit. He came over and put his hand on my back. I pushed it off me and tried to hide the hurt on my face. I had no reason to feel betrayed. He had every reason to. I’d hurt him in more than one lifetime. Maybe it was our nature to self-destruct. I didn’t know and didn’t care. It had to end. The ticking time bomb otherwise known as Caleb and I couldn’t continue on the same path. If only my father would understand.

“Gwen, I’m over four-hundred years old. I’ve had roughly eighty to a hundred partners in my lifetime. That’s not that many if you figure how long I’ve been alive.”

I turned and pushed him hard. He fell backward onto his butt. I stood over him and glared at him. “I’ve had five in my twenty-five years here and as far as I know I had three of them last time around and if we’re adding that life in then I’ve had five total in three hundred years ... so you do the math Caleb.”

He looked up at me and I saw him tighten his lips. “Gwen, I can’t take it back. I lost my mind. Please don’t let this change things between us. I’m not the same when I’m with you. But when you’re gone I can’t seem to fill this void and I try, I try anyway I can, but nothing works. It’s like ....” He shook his head and touched his chest. “It’s like something hard is pressing in on my chest. Like magik.”

That was the second time he’d brought that up. I stared down at him waiting for

him to go on.

“Like, power is pushing on me, forcing me to think of you. Then I have to find other things to thrust my mind onto. Anything other than you. I don’t understand it.” He mumbled something else, something that sounded like another woman’s name again and I leaned down. He grew quiet and stopped whispering to himself.

“You know, Caleb, I could have accepted an affair or two. We were done, not in my father’s eyes, but done in every way that mattered. But sleeping with up to twenty women in four months, I can’t forgive that and I sure the hell won’t overlook it. Our deal is off, do you understand me, off. I will not marry you!”

He got to his feet and came storming at me. “You don’t care if I slept with a thousand women. You’re just looking for excuse to get back in the sack with your newest pet vampire.”

I brought my fist up hard and fast and caught the corner of his jaw. I felt my pinky finger snap and I didn’t care. It’d heal before the end of the day. Caleb’s head flew back and he ended up shaking his head in disbelief. He brought his hand up to his chin and stared at me.

“Gwen?”

I rubbed my hand and glared at him. “Don’t... don’t stand there and tell me that I’m looking for excuses to screw Giovanni. There was a time that you had all of my love, Caleb, and I was willing to spend my life with you. You’re the one who acted like you hated me, not the other way around.” I took a step back, wanting to put some space between us. “You think you can play on my sympathies? I wanted you to forgive me for sleeping with my soul mate, for crying out loud, not half the damn population of California!”

Dramatic much? Me? No.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me to him. “You should feel honored, Gwen, I keep coming back to you. I keep trying to find that perfect replacement for you.”

“I don’t feel honored, Caleb. I feel sick.”

He put his lips to my ear. “And now you understand how I’ve felt since the moment you ran off with Giovanni all those centuries ago. Try carrying that around with you for three-hundred years. Yeah, Gwen, now you can understand it.” His breath was hot on my ear and I turned my face into his. His lips grazed mine and sent a flare of hot sexual craving down to my toes.

I parted my lips slightly and his tongue pushed in to meet mine. I could feel the morning sun rising and its rays touching us. It had been a long time since I had kissed someone in the warmth of the daylight hours. Since I kissed someone who didn’t have the faint taste of sweet copper on their breath from having a liquid diet of blood.

Standing there, kissing Caleb reaffirmed how alive he and I both were and how very much a part of me still wanted him. His hand moved around and he used it to push upwards on my back, bringing me to my tiptoes and closer to him. He and Giovanni both stood close to six foot four inches tall. Pallo was three inches shorter, still over six foot, but definitely easier for me to kiss while standing.

I ignored the crick in my neck and concentrated on that little piece of my own power I could sense running through his veins. As I pushed with my tongue, I pulled with my mind. Caleb returned the favor and tugged on his power, as well. My legs shook and my knees threatened to give out. He held me tight to him as we made tiny

moaning sounds. My body neared its point of climax. Drawing on our powers reached places that we weren't physically touching at the moment.

Caleb's mouth pulled off me fast and he backed away and made an odd noise. I reached out to him and he put his hand up. "No, Gwen, if you touch me now I'm likely to finish before we even start." His gaze fell to the bulge in his jeans.

I made another move to go to him, knowing it was wrong but feeling driven by a force I couldn't explain. He was right. It did feel as if a heavy weight was pressing in on us, some sort of magik.

Reaching out, he smiled. "Gwen, either we go to breakfast and see where the day takes us or we skip it altogether and head back into the woods, because if you touch me right now I'm going to need to be in you."

Hearing him describe the exact way I was feeling served as another reminder of how wonderfully in tune we were to one another. The thought of eating seemed so secondary to my body's need for his touch. I took another step towards him and ran my hand up and over the front of my sweater. Caleb watched as I traced the large mounds of my breasts, hidden under the navy sweater. I moved down and pulled the sweater up, driven by an outside force, exposing my flat stomach to him and my low rise jean skirt.

I'd fallen prey to a lust spell once and this felt similar to it. My mind fogged, and try as I might, I couldn't focus on anything other than the feel of being in Caleb's arms. This was wrong. I knew it was yet I couldn't stop myself. Was this his doing? Was he yanking the mystical cord between us, demanding I react to his touch?

He was on me in an instant. He picked me up and twirled me around. He pinned my body between his truck and himself. I wrapped my legs around his waist and looked up into his dark green eyes. I watched as he moved in to kiss me again. I could sense that his eyes were changing along with mine. I closed my eyes and let him lead. His lips found mine again. Warmth splashed over my closed lids as I returned Caleb's kisses.

He slid his hands under my sweater. I pulled at his jacket, trying to touch any piece of his skin that I could. He pulled back from me and I moved my head forward to retrieve him. Opening my eyes, I saw that his were now ablaze with green light. He looked into mine and I knew he saw the same thing.

"Gwen, do you want to do this? Can we?"

I knew what he meant by that. There was no way after not sleeping together for four months that we were going to be strong enough to control our magik to avoid getting pregnant. I'd been taking what I thought were birth control pills while we were dating, but it turned out the doctor who prescribed them was a psycho enchantress from hell who had illusions of me carrying her power cocktail to term. Needless to say, I wasn't taking those anymore.

Just another day in my life.

"Caleb, I can't control myself right now and I'm not on anything."

His forehead came down onto mine. He let out a sigh and I could sense him trying to control himself. His eyes held only the slightest hint that they could glow. It was a valid try on his part and if I could get mine to do the same, then we'd be covered, but I knew I couldn't. Not to mention a niggler in the back of my mind kept trying to tell me I had something or someone else to worry about. But what and who and why in the hell did it still feel like power was all over me?

"Caleb, I can't. I want you to take me and make me yours again right here against

this damn truck where anyone passing by can see. There's no way I can bring this need down a notch."

Caleb's mouth came down on mine. Our tongues dove in and out of each other's mouths as he pulled my skirt up. I knew I should protest, tell him we weren't acting very responsible, but I didn't. I let him yank it up and over my hip. Cool morning air found my moist mound and Caleb pushed his body against mine.

I moaned, wanting to feel his cock buried in me, not his jeans pressed against me. I reached down and tugged hard at them. Caleb's hand moved over mine and he freed himself from the confines of his jeans. My magik, my power, my body needed Caleb now. Four months without faerie sex and I was on the verge of losing my mind being this close to him.

"God, Gwen .," Caleb said as he pushed my underwear to the side. I pulled on his face and felt the head of him press against my wet opening. I thought of Giovanni and tried to stop myself. I tried to put my legs down, but they didn't want to budge. My magik wanted to be satisfied and it would not be taking no for an answer. I put my forehead against Caleb's and willed my body to stop its craving for him. I prayed for divine intervention, because I knew that I did not have the strength.

As if on cue, we heard the sound of a car coming down the road. Caleb glanced in that direction and then back at me. He pulled his hand out of my shirt and struggled with himself to let me down. I wanted to remove my legs from his waist probably less than he wanted me to.

I stood before him, still pinned between the truck and his body and let him keep his body close to mine. It felt good to have a source of warmth pressed to me. He watched the car approaching and let out another noise. This time he sounded aggravated. He pulled back from me and smoothed my skirt down.

"I think I'm going to have to take a rain check on this. Here comes your buddy."  
Somebody up there likes me!

I turned to see who he was talking about, then I saw the black luxury car pulling off to the side of the road in front of Caleb's truck. I watched as Ken Harpel stepped out of the car. He took his black sunglasses off, set them on his seat and stood to straighten his navy suit. He buttoned a button on his jacket and readjusted his baby blue tie. The morning light made Ken's sandy-blond, short hair look lighter than it really was. His large football player-like frame seemed at ease in his expensive style. Being the head of the Paranormal Regulators, the division of the government that deals with any and all supernatural related incidents, made Ken a well-respected, wealthy man. Ken's overzealous personality ensured him his place in the sun.

He looked at Caleb and me and smiled. His white teeth showed off his tanned skin more than anything else. Caleb backed away from me so I could go to Ken.

"Hey, Gwen, I heard you were back in town. I had to come see it for myself," Ken said, putting his arms out. I didn't hesitate. I went right to him and tossed my arms around his neck. He picked me up off the ground and swung me around. "Where the hell were you, kiddo?"

"Kiddo? You're turning into your grandmother," I said, laughing. It was true. Ken's grandmother, who everyone but Ken called Nana always referred to people as shorty or something similar. No one seemed to mind, or at least no one voiced a concern about it. That could be because his Grandma was a witch, but I couldn't be sure. Nana

could drop a hex on you faster than you could blink.

Ken hugged me tighter to him. I could smell the deep rich scent of his cologne and had only the fondest memories of that scent. I kissed his cheek lightly as he put me down and glanced over at Caleb. Ken walked away from me towards Caleb. He extended his hand outward and Caleb took it, shaking it firmly. Seeing them standing together warmed my heart and gave me hope that maybe we really could all get along.

“Hey, how was your job out in California?”

Caleb’s face tightened. I knew he didn’t want to bring this up again, but Ken didn’t know that.

A change of subject was in order.

“So, tell me about the office? How’s everyone doing? How’s my replacement working out for you?”

Ken gave me an odd look. “Your replacement? Gwen, I’d never replace you, ever.” He shook his head again, like he was trying to brush off the absurdity of my question.

“Ken, I took off for four months and never called in to tell you where I was. I’m pretty sure that is more than enough grounds to fire me.”

“I will never replace you. I don’t care if you go to the freakin’ moon for a year, Gwen. You’re indispensable and it won’t ever happen. I’ve even been coming out to the farm to help that vampire get the place in order.” He stared off in the distance, towards the farm. I knew that the vampire he was referring to was Pallo. Ken didn’t know about Giovanni and me, or at least I didn’t think he did. “So, did you see your new home office?”

I shook my head. When I’d left four months ago, I’d been using the dining room as an office. Now it was an honest to God dining room.

Ken smiled. “Well, call me after you see it. It’s in the barn on the right... upstairs. That vampire and I spent a lot of nights planning the thing.” He offered a broad, white smile. “You’re linked directly to the PR Department’s computers and databases. We’ve also got you linked up with Necro World. He insisted on that. Anyway, there is an ass-load of reference materials there and you’ve even got a mini-lab. There’s a shit-load more out there. I can’t believe you haven’t seen it. It’s great. We’re all set-up to be able to fit the team in and work at your place if need be. That’s part of the reason he had so many efficiency guest quarters built out there. After the incident with Rick, it’s nice to have another location for the team to work at when needed.”

The incident with Rick that Ken was referring to was still a very touchy subject with me. Rick, a Para-Reg with a lot of years under his belt, had been slaughtered in his office at the PR Department, by his own sons. It was something I’d never get over. He’d been a mentor to me and I missed him terribly.

I shook off the negative feelings and tried to focus on Ken. He seemed genuinely excited about the office out at my place. I was actually anxious to see this newly done office now myself. I glanced towards Caleb to find him attempting to look as enthused by the talk as we were. It wasn’t working.

Ken arched a brow, his attention moving to me. “God, I almost forgot. I wanted to be the first one to tell you. I made that vampire swear not to leak a word of this to anyone.” He put his hand out and took mine. There had been a time in our life when we’d held hands every chance we could. That time had passed and a part of me mourned



it. He took a deep breath in and I knew whatever Ken had to tell me, was big. “Gwen, I asked Beth to marry me and she said yes.”

I felt like someone had just hit me with a double-decker bus. I stood there moving what he’d just told me around in my head. I knew that he and Beth had been dating. I just didn’t know how serious it was. Beth had been the realtor who’d helped Ken and me house hunt when we were engaged. They’d started dating shortly after Pallo and Caleb came back into my life. Ken and I had already been done for six months prior to that, but we’d still managed to squeak in some fantastic sex since then.

Yeah, a movie of the week for sure.

Caleb pushed up next to us, seeming rejuvenated by the news. “That’s great, Ken! When’s the big day?”

He certainly didn’t have to force a smile anymore. He had one big enough for the both of us. I had little doubt that Caleb viewed this as one less competitor on the market for my affection. He was right. Ken was now off limits. In truth, the moment I had taken Giovanni’s outstretched hands all those months ago and allowed him to whisk me off to Tuscany, I had put up walls around my heart. Ken was the easiest to block, though I wasn’t entirely sure why. I was still working on cementing the walls in front of Caleb and Pallo.

“Gwen, are you all right? You’re happy about this, right?” Ken asked.

I pulled him close to me and grinned. “Of course I am. You just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“Well, when I got the invitation for your wedding, I thought, you know... you and Caleb might be on to something. It’s not like I’m getting any younger and Beth’s a great girl.”

I turned and stared at Caleb, my eyes wide and my curiosity piqued. “Invitations?”

Caleb tried to walk away. I grabbed his arm, forcing him to answer me. “Your father kind of had them shipped out about a week after the engagement party. But, hey look at the bright side of this. Ken received one and they only went out to the people who could cross over into the Dark Realm... the ones who were more than human, so Ken’s obviously got some magikal blood in him, aye?”

Ken nodded. “Thanks to my Grandmother. She got one, too. She’s pretty excited about it.”

“So are we,” Caleb said rather void of any real emotion.

A less enthusiastic groom I’d yet to hear.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

“Is there anything you’d like to do now?” Caleb asked.

I checked the digital clock on his dashboard and let out a sigh. It was only going on one o’clock. The day had been moving very slowly ever since we’d bumped into Ken. The news of his coming wedding had taken me completely by surprise. That wasn’t the biggest shock. The biggest shock was when Ken stood there and called Beth on his cell phone. He handed it over to me and she asked me to be one of her bridesmaids. After I picked myself up off the ground, I found myself agreeing to this absurdity. I thought the day couldn’t get any stranger. I was wrong. Ken asked Caleb to be one of his groomsmen.

Ken said he’d asked that vampire, Pallo, as well, but Pallo had refused because it wasn’t wise for him to go hanging out in a church. I hadn’t really given it much thought before, but Pallo was right, that would be bad. Caleb seemed all too eager to agree to be there for Ken. I was betting it was more a way for Caleb to see Ken removed as a threat with his own eyes, than out of friendship, but I’ve been known to be wrong.

Breakfast had gone well. It was quiet, but nice. Caleb tried to make small talk once or twice. Neither one of us were sure what to say. It was plain to see there were still a lot of issues between us. My biggest issue of all had been on my mind all day, Giovanni.

I hadn’t thought to grab my purse, so my cell phone was still back at the house. I wanted to talk to him, to hear his heavily accented voice tell me that I was doing the right thing. I needed to have some reassurance.

“Hey, Gwen. Anybody home up there?”

I turned and stared over at Caleb. Concern laced his features. I couldn’t blame him, I had every right to still be mad at him, but I wasn’t. I smiled and watched his expression soften.

I looked out the truck window and watched the zoo signs start to fade off. After breakfast, Caleb had surprised me and taken me over to the city zoo. He had a friend of his let us in early and I got to see the new baby tigers that had just been born. I loved it. Caleb knew exactly what to do to make my day. Neither, Pallo or Giovanni would have ever thought of doing something like that. No, they tried to tempt me through money or their sophistication. I had little interest in either of those and Caleb knew it. He had plenty to spend, but knew that seeing the baby tigers would suit me better.

Of course, I did have issues keeping thoughts of being attacked by a giant white one out of my head, but I kept that to myself.

“So, I thought I’d let you pick what we do next.”

“I guess we should nose around some bridal shops,” I said quietly as resolve settled over me. At the rate we were going, there would be no talking my father out of the wedding. Pallo was right. My father would never allow a vampire to be next in line for his throne. Bucking the system could cost Giovanni his life. Someone once told me that if you love something, you let it go and if it was meant to be, it will come back to

you. Maybe, just maybe, if I stopped clinging to the hope of happily ever after with my Tuscan lover, we would find a way to be together.

Yeah, and my faerie godmother will pop up any minute telling me I'm a born again virgin.

Caleb slammed on the brakes, yanking me from my thoughts. I'd have ended up through the windshield if I hadn't had my seatbelt on.

"Caleb!" I yelled, moving my hands off the dash.

He put his hand out and touched my leg. "You're serious. You want to do this?"

Locking gazes with him, I did my best to judge if he'd lost his damn mind or not. "Caleb, it's not like I've been given a choice." His eyes filled with pain. I touched his hand and moved closer to him. "No, don't take it like that. I mean, my father is insistent on this happening and I can't stop it. Neither one of us can. We might as well make it as ours as possible. I only have one thing to talk about with you ...."

He turned his face and looked out the window. A car horn sounded from behind us and he glanced in the rearview mirror. He gave a little wave and pulled the truck into the first parking spot he could find.

"Let me guess ... Giovanni," he said, quietly. I nodded. "Gwen, I've tried to tell you at least a hundred times that he's no good for you. I hear myself repeating the same damn conversation with you that I had three hundred years ago. Nothing I say is going to change your mind and I'm not willing to watch you run out my life again. I told you that if you felt the same about him at the end of our arrangement that I'd be all right with that—with him and since I played a part in getting the week shortened, then I guess I have no choice but to keep my promise."

I tried to throw my arms around him but got caught on my seatbelt. He laughed as I tried to frantically get it off. I did and tossed myself on him. I planted kisses on his cheeks and eyelids.

"Thank you ... thank you ... thank ..."

He pulled me back. "Don't thank me yet. It's you who's got to figure out a way to juggle the two of us and how does he feel about this? I'm assuming you told him about it."

"He kind of is the one who pushed me to go through with this arrangement. I think he's got a soft spot for you." I let out a small laugh, thinking about Giovanni staring at Caleb's naked body. "Yeah, I think he'll be fine with it. You know, he's even trying to get me to fix things with Pallo. He keeps talking about how the three of us are meant to be united and how he wouldn't dream of standing in the way of that. I don't know about all that, I just wish ..."

Caleb's hands tightened on my arms. "You just wish we could all be one happy family."

I looked away. I thought that was what I'd been hoping for, but now I knew. I wished Giovanni was my one and only mate and that I didn't feel so drawn to the other two. I couldn't tell Caleb and not hurt him, so I nodded my head slowly. "Yeah, one big happy family."

"Gwen."

"Yes?"

"Suppose we do go through with this wedding and I keep my end of the bargain to let Giovanni remain in your life?"

I bit my lower lip. "Yes?"

"Would you be willing to allow me the same freedom?"

"Caleb, when you were in California, did you meet someone?"

He exhaled loudly. "I met a lot of people, Gwen."

I gave him a hard look. "Someone special?"

He was quiet for a moment before shrugging. "I honestly don't know. I mean ... I thought I did but I don't know."

I knew without being told that was end of that conversation. At least for the time being.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Caleb and I didn't head straight back to the farm. Instead we stopped off at Necro's Magik World and picked up a week's supply of blood for the boys. Pallo had a large cooler that he kept it all in and Caleb, for some reason had a key to his place. It was awkward, but necessary. We loaded up Styrofoam coolers and then did a pit-stop at a regular grocery store.

I looked in the back seat. We were set for at least a week. I was worried about having enough refrigerator space, but Caleb made a good point, each one of the guest houses Pallo had built over the barns had little kitchenettes in them. We could use those refrigerators and the cooler in the basement. We had more than enough room.

I looked over at Caleb and wondered what he was thinking. We'd both managed to make a mess of things again. We were good at that. He stayed quiet all the way back to the farm. I leaned over and put my hand on his thigh. He brought it up to his lips and kissed it.

"We need to get with our parents sometime soon to see where they're at with wedding preparations," I said softly.

He pulled the truck up and stopped in front of the house. "Yeah, I guess."

I guess?

Not the answer I was expecting.

Opening the door, I climbed out. Ken ran out from the right back barn, loading a gun as he went.

I couldn't help but laugh at my life. Only I would come home to find a man loading a weapon, looking like he was expecting a full on attack.

He came to a stop in front of me. "God, Gwen, you're taking this Malita threat pretty lightly don't you think?"

"What threat?"

His jaw dropped. "James told me what Malita said before you mystically tossed her ass out a window. She told Caleb's enemies where to find you. I did some digging, called some of my connections and it's true. She put the equivalent of a hit out on the both of you. Those rouge Para-regs won't pass up an opportunity to strike, guys. Not if what I heard is true." He looked at Caleb. "If they kill you, they can either keep or kill Gwen. Think of what would happen if they took control of her. Think about the Dark Realm and what's up for grabs there, not to mention it's her life we're talking about here."

I just stared at him, not really shocked by the news. My life wasn't exactly roses and sunshine. It was fight for your life and run from the big bad demon. Anymore, the horror of it all had almost become mundane.

Ken grunted. "See. Taking it lightly."

I shrugged. "You think I'm not worried, you should talk to him." I pointed at Caleb. He gave me an odd look and turned to Ken.

"What's in the gun?"

Ken holstered it. "Silver bullets, I just switched over. Your buddy Mikhail suggested it after I told him what was going on."

Mikhail, hearing his name, came walking out of the house. Candy and Brandy followed closely behind. Mikhail came out and stopped near Ken. He was a little shorter than Ken, but they looked a lot alike. Both had sandy-blond hair that was short, but not too short, and both had five o'clock shadows. Mikhail's eyes were more of an amber color than Ken's and Mikhail was wearing only a pair of jeans, no shirt, no shoes. That was in sharp contrast to Ken's navy suit.

Candy and Brandy still looked like they shopped at a leather surplus porn shop, but seeing them stand by Mikhail told me where their loyalties lay. Fritz's absence didn't go unnoticed by me. I hoped he'd left the damn country. He was a creep and I didn't care for him in the least.

They all helped us unload and put the food and blood away. By the time we were done it was close to dusk. Everyone seemed to agree that the other lycans wouldn't be coming tonight. It would be too soon to try and organize that size of a group, but they'd be coming soon.

James walked into the kitchen and saw Brandy trying to start dinner. He glanced at me and I shrugged. She'd insisted on wanting to pull her weight. I tried to talk her into something a little less taxing, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. James walked up next to her and smiled. She handed him a piece of garlic to chop and he pretended to be melting. Garlic hurting vampires was a myth, sort of like them not being able to eat food.

Caradoc entered next. He was dressed like a page out of a Dracula book. He had on his white, puffy pirate shirt that tied in the front and his skintight black pants and boots. I'd always thought that he'd have made an excellent front man for an eighties rock band. He looked at all of us.

"May I ask what it is that is troubling all of you?"

Everyone turned to me. "What?" I asked. "Look at him." I pointed to Caleb. "If he had kept his ass where it belongs instead of gallivanting out to California they wouldn't be here at all! For once it's not my fault!"

"Who would not be here?"

I turned quickly and saw Pallo standing in the hallway. He was staring at me and I had to look away out of some deep-seated shame.

Caleb stepped up. "I... umm... you know the problem with the group from California, well, turns out Malita's gone to them and cut some sort of a deal with them ... if they help to get me out of the picture, then they all get to ...." He stopped and looked at me. I nodded for him to go on, but he didn't. I saw a tear in the corner of his eye.

I stood, unwilling to let Caleb break down in front of the group. "Apparently, the regulators get to have me to do with as they wish."

"What!" Pallo yelled.

"Yeah, I have no doubt that your little love, Malita, thinks I'm quite the lying whore and that by handing me to men trained to kill supernaturals, she'll be able to free you and Giovanni from me."

"I don't think that will be happening. I'm here to see to it that it doesn't anyways," a deep, unfamiliar voice said from the other side of the room.

Everyone stopped and looked at the open back door. A tall man with shoulder

length, black, wavy hair came walking in. The first thing I noticed was how broad his shoulders were. The second thing was his dark blue navy eyes. They were almost as dark as mine. He came into the light of the room and I could see how massive the rest of his body was.

Pallo let out a noise, sounding disgusted. James stepped in and gave me an odd look. Pallo glanced at the man in the doorway and his voice dropped. "Nicholas, what a pleasure is it to see you again. Tell me, is it the coming full-moon that draws you or did your master call his puppy home?"

Nicholas glared at Pallo and I could tell that there was no love lost between the two of them. "Pallo, I'd be lying if I said it was nice to see you, but I'm sure your bat senses would pick up on that. How are you doing with those anyways? Slaughter any innocent children lately? Kill anyone's mother?"

The whole room grew quiet. Pallo stepped towards Nicholas. I moved in front of him and put my hand on his chest. "Pallo, no, not here."

He took my hand in his and I saw him fighting to keep his demon down. Nicholas must have noticed, too, because he moved in for the kill. "Haven't fed yet today, huh? Maybe, I could fetch you a cow. You could suck it dry, or perhaps there is a village full young mothers you could drink your fill on? We all know how much you enjoy that."

I faced Nicholas. He was a handsome man who appeared to be about twenty-three or so. I should have found him sexy. He was everything I liked in a man, but something about him kept me from thinking of him in that way. I moved away from Pallo and towards Nicholas. I put my finger up and pushed it straight into the center of his chest. I twisted it a little and the royal blue long sleeved shirt he was wearing turned, too. I kept pushing him and kept backing him out of the kitchen. I gave one final shove and we ended up standing on the back porch.

"Who the hell do you think you are coming in here and starting shit? In case you didn't get the memo, we've got enough of it going on without you. As long as you are here, you will respect the people I care about. Are we clear?"

His eyes shifted to a deeper blue and I could sense something changing in him.

Mikhail appeared next to me. "Control your beast, Nicholas, or it will control you."

I arched a brow at Mikhail. "Is this kid one of yours?"

"Yeah, I called him. He's my second in command. I thought it would be wise to have him near. I thought he'd put aside his petty differences to aid his alpha."

"Fat chance of that, this kid's got the self-control of a spider monkey on crack," I said.

Nicholas's eyes shifted again and I felt him pull up a wave of warm power. I knew that power, it was like my own. There was more to Nicholas than met the eye.

I yanked my power up, as well, if this guy wanted to play, we'd play. Mikhail tried to step between us and Nicholas lashed power out at him. Mikhail lept back and grabbed his shoulder. Nicholas turned and stared at me. I felt all the rage he carried around within him. So much of it was for Pallo and I didn't know why. His hand came up and fur sprouted all over it. I wasn't worried about him changing into a wolf. I was worried about the magik he possessed.

"What the hell's your problem?" I asked.

"I don't owe you an explanation. I came here to help. Instead, I find that fucking

vampire here.”

“So, you don’t like vampires. I get it, but why the magik show?”

Nicholas glared past me. “Oh, I like vampires just fine, it’s that one I hate.”

“Join the club, I hate him every second Tuesday of the month, too. I, unlike you, get over it. So, if you’re not going to try to kill me, then please knock off the power trip. If you really want to do this, I will.”

“Humpf... what the hell is a little girl like you going to do?”

I smiled at him and lowered my head. I called on the wind. I concentrated on pulling it past the trees and around the house. I let it circle around him and I used it to pull him up off the ground an inch or so. His dark black hair lifted high into the air and his blue eyes locked on me. I noticed how he had a dimple in the center of his chin as he pulled his face into a smile.

“You can stop it now. I won’t hurt you!” he called out.

I let the wind die down and Nicholas’ feet touched the ground again. “You must be Gwyneth.” He put his hand out to me. “Nice to finally meet you.”

I gave him an odd look and took his hand. His grip was firm. Mikhail made a noise and we glanced over at him. He was lying on the ground holding his shoulder to himself.

Caleb came running out. “I got this.”

Pallo appeared behind me. He was beyond mad. I could feel his cool power threatening to rise up. I turned and put my hand on his chest. I let my fingers move over his carved alabaster-like skin. “No more tonight, please. He’s done, aren’t you, Nicholas?”

Nicholas smiled and nodded. Pallo seemed to be trying to appear okay with this, but he was failing miserably. His body language told me that he was not fine with the idea of Nicholas being here and I couldn’t blame him. In the five minutes I’d known the guy he’d already hurt one person and tried to use magik against me.

Mikhail stood and came over to us. He put his arm out and twisted it around. He glanced over at Nicholas and gave him a dirty look. Nicholas backed away, his gaze coming to me. I gave him the old ‘you’re screwed’ look and walked back towards the house. There was someone I wanted very much to see.

I managed to escape into the house relatively unnoticed. Everyone was too focused on the impending Para-reg attack to bother keeping tabs on me. I headed up the stairs and walked down the hall towards the back bedroom. When I tapped lightly on the door and got no answer, I turned the knob and opened the door slowly.

The room that had been yellow when I’d left. It was now a cool blue with white trim. The bed that had been mine growing up was still there. It looked like it hadn’t been slept in. I pulled the door shut and walked back down to my room.

Giovanni’s suitcase was still sitting on the dresser. The honey scented bath salts I’d left lying on top of it hadn’t moved. Giovanni never came in to change and by the looks of the room down the hall, he never even went to sleep. I went to the window and stared out. Everyone was still on the backside of the house, no doubt arguing. I reached down and picked up the pack of bath salts and held it to my face, breathing in the fresh scent of honey.

Catching a flash of black moving near the pine trees at the end of the lane, I stared harder to see what was moving down there. I felt my stomach pull in, if Malita and the



Para-reg's decided to attack now, then they'd easily ambush the others. I dropped the salt and turned around.

I took the stairs four at a time and burst out the front door. I ran around the porch and did my best to not trip over the wicker furniture that sat on it. I rounded the corner and found that only Pallo, Caleb and Ken were still standing there. They looked up at me and all of them came running.

I pointed down towards the road. "Something... I saw something moving down there," I said, short of breath.

Ken pulled his gun out and nodded at the other two. Pallo took my arm to lead me back up to the house. I dug my heels in and glanced out and over the yard.

"Where's everyone else?"

Pallo motioned back towards the barn on the left. "The omnis retreated to discuss the incident and James is cooking dinner. I have no idea where Caradoc has gone off to."

I stared into his brown eyes and I pleaded with him to understand who in particular I was asking about, without making me have to come right out and say his name.

"Ah, I do not know where he is at. The last time I saw Giovanni was before sunrise. He was walking on the edge of the woods."

We heard a gunshot and both of us took off running in that direction. I could see Ken standing with his gun drawn. Caleb was looming over something. As we got closer I saw that it was a large pale gray wolf. Caleb shook his head and I knew that meant the wolf was gone now.

Something moved in the bushes near us. I turned to see a pair of eyes reflecting the light back at me. I screamed as Pallo thrust me forward at Caleb. I tripped over the carcass of the dead wolf and Caleb grabbed me. His grip was the only thing that kept me from landing face first on a dead werewolf.

The vampire senses that Pallo had passed on to me with his bite kicked into full gear. I could sense that we were surrounded by the enemy. The entire farm was. Someone had to warn the others. They'd be fodder without a heads up. I turned to run back towards the house.

"Gwen, No!" Caleb yelled.

"The others, I have to tell them."

Pallo came back out of the bushes, brushing his hands off on his pants. "They know. I contacted James and Caradoc already. They are going to the others as we speak."

A wave of relief hit me. I'd forgotten Pallo only had to think about his vampires to be able to communicate with them. The hairs on my arms stood on end and I knew that at any moment we'd be completely surrounded.

The first growl and blur came from our right. Pallo reached out, grabbed the brown coyote hybrid by its neck and snapped it. I hardly had time to register that one when three others came barreling out at us. Ken fired and hit one. It dropped with a thud to the ground. A flood of what could only be omnis came out at us.

Caleb and I both called our power up, but I knew it would only take care of a handful of them. Screams and snarls came from the other end of the property. I wanted to call out to the others there to see if they were all okay, but I knew that would just bring more omnis down on us.

Caleb moved his body in front of mine and Pallo and Ken followed suit. They enclosed me in a circle and kept their gazes on the omnis. I lost count at twenty. They just kept coming and coming. The noise level had risen dramatically. There were sounds of high-pitched screams and low growls everywhere.

Ken fired and took several more down. He glanced over at me and I knew that he was low on bullets. He was human, or at least more human than the rest of us. If he got attacked by an omnimorpheleon there would be a good chance he'd end up one himself. There are three ways to end up an omnimorpheleon, get attacked, get cursed, or be born that way.

I touched Pallo's arm. "Take Ken back to the house."

All of them turned and looked at me. "What?" they asked in unison.

"Pallo, you're the only one of us who can go airborne and if Ken gets bitten he'll be furry in a week."

I saw the thought register with Ken. He hadn't considered that one. "Gwen, I can't leave you."

Reaching out, I touched his arm. "You've got to make it home safe and not as an animal for Beth now."

Pallo went to protest and I put my finger to his lips. "Don't try to argue, you and I both know that it would only take a knick for him to be one permanently."

Two omnis tried to jump in at Ken. He shot one and Caleb threw the other away with his magik. I turned to Pallo. "Now!"

He reached out and snatched Ken by the arm. In a matter of seconds, they were airborne. Caleb and I moved in so our backs were touching.

"Now what?" Caleb asked.

"Oh, sure now the bounty hunter loses his expertise," I said with a shaky voice. Trying to be funny while I was scared to death wasn't working out so well.

"Gwen, when I say go, let your power loose and run back to the house. I think we can take enough of them out to make it."

I touched his leg. "Caleb, be careful. I don't want my groom dead."

"Yeah, ready, set..." I felt the rise of power swarm around us. I loaded my hands with as much power as I could muster and waited for Caleb's signal. "Now!" he said. I let my power loose and sent half the circle of the omnis pummeling backwards. I took off running in the direction of the house and saw Caleb moving in the other direction. He was heading down towards the river.

It hit me then what he was trying to do. He knew they were after both of us and he wanted to lure some away. The thought of running back to the house and leaving him never crossed my mind. I turned and ran after him.

Something crashed into me from the right and I rolled with its weight on my body. I put my hands out and pushed against the weight. It didn't budge. Something snarled and I felt more weight hit me. I screamed and kicked as hard as I could. My foot came into direct contact with something heavy and it moaned. I knew that voice.

"Pallo?"

He grunted and I heard another sound of an animal. Gasping, I watched in horror as I saw an omni going for the back of Pallo's neck. I thrust my hand upwards and pushed my fingers through its eye. It pulled away and ran for the forest. I moved my hand away from Pallo's back and saw blood moving down my arm. It wasn't mine. I

knew that I hadn't been bitten. I touched Pallo again and knew then that the majority of the blood was his.

"Pallo ...."

His body weight was heavy, pinning me to the ground. I pushed lightly on his shoulder. "Up, we've got to get up."

He turned his head and looked at me. Another round of howls came from down by the river. I pushed Pallo off me with all my might and he rolled over onto the ground. I dropped down next to him and moved the wave of brown curls out of his eyes.

"How bad is it?"

"I just need a moment ... look out ...." He pushed me away and a huge furry beast came crashing down on him. Jumping to my feet, I kicked out hard. My foot connected with its ribs. I knew I'd managed to break some, but the thing kept tearing at Pallo. He had his arm up deflecting it. I leapt onto the omni's back and wrapped my whole body around it. I squeezed hard with my legs and felt its already broken ribs giving more. I grabbed the sides of its head and twisted hard and to the left. Its body went limp below me and we crashed to the ground.

Its large body pinned my leg to the ground and I tried pushing at it to get it off. I couldn't get it to move. Another snarl came from above my head and I saw an omni go straight for Pallo. I pushed hard and the dead omni's fur started slipping away. Its skin shifted, leaving the very clammy feel of dead human skin against me. I cried out and pushed harder. His dead weight gave and I was able to get out from under him.

"Help!"

I ran towards the omni that was going at Pallo. This one had more sense than the last. It saw me coming and took off running in the other direction. I dropped down in front of Pallo and yanked on his shirt, getting him up and off the ground. It was a major success to say the least.

"Gwen?" Caleb asked as he walked out of the darkness at us. He looked at me trying to hold Pallo up and came running. He supported Pallo's weight and we headed back towards the house. I could feel the omnis all around us still. They were pulling back slowly. Something was driving them away and that something wasn't us.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

I sat on the corner of the bed and touched Pallo's back. Caleb had had to lay him face down so I could see how bad his back wounds were. When I first pulled his shirt away I gasped and felt sick to my stomach. A large chunk of Pallo's upper back, near his neck was missing. He had several other claw and bite marks across him, as well, though none were as bad as the one by his neck.

I leaned over him and kept touching his open gashes with a warm washcloth. James had told me it was a waste of my time and that Pallo couldn't get an infection, but it made me feel better. It gave me a purpose.

The door opened and Caleb walked in. "Hey, how's he doing?"

"Caleb, you don't have to pretend to care. I'm sure he appreciates it, though."

Caleb walked over and put his fingers above Pallo's worst wound. "Gwen, things have changed between Pallo and me. We're trying to get back to that place we'd been before you came back into our lives. We were friends because we shared a common history. That hasn't changed. I'm going to ask him to be my best man—if your father still makes us marry."

I stopped dabbing Pallo's wounds and stared up at Caleb. He couldn't seriously be thinking of doing that to Pallo. "Caleb, don't ask him. That's wrong for so many different reasons."

"No, Gwen, I've put a lot of thought into this. My job keeps me on the move so I've never really developed any close bonds with anyone. Ken and I get along well, but Pallo deserves to stand by my side when I'm joined to you. Let it be his choice, he's earned it."

I set the washcloth down and put my hand on Pallo's low back. The feel of his cool silky skin made my fingers ache to run all over him. I didn't know what to think about what Caleb wanted to do. Asking Pallo to be his best man seemed cruel and I didn't like the idea at all.

"Caleb, I really don't think you should ask him to do this."

I watched as one of the claw marks on Pallo's lower back began to pull back together. His body was attempting to heal itself. That meant he'd be awake soon.

"Gwen, just think about it. He might want to be there."

My emotions ran amuck. "What about what I want, Caleb? I don't want to be forced into marriage right now. I'm nowhere near ready to commit to you or anyone else right now." I turned my head a little. If I kept looking at Caleb, I was going to break down and cry. "Have you ever once thought that maybe, just maybe I can't have Pallo there? God, I can't fucking do this! I can't hurt him anymore. I can't hurt either of you anymore. Don't you understand that's what makes me so attracted to Giovanni? He doesn't make me choose and he doesn't suggest tying the knot with you two standing next to him. He doesn't make me feel like I have to make a choice ... he just is—and that's what makes me want to be around him."

"Gwen, I'm trying my best to be like him. I am. I've already given you the green

light on him and I'm going to ask the guy who is my chief rival for your hand to be my best man. I'm trying here and nothing I do is right. You tell me what to do. You tell me and I'll do it."

I glanced down at Pallo's neck. "Heal him and don't ask him to be your best man. Caleb, I'm going to say this once and I'm sorry if it hurts you, but I wanted him to stand up and object to our engagement. I wanted him to step in and tell my father that he wanted my hand. You'd already turned your back on me... on us and I wanted Pallo to stop things before they got any worse." I was harsher than I'd intended to be, and I wasn't sure that I believed in what I was saying, yet it came out all the same.

I stood and walked out of the room. I met James in the hallway and told him to check on Pallo in a few minutes. He didn't ask why I was crying and I was happy for that. I pushed my door open and went straight to my bathroom. Turning the water on, I let it fill the tub. I walked back out and checked Giovanni's suitcase again. Nothing had changed. He was gone and I knew it. He never said good-bye or even bothered to give me a reason. He'd just up and left. He'd been so full of promises about not going anywhere and always being there for me that I'd actually began to believe him.

Always the fool, Gwen!

I started to take my shirt off and stopped when I saw something out my window. Peering out, I thought I saw someone standing outside my window, but I was on the second story so it made me question the logic in that. I drew the curtain shut. As I pulled my navy sweater up and over my head, the hairs on my body rose again. I heard the sound of breaking glass and something grabbed a hold of the back of my hair before I registered what was going on.

My feet left the floor and the broken windowpane cut my arms. The soles of my shoes slapped down on the porch roof and I tried to get to my feet. My attacker jumped off the side and my head smacked down against the roof before he dragged my body over the edge, too. My shoulders cracked as my body slammed into the ground. I reached up and grabbed the half-hairy arm that was dragging me by my hair.

I dug my nails in and tried to get him to let me go. He wouldn't. I kept holding on if only to prevent him from ripping my hair right out of my head. I tried to dig my feet into the ground and to claw at him, but he only pulled me faster towards the woods. I heard someone screaming and realized it was me. The man dragging me stopped quickly and bent over me.

My eyes widened as I saw Fritz's punk-rock styled black hair above me. His fist came at my face hard and fast. I heard Caleb calling my name as the darkness swallowed me whole.

\* \* \* \*

*"Bella, Bella mia..."*

I followed the sound of Giovanni's voice. I knew I was dreaming of the box hedge maze at his home, but I didn't know why. It was twice as tall as it was in real life and the bushes were a burning red color. That was a dead giveaway to it being a dream. I heard Giovanni call my name again and I ran around the corner expecting to find him. All I found was a dead end.

*"Bella mia..."*

I spun around. "Giovanni, I can't find you. Where are you?"

*"Bella, I love you."*

The sound of his voice held so much sorrow. I knew this was his way of telling me he would not be coming back to me.

I turned and ran faster down each passageway, trying desperately to find him. “Giovanni ... please, please don’t do this.”

His cool energy wrapped around me. I could tell it hurt him to say good-bye to me, but I also could sense he had no choice. I closed my eyes and let him envelop his essence around me.

*“Amore mia, vita mia, amore eternal,”* he whispered softly to me.

Something tugged on my waist and my wrist. I tried to fight the pain and stay in my dream with Giovanni near me, but I couldn’t. Something grabbed my chin and I felt myself waking.

My body hurt and my eyes were heavy. I tried to open them, but only one was working. My left eye only opened a little and that hurt like hell. Someone squeezed my chin and I looked down at the pale thin arm in front of me. My head was yanked upwards and I found myself face to face with Malita.

Oh, goodie. The bitch welcome wagon.

Her long blonde hair was pulled tightly back from her face. I’d never noticed how sharp her features were before. God, she was born to be a bitch. She glared at me and then smiled.

“You don’t deserve Pallo or Giovanni!” She let go of my chin and my face fell forward. My forehead smacked something hard and I realized I was tied to a tree. I jerked and the ropes binding me pulled tighter, cutting off circulation.

“The Para-regs will be here soon. My people will clear out, leaving the path open wide for them to get to you.” She tipped her head back and laughed. “Oh, the fun they’ll have with you. I do so hope they make a grand example out of the daughter of the Dark King.” With that, she pivoted and left me tied to the tree.

I wanted to draw upon my powers but was weak and disoriented. I sensed someone coming and fear slammed through me. Drawing in a deep breath, I waited for what would mostly likely be my doom.

“Gwen?” Caleb asked, sounding out of breath. “Christ, what the hell ...”

“Come, let us free her.” The sound of Pallo’s voice made me smile. It meant he was healed, at least enough to be alive—or whatever it was an already dead guy called it.

They worked quickly, untying me from the tree. Caleb put his hands over my wrists and sent healing energy through them. “She did a fucking number on you. What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “I woke up tied to the tree. She only just left. We could catch her.”

Pallo exhaled loudly. “For now we pull back and assess the damage they have done to our side.”

“Or we could hunt the bitch down and kill her incredibly slowly,” I offered, feeling better thanks to Caleb.

Pallo smiled. “All in good time, Gwyneth. Come.”

They hurried me back through the dense wooded area and we finally broke through to my yard. The farmhouse never looked so good. They bypassed it and headed for the guesthouse that Mikhail was staying in.

I gasped. “Is Mikhail hurt?”

“No,” Caleb said, helping to steady me. “Everyone is pulling back to there. It’s the best spot to set up a defensive position. Besides, it’s also where I store my extra weapons.”

I blinked. “You’re joking right?”

He grinned. “Nope.”

We rushed forward and were greeted by a very naked Nicholas. There was a nasty gaping wound in his torso. The sight of it didn’t make me sick. No. It sent a worry like I’d never known through me.

Pushing away from Caleb, I ran towards the staircase. “Nick!”

He staggered. “I’m... fine. Just need to sit down a minute.”

Mikhail appeared, took one look at Nicholas and paled. “Nicholas!”

Nicholas waved a hand dismissively. “I’m fine. Really.”

“So fine you cannot shift and heal this?” Mikhail prompted.

I closed the distance between Nicholas, not caring that he was butt naked. In fact, it barely registered in my mind. My only concern was the fact he was injured. I reached out to see how bad his wound was and he lost his balance on the staircase, tumbling onto me. I tried to lift him but wasn’t strong enough.

“Nick, off...”

Nicholas didn’t move. His magik surged, moving up through him. His breathing grew faster and the weight of his body pressed down harder on me. His magik slammed into mine and mine recognized his. I’d never had that happen before. I tried to pull mine away, but I couldn’t control it. I could hear Caleb yelling and I felt someone’s hands trying to pull me free of Nicholas. I knew that if they separated us now, one of us might not survive. I grabbed tightly to Nicholas’s arm and he put his head down on me.

I closed my eyes tightly, my head feeling like it was splitting. Quickly, another vision came on. I’d worked hard at controlling them lately and thought for sure I had it mastered.

Guess not.

In my mind, I saw Giovanni and Mikhail sitting on the hill near Giovanni’s home. It was dark, but I could plainly see a child running through the herb gardens. The little boy’s hair was dark as the night and his eyes were a deep, dark blue. His little face was so perfectly round. The only hint of the coming features of adult hood was the tiny dimpled chin he had. I watched Giovanni put his hands out and the child came running to him yelling, “Papa”.

Nicholas tried to pull his memories back from me. He knew I was sharing them, but our magik wouldn’t allow it. I dove into another moment from his childhood when he was around five. He was standing on the other side of a door with it cracked open, watching Giovanni have a heated discussion with someone. Giovanni’s body lifted into the air and blood flew out from his chest and arms. I screamed at the same time the younger version of Nicholas did. I saw large arms wrap around him quickly. Mikhail picked him up and turned with him to run. Nicholas kept his eyes on the cracked open door and it burst open the same time Mikhail was heading out with him. Pallo stood in the doorway. His hands were dripping with Giovanni’s blood and his eyes were black and wild. Little Nicholas did not feel fear, he felt hatred.

“Gwyneth!” Pallo shouted, yanking me from the visions of Nicholas’ youth.

I glanced up to find Pallo holding onto to my shoulders. He saw me open my

eyes and turned quickly to glare at Nicholas who was now leaning back from me on the steps. Reaching out, Pallo grabbed Nicholas by his throat. He lifted his limp body high into the air and threw him across the railing. I jumped to my feet and screamed as I watched Nicholas' body flying across the yard. He crashed down and slid a few feet. He didn't move.

Mikhail sprang over the side of the railing and was to him before I could shout again. I hit Pallo's back hard. He spun around and grabbed my wrist. "Gwyneth, he attacked you. Caleb said he was using his magik on you."

"He didn't attack me! I don't think he meant to do it."

I tried to take another step down and had to grab a hold of the railing. Pallo put his arm around my waist and I pushed him away. "Don't touch me!"

"Gwyneth?"

I could still see the image of him that Nicholas had carried around since he was a child. That was why there were hard feelings between them. Nicholas had watched Pallo attack Giovanni, his father.

His father?

I staggered down the rest of the stairs and ran across the grass to Nicholas. Mikhail had Nicholas' head propped up and was saying something to him. I dropped down next to him and touched his forehead.

"Are you all right?"

He gave me a half-nod, half-no answer.

Yeah, I felt about the same.

I locked gazes with Mikhail. "Is he Giovanni's son?"

His eyes widened and he glanced back at Pallo quickly. I knew that both Caleb and Pallo heard me because they let out the same gasp. I touched Mikhail's leg. "Is he Giovanni's son?"

Nicholas sat up and put his weight on his elbows. His dark blue eyes found mine. I searched for traces of Giovanni in Nicholas. He did have dark black hair like Giovanni, but his was curly and not the sleek straight Giovanni had. Giovanni's eyes were as dark as his hair and Nicholas' were crisp and blue—navy blue. A blue I saw when I looked at my father and when I looked in the mirror.

My stomach tightened. I fell forward and grabbed Nicholas to me.

Pallo came running at me to yank me off. I put my hand out and shot what little power I had left in me out at him. It didn't stop him, it only made him grunt. He came flying past me and lifted Nicholas back up off his feet again. Pallo spun Nicholas around and I tried to push myself in between them.

Mikhail ran in to help break Pallo off him. Mikhail had the upper body strength to accomplish what I couldn't. He got Pallo to let go. Nicholas fell back onto the ground. Pallo swept Mikhail into the air with one flick of his wrist.

I felt Pallo's cold energy rise up and I saw Nicholas' cheek rip open. I threw myself down and over Nicholas and sensed Pallo pulling his power back into himself.

"Gwyneth, go. This does not concern you. If he is the son of Giovanni, then that would explain much."

I stared at Pallo and then to Mikhail. "I think it does concern me, don't you?" Mikhail's eyes widened. He glanced at Pallo and then at me. He didn't have to answer me. I already knew I was right.



“Pallo, you can’t hurt him. I don’t care what the problem is between you and Giovanni, you can’t hurt Nicholas.”

Pallo sighed. “Gwyneth, there are certain things you cannot understand about creatures like us. One is that old feuds do not die easily.”

Nicholas moved himself out from underneath me and I watched in horror as he glared at Pallo. He didn’t know. Giovanni had never told him. “Nicholas, no, look at me. Is Giovanni your father? I need the truth. Please. Is Giovanni...?”

“Yes, but I was an orphaned child. He took me in and cared for me like his own.” He nodded and stepped past me. He’d given me all the information I was going to get from him.

“Nicholas, no!” I grabbed his arm. He thrust it out and sent me flying backwards. My shoulder smacked the ground first, then my head. Caleb yelled and ran to me. He dropped down beside me and touched my temple. His finger came away bloody.

“Gwen, you’re bleeding!”

My head spun slightly as I tried to lift it. Caleb held me down and put his hand to my forehead. He washed a wave of his hot magik over me and I knew that he was healing my head. I was thankful but getting hit on the head was the least of my concerns. Pallo and Nicholas were locked together in battle again, snarling at one another and I knew they wouldn’t stop until one of them was dead. They shared the same stubborn streak—it was obviously genetic.

I tried to sit up. Caleb grabbed my arm. “Gwen, take it easy.”

I pushed up and past him. He had to move up behind me to keep me from falling on my face. Pallo took Nicholas’ half-clawed hand to his face. Pallo countered with a blow that sent Nicholas’s head snapping backwards.

“Stop it!”

Nicholas turned and stared at me. Pallo hit him again and sent him flying backwards. I moved towards him and something snatched me up from behind. I turned and saw Pallo’s face. His eyes were swirling to black. His lip turned upwards and I watched his fangs emerge.

“Why do you protect him? Is it out of love for Giovanni? He is a monster and so is his son!” He leaned in and licked my cheek. I could sense his thirst for blood, almost as if it was my own. “Tell me, why have you not given up on Giovanni? He abandoned you. He is not to be trusted and now he has proven as much.” Pallo pushed me away from him. I saw the black in his eyes as he stared past me at Nicholas. He wanted to kill him and I wouldn’t let that happen.

“Pallo, if you want to hurt Nicholas then you will have to go through me.”

He looked down at me. “Gwyneth, Giovanni cannot be that good a lover to give up your life for his child.”

I let his first comment go. Yeah, Giovanni was a good enough lover to give up just about anything for him, but that wasn’t the point. “Pallo, it’s not his child I’m willing to give everything up for... it’s yours.”

His eyes narrowed to tiny slits. “What?”

Reaching up, I cupped his cheek lightly. “I think Nicholas is our son. I think he’s the child I was pregnant with when, umm, when I died.”

Pallo jerked away from me. I turned and glanced at Nicholas. He appeared as shocked as Pallo. “That can’t be,” Nicholas said, his mouth agape. “You aren’t that old.

You're almost two-hundred years younger than I am."

That wasn't saying much and it was obvious the guy didn't know my history very well. Caleb moved up and touched my arm. "Gwen, his magik wasn't attacking you then, it was finding a piece of itself in you. God, I should've recognized the signs. His eyes are yours and your father's."

"This cannot be," Pallo said.

"Pallo, you said they found my body, but did they find the baby's body?"

Caleb moved up and wrapped his arms around me. "No, I only found you. Not the baby, but your body was so bad that I ... I just..."

I turned in his arms and hugged him to me. I had no idea he'd been the one to find me. "I didn't know."

He hugged me tightly to him. "Gwen, I found you in the same field that ... that you and I first made love in."

I thought about Giovanni telling me how he'd watched Caleb and I make love for the first time in a field of flowers. Oh, God ... he had put me there for Caleb to find. I tried to push away the doubts that were creeping into my head about trusting Giovanni.

I stared at Pallo. "Pallo, look at Nicholas. He's your height, your build, he's got your curly hair and for crying out loud look at that chin! If that doesn't do it for you, look at Nicholas' temper!"

Caleb let me go to Pallo. Pallo kept backing up, looking confused. He dropped to his knees and put his hand out to me. I took it and bent down before him. "This cannot be ... no, Gwyneth."

Mikhail appeared and stopped when he was within a few feet of us. He looked like he had something to offer, but was scared. I smiled, doing my best to appear reassuring. "Not that my opinion will matter much with Giovanni, since he ran out on me, but go ahead, Mikhail, spit it out and I'll see what I can do for you."

He glanced nervously at me and then at Pallo. "I don't think Giovanni ran out, but I'm not the one to ask about that." Pallo's arm stiffened under the weight of my touch. Mikhail took another step forward and dropped his head down. "I helped Giovanni raise Nicholas. He called me to him after you died and said he had made you a promise to care for the child. I told him he was insane, vampires couldn't raise babies. They couldn't even go out in the daylight."

Mikhail glanced at Nicholas and then back at me, sorrow evident in his face. "Giovanni told me he'd thought of all that already, but he'd made you a promise before you died and he would rather give up his own life than to give your child away. I tried to talk him into giving the baby to the King. He said no one but he and I knew you were the King's daughter and the Kingdom would question why the Kerrigan had suddenly taken in an orphan."

Mikhail's gaze landed on Pallo, who stared blankly out into the night. "I even tried to talk Giovanni into taking the baby to you, his father, but he told me about how you'd lost control of your demon and he knew the knowledge of Gwen's death would find you soon. And when it did you'd go even further over the edge. His fear was for the boy. He didn't want the baby to be hurt. He asked for my help and I gave it. I was his eyes and ears during the daylight for Nicholas growing up, then... when Nicholas got sick with the fever... I ...."

Nicholas stepped closer to us. "Mikhail, was the one who saved my life by giving

me the gift of immortality. My father couldn't bring himself to turn me into something that would never again see the light of day. He told me my mother would have never allowed that to happen. He said she'd lost someone close to her to the vampires and would never forgive him for doing it to me. So, Mikhail stepped in and saved my life."

Pallo stared at Nicholas. He grabbed my hand and pulled me to him, holding me tightly and rocking back and forth. "We have a son ... I have a son. He's alive. Gwyneth, we have a son," he whispered.

I let out a small laugh even though the situation was anything but funny. "Yeah, I've got a son who is two-hundred years older than me, but we look like we're the same age. Not bad, huh!"

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Closing my bedroom door, I put my head against the wall. I was having serious issues absorbing everything that had gone on. After we were sure the rogue omnis and the Para-regs were gone for good, Pallo decided he needed some time to himself. I couldn't blame him, finding out a guy you hate might be your son is hard, I'm sure. Nicholas seemed even less enthused with the idea. He kept mumbling how his mother was almost two-hundred years younger than him and how there was no way Pallo was his father. Caleb took the news well. I think part of him had expected something like this someday. I wish I could say the same.

I didn't know how to take the idea I might be Nicholas' mother. That life seemed so far removed from mine. So often when I would hear one of the men talk about my past, it was like hearing about someone else. I had tried to talk to Nicholas and failed. I ended up walking up to him and mentioning how very rude he was. He agreed his attitude wasn't the best and took off back to Mikhail's room to get dressed.

I needed to talk to Giovanni and he was nowhere to be found. I had tried calling his house before I went up to my room, but all I got was Ester. She said she hadn't seen him since the two of us left for the States. That should have been a comfort to me. It wasn't. If Giovanni wasn't at home and he wasn't here, then where the hell was he?

Someone knocked on the door. I lifted my head off it and turned the knob. Caleb stood there in his torn jeans. He looked tired and ready to sleep. I opened the door for him. He walked in, immediately came to me and put his hand out. I took it and let him pull me close to him.

"How ya doing?" he asked.

I put my head on his shoulder. "Not so good, how about you?"

Chuckling, he ran his hand down my back. "I'm good. Better than you. You've had a long night. You managed to find out you were, or are, someone's mother and that Giovanni betrayed you."

I rolled my eyes. "Why is everyone so hip to jump on the betrayal wagon when it comes to Giovanni?"

Caleb sighed and kissed the top of my head. "The very fact that you ask that proves you don't know a damn thing about him."

I nodded slowly, not because I agreed with him, but out of annoyance. "Great, so I guess the deal with you being fine with him is off, I mean ... you did get what you want... him gone."

I went to pull away from him. He held tight to my arms. "Gwen, I'm not going back on my word. I just don't think you know all there is to know about him, and I don't want to see you get hurt. That's all. Am I supposed to stop caring about you ... just like that?" He snapped his fingers. I got his point, but I didn't like it.

"I guess it doesn't matter anyways. He took off. He never said good-bye, hell, he didn't even bother to take his suitcase with him. That's how bad he wanted to get away from me."

“Gwen, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I don’t think Giovanni walked out on you.” Caleb tipped his head back. “Shit, I hate defending the guy, but maybe he had something important come up, maybe ....”

“No, he came to me in the woods after Fritz had knocked me out. He came to me in a dream and he said his good-byes. He’s not planning on coming back, Caleb.”

Caleb’s grip tightened on my arm. “Gwen, maybe we should search for him.”

Staring into his green eyes, I wondered what it was that he was thinking.

“The only way you’re going to get proof-positive that Nicholas is yours is to go straight to the man in question. Giovanni can fill in the blanks for you. He owes you that much.”

I grabbed the sides of his scruffy face and pushed my mouth onto his. It was different kissing him with a goatee now and I actually found myself liking it. My magik wrapped around his. They knew each other now and so did our bodies.

I pulled back and took a deep breath. My body was shaking with need for him.

I leaned into him and gave him another kiss. I needed comfort right now and Caleb would do nicely—no, better than just nicely. We stood locked together for what felt like forever before we pulled away.

“I’m exhausted and I hate to admit it. Would you mind if I got in the shower and got cleaned up?” I asked.

It had been a long night. I’d been attacked by a psychotic omnimorpheleon chick and her slackies. I’d discovered that I might very well have a son who was a shifter and a hell of a lot older than me.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

I took a long hot shower and found a comfy pair of pink pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt to sleep in. Caleb had fallen asleep across the foot of my bed. I knew that he was exhausted, as well, and I had no intention of waking him. I kissed his head and climbed under the covers. Caleb's long body prevented me from being able to get the comforter up enough to get under. I finally gave up and lay sideways next to him.

I felt my body surrendering to sleep. The day had been long and by the looks of it, the next day wouldn't prove to be any shorter. I moved into Caleb's warm body and snuggled close to him. I let myself go and enter the dream world I was coming to dislike.

I had always had a gift for knowing when I was dreaming, although I'd recently had a rash of monk filled dreams that had questioned that. I found myself standing in the field of purple and yellow flowers that I had come to expect in my dreams and know in real life. I knew that a field identical to this one existed at a portal in Necro World to the realm of fairies. I had also come to expect the flowers to part for me as I walked. I put my hand out and waited for the butterfly that visited without fail in every one of these dreams I had. He did not come.

I looked around the pre-dawn skyline and looked for a sign as to what had changed. Everything appeared to be the same, minus the butterfly. I walked straight towards the river that ran through the field and stopped just before stepping out and onto it. I'd seen Caleb and my father walk on water before. I should have been used to it, but I still found it unnerving. Being raised by church fearing humans left water walking to a certain individual who I dared not compare myself to.

"Welcome, child of mine, balance between the light and dark," I heard a woman's voice say. I knew that voice. I'd heard it in my dreams enough to recognize it. I looked around for its source, but found nothing.

"Lydia?"

I heard a soft chuckle and then felt a warm breeze tickle my neck. "You may call me Lydia if you wish, daughter of mine, but I would rather you call me mother."

I felt my stomach tie into a knot with excitement. This was the first time the voice had ever actually responded to a question I asked. It was weird to think of the voice as my mother. I'd never met her. The mother I'd come to know had been Sarah, my adoptive mother. She was a sweet and wonderful woman whom I still missed. I'd lost both my adoptive parents in the last two years and I hadn't really had a chance to work through that.

I turned and looked around for Lydia, I couldn't find her. "Mother?"

I felt another blast of warm sweet smelling air come past me. "I am here, Gwyneth. I have come to you for a reason. You need to go to your father. You must go soon, a life depends on it."

I felt the wind blowing more. I turned into it. "Mother, whose life depends on it and why does it involve my father?"

"Go, Gwyneth, go soon. Take Caleb, he will curb your father's anger."

“His anger? About what?”

I heard her laugh softly again. “About Nicholas ... I told Giovanni to keep the child’s identity a secret. Your father does not care for Pallo and this news will not go over well.”

I thought about what she was saying. She’d known that Nicholas existed? “Mother, if you knew about him, why didn’t you take him? Why let Giovanni raise him?”

“Pallo was not to be reasoned with. I tried to send Caleb after him to stop him, but his vengeance spread to innocents not the woman responsible for your death. The child would not have been safe from Pallo or Sorchia at the time. Giovanni knew this and I helped to ensure that he would never again fall prey to the magik that controlled him. He is a good man, so are Caleb and Pallo. You have chosen well with who you give your heart to.”

I took a step out onto the water and looked into the night sky. “Mother, how can you say that?”

“Your heart is big enough to love thousands and it is in your genes to love more than one.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Let me guess, I get that from the Dark Lord, my dad, too, huh?”

The wind stopped moving around me and the night felt suddenly still. “No, my sweet child, that gift came from me. You see, I loved your father, but he was not the only man I loved. He was not the only man that could give me you.”

I was hit with a sudden realization. “Oh God, that’s why he’s been so insistent on me marrying Caleb in front of the Kingdom. He never got to proclaim his love for you and put an end to your other affairs.” I dropped to one knee. “Why, did you leave father for them?”

Her voice was growing fainter now. “No, you cannot leave what never lets you in and he made sure that I could not commit to any other so long as he was unable to have me.”

I thought about what she was implying. Had my father forbidden her to see anyone else, even though he could never publicly love her? I didn’t have to wait for a response.

“You must hurry, Gwyneth, a life is in your hands now. Do not let him repeat the sins of his past. Go to him, Gwyneth, go ....”

I shot awake and found Caleb still asleep next to me. Touching him lightly, I watched as his eyes opened quickly. He glanced around and then sat up fast. “Don’t laugh when I ask you this, but by any chance, did you just dream that someone was in some serious trouble in the Dark Realm?”

I nodded.

“Shit,” he said, tossing the covers aside. “Me too. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

We used the portal to the Dark Realm near the river by my house. My father had created it when I was a child so he could watch over me. I looked around at the large buildings and crowded sidewalks. This wasn't exactly what I had pictured hell to be, but I was pretty sure it was what Christians based their belief of it off of.

It's always dark in the Dark Realm, hence the name. Not too many creatures that inhabit it can take direct sunlight. Everyone is free to come and go between the human world and here and that is a very scary thought.

I grabbed for Caleb's hand as I walked past a furry seven foot tall beast. Its eyes were bright red. Only the black iris let you know they were even functional. It looked at me and spread its mouth wide. For being huge, it had incredibly tiny teeth. I pulled in closer to Caleb. He'd been walking a step ahead of me the entire way.

"Caleb, wait."

He slowed and turned to me. He shook his head slightly and pulled me to him. "I'm sorry. I'm wrapped up in thoughts about ... let's just say that I've got a lot on my mind."

"Like what?"

The large furry beast took a step closer to us. I tensed up and Caleb smiled. He put out his hand and shook the human-like hand of the beast.

"I thought that was you," the beast said in an incredibly low voice.

"Beevan, how have you been?"

Caleb knew the thing? A shudder ran through me. Beevan turned to me. "Is this who I think it is?"

Caleb pulled me in and brought my hand to his lips and then to my horror put my hand out to Beevan. His large hand came up and took mine. He brought his wide face down to me and planted a light kiss on the back of my hand.

"Princess, it is an honor indeed."

Princess? I turned around and looked behind me. Both Caleb and Beevan chuckled.

"You'll have to excuse her, Beevan, she's not used to the title," Caleb said.

"Yes, I can see that." He let go of my hand gently and looked at Caleb. "You should know that the elders are filtering in. They have come early to aid in the preparations for the ceremony."

Caleb stiffened. "Which ones are here?"

"At least half of them and yes, your Aunt Sira has arrived." Beevan looked down the street towards the large castle. Caleb followed suit and then looked back at me.

"Maybe we should come back later. We should really let your father know that we're coming."

I thought about the dream I'd had. No, this couldn't wait. I had to see my father and stop him from doing something. I just wasn't sure what yet.

"Caleb, I need to see my father. Now. It can't wait."



He let out a sigh and glanced at Beevan. "I take it that since you are here, so is Conlan."

Beevan nodded his gigantic head. "Yes, my master is in a meeting with several of the elders as we speak."

"Thank you, Beevan, and be safe."

Beevan smiled. "Be safe, young Caleb."

Caleb pulled me down the street. I suddenly felt like everyone we walked past was staring at us. I yanked on Caleb's hand to stop him. He turned around and stared at me.

"What's wrong now?" he asked.

My jaw dropped. He was treating me like I was the biggest burden he'd ever had to deal with. I pulled my hand loose from his and felt my face tighten. "Nothing, sorry."

His eyes fluttered shut and he closed the distance between us. I stiffened as his arms wrapped around me. He planted tiny kisses on the top of my head and held me tightly. "Gwen, I'm sorry. I'm just worried about the elders being here already." He ran his hand down my cheek. "How are you feeling?"

Ignoring his question, I glanced at the people walking past. They gawked at us. "Why is everyone staring at us?"

He looked around like he was noticing for the first time that they were. He shrugged. "I'm not surprised. You do realize that you're royalty and a public sighting of you is big stuff here."

"But why are they staring at us?"

Caleb laughed. "Because since your father announced our engagement, we're all the talk." He cleared his throat. "Of course, my sexual escapades have been front and center in the tabloids while you were in Tuscany. They claimed I was sowing my wild oats before tying the knot."

I groaned. "Caleb, I'm trying really hard to be okay with my father's decision to force us to marry, but I can't lie to you."

Nodding, he pulled me close and pressed his mouth to my ear. "I know, Gwen. Deep down, it doesn't feel quite right, does it?"

Relief swept through me as I caressed his chest. "No. It doesn't," I whispered. "They're still staring at us. More so now. Why are we such a big deal?"

He drew back slightly and smiled. "Think about this place in terms of Hollywood, to them we are the newest and hottest celebrity couple." He kissed me. I felt my leg kick up and my arms wrap around him. I heard various people making sounds of surprise and I think I even heard some of them clap.

My face flushed with embarrassment and Caleb laughed from the gut as he led me through the crowd.

The stained glass windows of the castle came into view and I felt sick to my stomach. I didn't want to speak to my father anymore. I just wanted to go. Caleb turned and looked at me when I refused to take another step.

"Gwen?"

I pulled back from him and stared up at the large dark castle. "Caleb, I can't do this. The man scares the hell out of me."

He picked me up into his arms and spun me around. "He scares everyone. Welcome to the club."

“Caleb, Gwyneth!”

Caleb put me down and it took me a minute to regain my sense of balance. When I did, I looked up at the entrance to the castle. My father, Kerrigan, was standing there dressed in long red robes. I’d never seen him in red before. He looked intimidating. Just what he didn’t need to look more of. His blue eyes found mine and he smiled brightly.

“Welcome, when the guard said he thought the two of you were approaching I thought he must be joking. I mean, the last time I spoke with Caleb, the two of you still weren’t on speaking terms.” He nodded, appearing appreciative. “I see that you are getting along fine now. Good, then that should speed the union along nicely. Let’s go.”

He motioned with his hand and turned into the castle. Caleb pulled me close to him as my hands shook slightly. Malita was right. I didn’t know anything about these people.

Caleb led me through the large double doors and into the enormous entrance. The first thing that caught my eye was the staircase again. The second was how the blood red carpet that covered it matched my father’s robes. I shuddered and tried to calm myself down. My father came walking up to me and put his arms out. I went to him reluctantly. I was ashamed of myself. He’d never done anything to prove that I had reason to be scared of him. He’d even given up his throne to watch me grow up.

He was a hair taller than Caleb, which made him really friggin’ tall. I let him gather me in his arms and hugged him back. It was strange to think of him as my father. He only looked to be about ten years older than me. He still had and would always have the body of a warrior. I knew that he was older than Giovanni and Giovanni was five hundred, so that made my father old. Really, really, really old.

He released me and then stared down at me. “You look wonderful. I see your vacation suited you.”

I met his gaze and knew that he had never once suspected I was on vacation. He definitely was King material. He could put a positive spin on anything. If the gig as head of the underworld didn’t pan out, he could have a future in human politics.

“Father, have you seen Giovanni?”

I watched his eyes flicker. He kept his face blank and then raised an eyebrow to me. “My dear daughter, I think Giovanni is a wise man. Why would he contact me? I am ... how should I put this? Ah, yes, less than pleased with him.”

I made a mental note that at no point during his answer did he come right out and say if he’d seen Giovanni. Yep, he was royalty all right.

My father glanced back at Caleb. “And how do you feel about my daughter’s concern for a vampire?”

I turned to Caleb, wanting to see what he had to say. He walked up to me and put his arm around my waist. My father caught this innocent gesture and motioned for us to follow him. We walked closely behind him as he went up the stairs. We stopped just outside of a large brown door. He put his hand out and opened it. I tensed up and didn’t want to enter. Caleb put his hand on my shoulder.

“It’s okay, Gwen. It’s my room.”

I exhaled and entered the room. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust. The room was completely white. The walls, the floor, the bed, dressers, chairs, you name it, it was white. “Geesh, big sale on white stuff?”

Caleb snorted. “It’s not like I picked. I really don’t give a damn what it looks

like.”

Kerrigan cleared his throat and pushed the door closed. He turned and glanced at me. “Are you with child?”

Caleb went to speak. Kerrigan put his hand up, silencing him instantly. I stepped forward and gave Kerrigan a dirty look.

“Get off it, all right. You don’t get to treat him like a dog.”

Caleb made a small noise of protest and I put my hand up to indicate he needed to stay out of this.

My father snickered. “Oh, I wonder where you get that from.”

I rolled my eyes and motioned to Caleb. “Sorry.” I focused my father. “You neglected to answer my question. Have you seen Giovanni and please don’t tap dance around the answer.”

My father’s gaze snapped to Caleb. “You permit her to speak his name freely?”

Caleb sighed. “Aside from casting a mute spell on Gwen, nothing will keep the girl from speaking her mind. Trust me on this.”

He put his hand on his forehead. It was a very human gesture, but one I’d never seen him do before. “Caleb, I want this to work for you both. You are the only choice for my daughter and I need you both to understand how delicately you must tread until the merging. There can be no talk of Giovanni.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“No, what?” my father asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “No. We won’t tread lightly because we don’t want to get married, father.”

“What?” he asked, paling considerably.

“Gwen,” Caleb warned.

I glanced back at him. “Tell him what you won’t tell me, Caleb. Tell him how you found someone who makes your chest tight just thinking about her.” I smiled. “Tell him how you have a chance at happiness with someone else. Someone who feels right and who doesn’t feel like something heavy is pressing in on you.”

Caleb stared at me, his brow furrowing. “How did you know?”

“I can put two and two together and get something close to four, Caleb.”

A soft smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “We’re okay? You don’t hate me for feeling this way?”

I snorted. “How can I hate you for feeling the same way I do? This isn’t right, Caleb. We shouldn’t marry.”

He nodded. “I agree.”

My father shot a blast of energy out at Caleb and sent him flying backwards. I threw my hand up and my power leapt forth from my fingertips, striking my father’s out stretched hand. It lurched back, and he turned his angry eyes on me. I didn’t back down. I knew he could tear me to shreds, but I didn’t care. He looked down at his hand and then back at me.

“Gwyneth, any doubts I had are gone. You’re completely mine this time.” He turned and stormed out of the room.

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that and I didn’t care. I ran to Caleb. He was lying very still on the floor. I touched his hand and he smiled sheepishly. “Is he gone?”

I looked him over for signs of being hurt, there were none. “Yeah, I think I pissed

him off.”

Caleb let out a small laugh. “Not as much as if I hadn’t thrown myself backwards.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe my ears. He’d propelled himself across the room on purpose? It was official, he was crazy.

Caleb stood up and dusted his pants off. “Gwen, I felt his power hit me, but it didn’t hurt me. I think that when we merged magiks, almost seven months ago, that yours somehow is immune or has a higher tolerance for his power.”

I shook my head. It was plain to see that I wasn’t understanding the severity of what he was saying. His face was dead serious. “Gwen, somehow you’ve managed to get a hell of a lot of power from your father. That’s not usual for a faerie your age to have so much already and we have no idea how much your mother may have passed on to you.” He took my hand. “Gwen, your father is proud you’re as strong as he is, but he would not be proud to find out that I am, too.”

“Why?” I asked. I thought it was a legitimate question. Caleb’s slight laugh told me it wasn’t.

“Gwen, you aren’t a threat to his power base. You would never assassinate your father to have his throne.” I yanked back from him quickly. I’d never in a million years entertain the idea of having my dad bumped off. Caleb came towards me. “No, no... Gwen, think about who my mother is. She would think of doing something like that if she knew her son was powerful enough to take on the King. God, who knows what she’d do and I’m willing to bet Kerrigan wouldn’t want to find out.”

I didn’t want to believe what Caleb was saying. “No, my father would never try and hurt you to protect his position. He likes you.”

This made Caleb laugh harder. “Yeah, he thinks of me as a son, but I’m telling you that wouldn’t stop him in the least. When Kerrigan makes up his mind, he really makes it up.” He shifted his eyes to the side. I knew the look. He was trying to hide something from me.

“What? Tell me now.”

“I think he’ll kill Pallo if he finds out that he might be Nicholas’ father and if Nicholas is actually your son from before.”

I stood very still. I felt like if I moved at all that I’d simply fall to the floor in a fit of hysteria. Caleb would never lie to me to advance his position with me. If he thought that there was a chance that my father would kill Pallo, then I believed him. I thought of Nicholas.

“Nicholas, what if it turns out that Nicholas is who we think he is ... will my father hurt him?”

Caleb’s green gaze moved the floor. “I don’t think Kerrigan would hurt Nicholas because he carries his blood in him, but I’m not sure about Pallo.” He exhaled deeply. “Gwen, I think Kerrigan is just looking for a reason to get to kill Pallo. Any excuse will do.”

I felt like my heart was going to pop out of my chest. It was beating so fast and I was chock full of emotions. I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to Pallo. I knew full well that when my father set his mind to something, he did it. I’d learned that firsthand with the wedding ordeal.

## Chapter Thirty

Caleb and I sat and talked for a while more, before he was summoned to meet with the King. I tried to go with him, but he insisted I stay out of the line of fire if at all possible. He reminded me that he now carried an extra level of protection from my father's magik and that he'd be fine. I gave him a chaste kiss and told him that he'd better come back to me all right or I'd kill him myself.

I sat there on the bed staring around the white room. It looked so sterile yet felt so cozy. Whoever had decorated the castle must have been good. I glanced over at the door that led to the terrace. Each room had one in the castle. Mine overlooked the street we'd come in on. I walked to the door and opened it.

A gust of cool wind blew over me. "*Bella ....*"

I ran out onto the terrace, glancing around for Giovanni. I could smell him, feel him, sense him all around me, yet he was nowhere to be found.

"Giovanni?" I called and turned to run back into Caleb's room. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Caleb's mother standing there. I hadn't heard her come in.

Her long silver gown made her white-blond hair sparkle. Her thin waist was exposed through a hole designed in the dress. I looked up at her and caught a glimpse of a very gray pair of eyes. Last I remembered Sorcha's eyes were green, like Caleb's.

She took a step towards me and her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here? How did you manage to come back?"

Why the hell was Sorcha asking me questions she knew the answers to? I stared past her at Caleb's bedroom door and wanted more than anything to have my angry father come in again. She followed my gaze.

"No one is here to help you and even if they were I know that they could not stand up to me. Greater men have followed my orders and were unable to resist me."

I took another step back and felt myself run out of terrace. I was pressed against the rail and the only other option I had would be to jump and that wasn't sounding so appealing. At least not yet, anyway.

She let out a throaty laugh and came walking out towards me. A cool breeze swept past me. "*Bella ... run ...*"

She heard Giovanni's voice riding the breeze, too, and glared at me. "You think your Giovanni can save you now? No, I think not. You see, he's mine to play with now, the King gave him to me as a welcome home present."

"Welcome home? Where the hell did you go?"

She tossed her hand out and it felt like someone had just struck me with a whip across the cheek. I brought my hand up, touched my cheek, and came away with blood. She did it again and this time I felt her power rip across my lower stomach. I let the floodgates to my power open and when she sent another blast at me, I took it into myself and closed my eyes. It rolled around as my magik broke it down—dissolved it. Lifting my hand, I blew her power back out and over my hand. Tiny yellow and purple butterflies came from my warm breath. Her eyes widened and she tried to throw more

magik at me. I put my hand up and caught it and sent it flying back at her.

I laughed as she staggered. This time it was me who walked towards her. "I know you hate me and I'm fine with that, but if you ever try to hurt me or anyone else I care about again, I'll rip your heart out and feed it to a wonderful little pack of omnis that I know. Are we clear?"

She looked at me and then down towards my stomach. "No, no he couldn't have given you that. It's not possible. He can't father children."

Children? Who said anything about children?

Sorcha had finally lost it. I couldn't be pregnant. I hadn't been with either of the men I was a matched pair with, in over six months.

"Sira!" a loud male voice boomed in around us.

Sira? This crazy coot was Caleb's aunt not his mother. Some family? I looked at her and the surprise must have showed on my face. I turned and stared at the man who was standing in the middle of the room. He stood about six foot tall. His long black hair fell in waves over his wide shoulders. His face had strong features and his chin was incredibly prominent. He looked a lot like my father, but his eyes were the most beautiful shade of purple I'd ever seen.

Sira turned, her gaze meeting mine as if daring me to say a word. She smiled at the man and looked over his long black robes. "Conlan, I see that your luggage has arrived."

So this was Beevan's master? He didn't smile once at me. He just stood there staring at me. I'd gotten used to that look. It was the one that screamed they thought they were seeing a ghost.

Sira leaned over and whispered to me, "One word and I will finish Giovanni off, do you understand?"

My heart leapt to my throat. She knew where Giovanni was.

I nodded and forced a smile to my face as my attention went to Conlan. His focus snapped to Sira. "What are you doing in here?"

She smiled innocently. "Welcoming her, what else?"

His jaw moved outward. "Sira if one hair on her head is harmed I will not be responsible for my actions."

She gave him a small bow. "You never are." I watched her storm out of the room and wondered if all the high fairies took a class on how to make a dramatic exit.

Conlan walked towards me and extended his hand. "Sorry to have to introduce myself to you under these circumstances, I am Conlan."

"Nice to meet you. I'm ...."

He cut me off. "You're Lydia's daughter, Gwyneth."

"You knew my mother?"

He smiled and averted his gaze. "Yes, I knew your mother well."

My father and Caleb appeared in the room. When my father saw Conlan and me standing together his face turned several shades of red. His eyes narrowed and he came walking towards me. He wrapped me in another tight hug and faced Conlan.

"I see you've met my daughter." There was so much emphasis on the word that I almost choked.

Caleb glanced at me and I knew he wasn't even sure what was going on either. Conlan took a step forward. "Yes, brother, I have met your daughter ... my niece."

Brother? I had an uncle? Kerrigan had never mentioned him to me before. Great, just great, I go from orphaned to a princess caught in the middle of a brothers' feud. I smiled at my father, then leaned up and kissed his cheek lightly. I whispered softly in his ear on the way back, "Where is Giovanni? I know you have him here somewhere."

A neutral smile graced his face as he patted my arm. "Some things are better forgotten, wouldn't you agree, Conlan?"

Conlan nodded and I got the sense that this could go on all night if someone didn't put an end to it.

I felt the cool breeze return and it moved my hair forward. "*Bella*," Giovanni's voice whispered to me. I glanced around to see if anyone else heard it. Caleb was staring at Conlan and my father. The two of them were making snide comments back and forth. Giovanni's cool energy pulled on me again. I looked at the three men and knew that my moment for escaping undetected had arrived. I headed for the door and stepped out into the hall.

I took off running in the direction Giovanni's energy was pulling me. I ran down the stairs and to the left. Racing down a long corridor, I stopped, sensing his energy coming in strong waves as I stood outside the third door on the right. His energy seemed to be trying to yank me through the door. I tried to twist the handle but it was locked. Giovanni mystically pulled harder on me.

"I can't get the door open ... I'm trying ... I'm trying."

He seemed to hear me and I stopped his internal pulling on me. I heard his sweet voice in my head, "*Bella*, announce yourself."

Announce myself? "What the hell is telling the door that my name is Gwyneth going to do?" The handle dropped down and the door opened. "Oh!"

I was amazed at how easy that was and wished I had thought of that on my own. I gathered up all the nerve I could muster and made my way into the darkened doorway. The large wooden door was heavy and I knew that once my hand moved off of it that it would close behind me. I had a split second to decide if it would be as easy to open from the inside as it was from the out. I let it fall shut. If Giovanni was really in here and in need of my help then I would do whatever it took to get to him. If he wasn't and it was some sort of a trap—I was screwed.

"Giovanni?" I asked softly as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The room smelled musky and I could hear the faint drips of water, or at least what I hoped was water. Thanks to Pallo's gift of saving my life my gaze moved quickly over to see the room was not a room at all, but rather another torture chamber. I backed up against the wall when I saw all the chains on the walls.

I'd seen a room similar to this one several months back. I wasn't sure how many torture chambers a castle needed but it was looking like a lot. I took a few steps more into the room and stood, waiting for Giovanni to give me a sign of his whereabouts. Nothing came to me. I closed my eyes and tried to feel for him. I'd seen Pallo do it before with James and thought I'd give it a try.

I closed out the sound of the dripping water and tried to block the smell of mold. I visualized colors flying at me, taking me over and relaxing me. I looked out and down a purple path in my mind. A door that only I could see swung open and I saw a man's back. I reached out and pushed my essence at it. The man turned around and I stared

into his dark brown eyes, Pallo. I know that he felt me. I saw him mouth my name. I tried to pull back from him, but he held on. He wanted to find me. He was in my room at the farmhouse looking for signs of where I'd gone. I did my best to block him from reading me and knew I failed.

"Don't come, Pallo! If my father finds out about Nicholas he'll kill you." I could feel him pushing at me trying to get inside my head—trying to find out where I was.

"No," I said out loud. Pallo's attempt at scanning my thoughts came to an end. It took me a minute to focus on Giovanni. I thought about his onyx eyes and double-dimpled smile. I thought about the countless times he'd beaten me at chess even when he tried not to. I thought about him spinning me in circles to music only he could hear. I felt my hair lift slightly and I knew he was reaching out to me.

I let my magik loose with the mission of latching onto his. It worked. It was as if someone had put a hook in the center of my chest and was pulling hard on the rope attached to it. I half-ran, half-glided across the stone floor. I came to a stop in front of another large brown door. I put my hands on it.

"I'm Gwyneth."

It opened instantly.

I stood there looking at the room, too shocked to move. At first I wasn't sure whose body was hanging before me. The hands were bound together above the person's head. The rest of the body hung loose from the chain. I walked up closer to the backside of the man and noticed right away the short black head of hair. I relaxed a little. Giovanni's hair hung to his mid-back.

I looked closer at the red skin on the man's back and realized that it wasn't skin at all. It was muscle. Someone had peeled two thick chunks of the man's skin off his back. I walked slowly around to the front of the man and stared straight up at the slumped face. I was barely able to recognize him as human. Someone had made sure that both his eyes were gouged out and there was no top lip to speak of whatsoever. I scanned the length of his body and fell to my knees when I saw the half moon tattoo on his right hip. I didn't need to look any further.

"Giovanni," I whispered, touching his leg ever so softly, scared of causing him further pain.

He didn't respond. I tried to step closer to him, but ended up moving his body and he swung from the chains. Knowing I was causing him more pain, I grabbed his leg gently and held him still. I stared up into his once beautiful face and heat flared through my body. I had to wipe my forehead and turn away to keep from throwing up on him.

"Gwen?" Caleb said, walking into the room. "Gwen, are you in here...? What the fuck?"

I didn't move from Giovanni's side. I looked back up at his face and saw his top gums and teeth fully exposed from his lip being ripped off. My gaze met Caleb's and my eyes were filled with tears. "Caleb... please."

I didn't have to ask again. Caleb tossed his hand in the air and the chains dropped to the floor. I screamed because I thought that Giovanni's body was going to come slamming down, too, it didn't. Caleb controlled his magik well and lay Giovanni down onto the floor with ease. I rushed down beside him and wanted to take his head into my lap, but I was afraid of hurting him.

Caleb came running over and bent. He ran his fingers over the spot where



Giovanni's eyes had been. "Gwen, he's gone."

I shook my head, unable to believe Giovanni was gone. "He can't be dead. They didn't pierce his heart or ...." I had a hard time saying it. "Or chop off his head."

Caleb put his hand on my shoulder. "Gwen, the person who did this was operating under orders of the King. That meant they had the power to kill him unconventionally. He'll never recover from this. Gwen, I need to ...." He sighed. "Gwen, I need to finish him off. He can't live for eternity like this."

Caleb put his hand out over Giovanni's heart. I smacked it away. "No! Get away from him now!"

"Gwen, this is what he'd want. There's no way he'd want to live like this. They took out his eyes and ...." He leaned over and examined Giovanni's mouth. "Shit, Gwen, his tongue is gone."

I turned on Caleb and stared at him. "Did you know he was here?"

"No, I'd never stand for this and you know that."

I shook my head. He was right. "Leave me alone for a minute with him, please."

"Gwen, he needs to be put out of his misery soon."

"Go!"

Caleb stood and walked out of the room. I knew he hadn't gone far, but it didn't matter. I put my hand up and threw power out at the door. It slammed shut. I leaned down and brushed back a tiny piece of the chunked black hair hanging in Giovanni's bloodied eye socket. Reaching down with my free hand, I found his hand and laced my fingers through it. He was beyond cold now and I knew Caleb was right. He was lost to me. I let the tears come freely now.

"I thought you walked out on me," I said between sobs. "I should have known, you promised not to leave and yet I still believed Pallo. I still believed him. I'm so sorry, honey." Leaning down, I kissed his forehead gently. "I can't ... oh ... God ... Giovanni it's not supposed to end this way." Anger pushed through my pain. I thought about what Caleb had said about the King giving his blessing for this. My father had ordered this? My own father had done this to the man I loved?

"No. I'm not going to let this happen. He'll pay for this. He will. They will all pay for this." I felt my power collecting itself. In my head I pictured a volcano just prior to eruption. "No, this can't be, no ... You're supposed to be here with me to tell me about Nicholas as a child. You were supposed to be the one that I could have children with. You were supposed to ...."

I couldn't hold my power back. It felt like it was ripping through my chest. I screamed as I felt like my skin was slipping away from my body—like my bones were shattering into a thousand pieces. Someone banged on the door, but I could only keep my head back and continue to scream as my power unleashed its fury outward.

The door to the room burst open and Caleb came running at me. My power grabbed at his magik. They truly were one now. He dropped to the ground and began to cry out, as well. I fought to bring it back in, to regain control. I didn't want to hurt Caleb. I wanted to hurt my father, but not Caleb.

I yanked hard on my magik and it slammed back into me with a vengeance. I fell forward and onto Giovanni's chest. My eyes were heavy and I couldn't get them open. I had no idea how much time passed before I was able to twitch my fingers, but I did. I cried against his chest, mourning the loss of him. Nothing would ever be the same. I

knew that I'd destroy all involved in this.

"*Bella?*" Giovanni said softly.

Opening my eyes wide, I didn't move. He stroked the back of my hair. I held my head to his chest and let the tears come out harder. "I can't do it. I can't let Caleb kill you."

"*Bella* ... I do not think you'll need to resort to that just yet, but I was pleased to know Caleb was willing to end my suffering"

I thought about the fact that he was talking to me and it wasn't just in my head. That meant he was alive. Pulling my head back, I stared into his face. He was whole again. His lips were full and cherry colored. His dark black eyes were staring at me with a look of love. I even noticed that his hair was back to its normal length.

"What? How? Giovanni?"

He smiled. "*Bella*, I think you have come into your full power now and I would definitely say you are a force to reckon with."

"I'll say she is," Sira said from the doorway.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Giovanni tried to sit up. His body was stiff yet and I knew it would take him a bit to regain his full strength. Caleb stirred slightly on the floor. I hadn't hurt him after all. I'd only drained him. I looked at Sira and felt my blood run cold.

She sashayed into the room, her attention going to Caleb. Leaning over, she touched his head lightly. "He will live." She stood, focused now on me. "As for you, I believe your little healing theatrics expended most of your power, so I do not think you will be as fortunate as Caleb once I am through with you."

"Sira, no... this is between you and I, not her. Leave her out ...."

"Silence!" she screamed and threw her hand out at Giovanni.

His body lifted into the air and she sent him flying backwards. He smacked the wall and moaned. He locked gazes with me. "Run!"

"Oh, she's not going anywhere. I so enjoyed the show last time around. I think we shall have a repeat performance." Sira took another step towards me and smiled. "It will be just like old times."

She looked around the room and put her finger on her lip. "Hmm, I can't control my nephew... no... I do so want to have more men to join in the games. Last time it was so much fun to watch you being raped and tortured by so many men."

Giovanni averted his gaze. That was why he didn't want to tell me about my past. It truly was as horrible as he had tried to stress it had been.

"Sira, leave Gwyneth out of this. It is I who refused to come back to your bed. It is I who chose another. She had nothing to do with that," Giovanni said, straining against the power holding him.

My jaw dropped as shock coursed through my veins. "She's the sorceress you'd been having the affair with. She's the one who you were seeing when we met?"

Giovanni nodded. "Let her go, Sira. She is Kerrigan's daughter and he will not let you live if you harm her."

A sinister smile graced her face and I knew the bitch had a plan I would not like hearing. "See there's where you're wrong. I won't be the one hurting her, you will be. It played out so well last time." She threw her hand out towards him and narrowed her eyes.

Giovanni let out a small gasp and looked down at his hip. The moon tattoo began to glow.

Sira was the reason he'd gotten it. He didn't want to fall victim to her evil again. I jumped to my feet and ran towards him. She tossed magik at me, sweeping my feet out from under me. I landed hard on my back.

"Gwyneth!" Pallo shouted. I didn't know how he'd found me and I didn't care. He was here and that was all that mattered. He could help.

"Oh, good, more able bodies," Sira said, bursting my bubble about the cavalry arriving.

"What the bloody hell kind of operation you got running here, lass?" James asked,

alerting me that he'd arrived, as well.

It was my turn to give a smile laced with hate as I stared at Sira. I pushed to my feet, pissed beyond belief.

Pallo stood there looking at me. His gaze darted to a still very unconscious Caleb and then to Giovanni. He didn't seem surprised to see him at all. The realization ran through me. He'd played a part in Giovanni's torture.

"You knew. You knew he was here." I let my accusations fly.

Pallo glanced at me quickly, but didn't answer me. Sira tossed her head back and laughed. "Of course he knew Giovanni was here. Pallo brought your father right to Giovanni. I never saw such hate in a man's eyes as when I watched Pallo rip Giovanni's tongue from his head."

I glanced at Pallo and then to James. James was staring at Pallo wide eyed, too. Clearly, he had no idea Pallo had taken part in this and that kept him on my good list. As for Pallo I didn't want him near me. I turned to Giovanni.

"Is she lying?"

Giovanni's gaze drifted to Pallo. I moved towards him. "No, don't look at him. Is she lying?"

It was Pallo who answered me. "No, Gwyneth, she is not lying. I was blinded by jealousy and concern for you. I made an error in judgment."

I laughed. An error in judgment didn't generally involve ripping someone's tongue from their head. My eyes grew cold and my lips tightened into a thin line. "Why ... why hurt him like that? Were the eyes your handy work, too?"

Pallo shook his head. "No, Sira very much wanted to do that herself. I do not know what came over me, I ...."

Sira put her hand up. "Nonsense, you looked right at him and told him that her name would never again fall from his lips. If I had known she was the one you were talking about I would have had you bring her to me. I am going to enjoy watching her die again."

Pallo made a move to come to me. I backed away and Sira tossed magik at him like she had an endless supply. Pallo's head jerked back. Giovanni struggled to break free from the nothingness that held him.

"Gwyneth ... do not let him touch you," Giovanni said, his voice sounded strained.

Sira laughed and moved her hand again. Pallo's head came forward and I expected to see his eyes to be in demon form. They weren't. He stood and walked towards me. James tried to enter the room but Sira held him at bay. James grabbed his hip and pulled his black jeans down. A matching moon tattoo was glowing on his body as well—fighting her black magik.

Pallo came to me and put his hand out. I backed up against the wall and tried to block him. "Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me. I can't believe you did that to him... you ...."

"He's not in control, Gwyneth ... she is," Giovanni said looking at Sira.

It hit me then. "She did it, she controlled you. She caused you to do what you did to me all those years ago."

"Oh and what fun I had," Sira said laughing. "Looks as though I will get to enjoy it again. I'm so very happy that you're expecting again, Gwyneth. I would hate to leave

anything out.”

My breathing was erratic. “Expecting? I’m not pregnant.” I touched my lower abdomen. “I can’t be. It’s not possible.”

Giovanni gasped and a line of Italian fell forth from him. If I had to guess, it sounded as if he was muttering a prayer.

Never a good sign when the vampire resorts to finding religion.

Pallo stopped just shy of touching me. For a second I thought that he was back in control but the faraway look in his eyes told me that he wasn’t. He advanced on me, leaving me no choice but to walk further from Giovanni.

I looked towards Giovanni, hoping for a hint as to what to do. He stared at me, his gaze skimming down my body, settling on my midriff. “A baby? You are ...?”

Sira moved across the room towards Giovanni. She put her hand out and cupped his groin in her hand. “Don’t look so surprised. She is a whore. I will do you a favor and rid you of her and the bastard the other vampire probably planted within her.”

Giovanni stared at me, a question in his eyes. Shaking my head, I glanced down at myself, still not believing what she claimed was true. “I can’t be with child. I can’t.” I’d only been with Giovanni recently.

Sira laughed. “Oh, but you can and you are. I know it’s not my nephew’s because I can sense the blood of a vampire within the fetus.” She motioned to Pallo. “It must be his.” She smiled with glee. “Pallo, let’s show Giovanni a recap of her last death, shall we? Take her!”

Pallo grabbed the back of my hair. My head jerked back and I pushed at his face. “Pallo no!”

He brought his lips over mine and his eyes changed to black. Long fangs appeared as he opened his mouth wide. I could hear James yelling for him to stop and Giovanni trying to tell me to do what I must to keep him off me. I knew that meant possibly killing Pallo, and I wasn’t willing to do that.

I touched the arm that held my hair tightly. “Please, Pallo don’t do this ... please ... you’ve carried so much hate for Giovanni for doing this to us. Don’t let her control you, too!”

He yanked harder on my hair and I cried out, grabbing his wrist and digging my nails in. Sira clapped her hands contemptuously. “Come my children, come.” She walked around to the side of Pallo and kissed his cheek. “If she speaks again, rip her tongue out. You did enjoy that so very much.”

I heard the sound of footsteps and then a voice I didn’t ever want to hear again, Malita. “Oh, Mistress, I thought I had taken care of this little problem. I ...”

Sira shot power out at her and Malita screamed. I found myself secretly rooting for Sira to rip Malita in two. I tried to see where Malita was, but Pallo pulled harder on my hair and then brought his head down hard and fast. His fangs sank deep into my body. He sucked on me hard and there was no pleasure involved in it. It was pure pain. He jerked back from me and ran his tongue out and over his bloody chin. His face came closer to mine and my breaths came in short bursts. He ran his tongue over my cheek and down my chin. His teeth sank into me again.

“Pallo, no!” I cried out, pushing to no avail against him.

Pallo came away from my neck and his face was now covered in my blood. His black eyes watched me with the look of a hunter. I looked at him as my magik began to

regain some of its strength. It wouldn't be enough to stop all of them, only one, maybe. I brought my hand up and touched Pallo's face. He bit my wrist. I screamed and fell to the ground. My face hit first and my cheekbone throbbed from the impact.

I felt my skirt being lifted high up my legs. Pallo's weight dropped onto to my back. I lifted my head up and saw Giovanni still pinned to the wall in front of me. I tried to crawl to him, but Pallo was too heavy for me to move. His hand reached into my hair and he pulled hard on my head. His lips came down next to my ear and he pressed his mouth against it.

"Do you still think fondly of him?" Pallo's voice was raspy and deep. "Tell me that you want him, tell me that you desire him and this shall all end." He pierced my earlobe with his fangs.

Malita's feet appeared before me. I grabbed her ankle and dug my fingernails into it. Her other foot came out and caught my cheek. "Tell him, bitch. Tell him how you still want Giovanni. I can taste your love for him in the air. Tell him how you love Giovanni more than him!"

Pallo flipped me over and grabbed my chin. His fingernails had grown longer than normal. They were now razor sharp. He took his right hand and put his finger on my breast bone. He dragged it down slowly, pressing hard enough to leave a welt but not hard enough to hurt me, yet.

"Gwen?" Caleb asked softly.

I couldn't see him, but I was betting that he was just stirring awake. I heard him make another small noise and then he yelled, "Gwen!"

"Shut-up, Caleb!" Sira shouted, sounding annoyed.

"Aunt Sira, what are you doing? What the hell is going on? Pallo?"

Pallo pushed his finger down on me harder now and my skin ripped open. I tried not to hurt him, but my hand flew up and caught his face. I'd hit him hard enough to turn his head, but not to knock him off of me. I tried again and he caught my hand with his, crushing my wrist under the weight of his grip.

Malita's blonde hair appeared above me. She smiled down at me. "Smells like you have something growing inside you, Gwen." She leaned down and licked my wounded neck. "I will enjoy watching him kill you slowly. He's earned this and having you pregnant only sweetens the deal for him. Tell me, is the baby his again or is it Caleb's this time?"

Caleb yelled again and I heard a loud thud. I could feel Sira's magik all around us. She laughed wickedly. "Malita, you are mistaken. I sense a vampire's energy within her. The cool undertone of a vampire's existence beats within her womb."

Malita looked down at me and then at Pallo. She lashed out and struck my face hard. "I smell the faerie. It can't be!"

Sira's power blew past me and struck Malita. "She is Fae, moron. Of course you would sense it upon her and in her unborn child. Do you think me not powerful enough to know that I sense something that is of a vampire within her?"

Malita cleared her throat. "No, mistress. I'm sorry. I was not thinking clearly. I'd never question your power."

"I would," a deep voice said from the door.

Sira gasped and I sensed her trying to pull her power back into herself. "Conlan, what... how... this is not.... how?"

I felt energy that was so familiar to my own that for a brief moment I thought it was mine move over me and to Giovanni. Pallo stared down at me and his eyes changed quickly back to brown. He saw himself holding my crushed wrist and his gaze came to my face. I had a hard time seeing him. My right eye was covered in my own blood. I could see enough to know that he had no idea what had taken place.

Sira cleared her throat. "This is just a misunderstanding. I found Malita and Pallo in here trying to kill these three and I knew they needed my help, really, Conlan. You don't think I had anything to do with this."

Caleb's eyes were wide and he was trying to speak, but nothing was coming out. She'd silenced her own nephew. She was a ruthless bitch.

Conlan moved in and stared at me. "Dear, Goddess, what have they done to you and what is this about expecting a child?"

Pallo stood slowly and lifted me. He was careful not to touch any of my injured spots but that didn't leave him a whole lot to work with. Someone moved in behind me and put their arms around me. I turned and found Giovanni standing behind me. Pallo was less than thrilled but backed away all the same.

Conlan put his hand out and stopped just before my stomach. He looked at me with his vibrant purple eyes and smiled. "May I?"

Giovanni's arms slid around me tighter and he lifted my shirt slowly. Conlan placed his hand on my stomach and his energy swept in. It moved into my abdomen and radiated up my torso to my neck, face and out my arms. My numbed broken wrist stopped throbbing. I wiggled my fingers slightly and then brought them to my neck. It was smooth again—no more bite marks, no more broken bones.

Conlan leaned over and kissed my forehead softly. "Congratulations, the baby is healthy and fine."

"What?" I asked, feeling faint. "Baby? This is a joke, right? I can't be pregnant. I haven't had sex with either of the men who are supposed to be able to give me a child." Flustered, my cheeks heated. "I mean, I have had sex with them just not in over six months. No offense, Mr. Powerful Fae Guy, but I've kind of had my monthly cycles show up since them, like clockwork and I think I'd know if I was six months pregnant. Don't you?"

Conlan laughed slightly. "Call me Conlan. It's much easier to get out than Mr. Powerful Fae Guy."

I exhaled, holding tight to Giovanni's hand. "Conlan, you don't understand. I can't be with child. I've only been with Giovanni and he isn't my mate."

Conlan's brow furrowed. "According to who?"

Giovanni and I both responded with a, "Huh?"

Smiling, Conlan kept his hand on my lower stomach. "The baby is healthy and strong. She's young yet but strong. Like her mother and," he looked past me at Giovanni, "her father."

Stunned, I stared at him. "But I don't respond to him." I blinked. "I mean, I do respond to him but my eyes don't shift colors like they do with ...."

Putting a hand up, Conlan silenced me. "Gwen, you have lived two lives, both of which were shrouded in lies and magik. I fear my brother's desire to see you mated to a Fae has twisted things to the point it's hard to see the truth of the matter."

"Which is?" Giovanni asked, holding me closer to him.

Conlan locked gazes with him. “That you were and have always been Gwyneth’s soul-mate.”

I drew in a sharp breath.

Conlan continued, “Kerrigan sensed as much and had no choice but to send you to watch over Gwyneth when she was just a child. He came to me, asking for my assistance in a spell to keep either of you from sensing the truth until you were of age, Gwyneth. I agreed.” He sighed. “I found out later that Kerrigan had other plans. He wasn’t completely truthful with me in gaining my assistance. By the time I learned he had no intention of allowing a vampire to claim you, it was too late. You were already dead.”

Giovanni’s long fingers caressed my lower stomach gently. “Non, I do not believe what you tell me. I would have known. I would have ...”

“I think you did know, Giovanni,” Conlan said matter-of-factly. “You swept into her life the moment she began to get serious with Caleb. You whisked her away and I believe you would have produced a child had we not tampered with fate. By helping my brother block what was natural for the two of you, I unknowingly gave him access to one of my specialties.”

Caleb gasped. “You’re a life giver. You can repair and create most anything—especially anything to do with fertility.” He let out a long, drawn out breath. “Shit. Kerrigan harnessed your ability and twisted it, assuring Giovanni and Gwen couldn’t reproduce.” He shook his head. “But what about Pallo?”

Conlan glanced in Pallo’s direction. “I believe Gwyneth’s power was so strong that she would have repaired the broken connection with Giovanni, in time, had Sira not interfered at the end. If I had to guess, and I do, Gwyneth’s power latched onto a man she found similarities to Giovanni in—Pallo.”

I swallowed hard. “This isn’t happening. It’s a trick ... like when the enchantress used me as a vessel.”

Caleb shook his head. “Gwen, it’s no trick. If Conlan says you’re pregnant and Giovanni is the father, then you are. I just don’t understand why we react to one another in this lifetime if you’re still his mate and not either of ours.” He motioned to Pallo.

Conlan stopped touching my stomach and faced Caleb. “Think hard, Caleb. Who would want to assure you’re mated to her?”

“My mother,” he said.

I shook my head. “My father.”

Conlan glanced at me and smiled. “You’re right. While I don’t doubt Sorcha would very much like to see her son mated to the King’s daughter, even she would not tamper with soul-mates. Even Sorcha has her limitations. Kerrigan, however, does not.”

I let the information soak in and stared at Caleb. “All this time it’s been my father controlling us. He was responsible for that lust spell and for what happened when we first met again.”

Caleb seemed to think upon what I was saying. “It’s his magik I feel pressing down on me when I’m near Gwen, making me forget anything but her. It’s his power controlling our actions and making us receptive to mating.”

“I’m going to kill him,” I said, my voice low.

Conlan shook his head. “Gwyneth, he loves you dearly and is misguided. He has it in his mind that in order for you to be safe, you must be married to a full-blooded Fae.”

“Don’t defend him,” I snapped, making Conlan take a step back. “The man has



used us as pawns from day one. He's twisted our lives and ...."

"Shhh," Giovanni whispered, kissing my neck. "I do not want this moment marred with hate."

"This moment?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at him.

He locked gazes with me. "Yes, Gwyneth. The moment when my heart finally felt full for the first time in all my centuries of life." He glanced down the length of my body. "The moment I learned miracles do happen ... that I was wrong ... I can give you a family and the life you deserve."

Emotions welled in me as the reality of it all set in. "Ohmygod, I'm pregnant. We're pregnant!" Turning, I tossed my arms around his neck.

Laughing, Giovanni lifted me off my feet and kissed me passionately. As he set me down, he bent, continuing our kiss. "*Bella*, I have a request."

"Anything," I said, my lips tingling from our kiss.

"I would like it very much if you would not see any other men," he glanced at Caleb, "not even your faerie. I want you to myself for all eternity. I know I told you I would be open and willing to share you if it meant keeping you but ..."

Pressing my finger to his lips, I shook my head. "Stop. I'm yours, Giovanni. Yours and yours alone from now until eternity. I don't care what my father wants for me. Caleb doesn't want to be married to me anymore than I do to him."

"What of your Pallo?"

My chest tightened. "I honestly don't know, but I can tell you that you feel right. Like you're the only man I'm supposed to love."

He smiled. "Good to know."

I glanced at Conlan and was mesmerized by his violet eyes. The harder I stared at them, the more I thought about the painting Pallo had of the two of us hanging in his home. It depicted me with the same colored eyes in my past life. It was of him and me by a riverbank. Holding each other and looking into each other's eyes. The thing that had stuck most with me was that my eyes had been violet, the same color purple as Conlan's. I thought of my dream with my mother in it. She had confessed to loving more than one man. Had she loved the brothers?

Conlan smiled at me and took my hand in his. "I sense none of myself in you now. Only that which an uncle and a niece would share, but at one time, I sensed so much more of me in you and Kerrigan, as well. Somehow, Lydia had been impregnated by us both. When you came Kerrigan could not acknowledge you and he refused to accept it when I told him I believed that I, too, was your father. He sent me off to lead the wars against the ogres. I was forbidden from seeing you."

Caleb stepped forward. "It's true. I know it is. Gwen, you used to be able to sense things, much the same way Conlan does. You ... you knew the second that Pallo had gotten you pregnant that you were with child and once I even watched you touch a dead butterfly and bring it back to life. Fairies can heal people, but only a few can heal animals. Kerrigan can't bring animals back from the dead. His brother can."

Conlan glanced at Pallo and Caleb. "A child is no small undertaking. It cannot be born among fighting and hate. It must be loved and cherished by its uncles. You both must set aside your differences with Giovanni and understand he did not harm her of his own free will. Had he been freed to do as was destined, he would have made her his wife long ago and they would be celebrating hundreds of years together, with many children

of their own.”

Something he’d said earlier sunk in. “Wait, you called her a she.”

Conlan smiled. “I did.”

Giovanni held me to him and kissed the top of my head. “A daughter to add to our ...”

He stopped and I stared up at him. “Nicholas? Is he...?”

James stirred. I stared down at him and smiled. “What’d I miss?” he asked. He touched his head. “That bitch packs a wallop.”

“Speaking of that bitch,” Conlan said. “Where did she go?”

“And where is Malita?”

Pallo cleared his throat. “I will go in search of them.”

I locked gazes with him. “Take your time. I’m still disgusted with you. You tore his tongue out, Pallo. That’s sick!”

“You are free of me, Gwyneth.” He pointed to Conlan. “If what he says is true then you have no ties to me any longer. It would seem I was sired by mistake.” His tone was mocking and harsh.

I glared at him. “You were caught up in the web of lies, same as the rest of us, Pallo. If you’d prefer the alternative--you know--the one where you’re mortal and dead by now, I’m sure I can find someone to kill you.”

He huffed and walked away.

Giovanni stepped past me, reaching for him. “Pallo, Nicholas is the child Gwyneth carried long ago.”

Pallo stiffened and bent his head, letting out a somber laugh. “You are two hundred years too late with the news, Giovanni. You see, he hates me and has for two centuries.”

“That does nothing to change the fact that he is your biological son.” Giovanni put his hand on Pallo’s shoulder. “You have always been full of so much rage. Let some of it go long enough to see that his temper is yours. That his ability to hold a grudge is yours, as well.”

Pallo looked back at Giovanni. “That may be so but it is you he calls father.” He glanced at me. “It would appear you have it all.”

Conlan stepped in, pulling Pallo’s attention to him. “Do you honestly believe you were sired by mistake? Do you think the Fates have no plan for you? That they assured you would be immortal for nothing more than fun?”

The silence on the part of Pallo spoke volumes.

Conlan lifted his hand. In it, a tiny speck of silver seemed to radiate light. “If you truly believe your life and death have no meaning, walk away and never look back. If you believe as I do, that everything happens for a reason, take what I offer.”

“And what it is you offer?” Pallo asked.

“Hope,” Conlan said flatly.

I wasn’t buying it. There was more to the story for sure.

Pallo apparently wasn’t biting on it either. “You expect me to believe you carry hope in the palm of your hand and all of this ... the events of my life can be spun to find a positive with nothing more than a play of light in your hands?”

“Yes,” Conlan answered.

Pallo made another move to go for the door but stopped, turning and reaching for

the silver light. The minute he touched it, he tipped his head back and hissed, before looking at Conlan, his eyes reflecting silver.

Conlan nodded. "Now you understand she truly exists."

I almost asked who they were talking about but Giovanni picked up on my curious ways and whispered in my ear, "The one he is meant for, Gwyneth."

Tears came to my eyes and I nodded. "Good. She better damn well treat him like he's a god because he's been through so much. If she dares to break his heart, I'll strangle her."

Laughing, Giovanni kissed my cheek. "I believe he can handle things himself."

Caleb walked to Pallo and embraced him in a rather manly hug. "Good on you, old friend."

Pallo returned the hug, still looking shaken by whatever he'd seen when he touched the silver light.

Conlan held the light out to Caleb. "Would you like hope, as well?"

Grinning, Caleb shook his head. "Nope. I think I'll just let nature play its course, but thanks. I had a sneak peek once before and to be honest, look where it got me."

I snorted.

"The offer always stands," Conlan said before closing his hand.

James tipped his head. "Do I not warrant a glimpse myself?"

Conlan gave him a look I couldn't read fully but it certainly was mischievous.

"No. It is best you not see."

"Says the bloke who can summon hope from the ether," James mumbled with a huff.

Caleb and Conlan went another few rounds with Conlan attempting to get him to look at what he held. In the meantime, James inched his way closer to Conlan. I knew James well enough to know what he was up to. He was going to touch hope if he had to tackle someone to do it.

Giovanni pressed his lips to my ear. "He is a moron. You are aware of this, right?"

"Totally, but he's an adorable moron. Don't you think?"

"No. Adorable never once came to mind."

Conlan glanced back at James and James thrust his hands into his pockets and whistled a merry tune, looking up at the ceiling.

Groaning, I covered my eyes, not wanting to look at how obvious James was being, but I found myself peeking all the same.

The second Conlan turned his back to James, James reacted, jumping up and tapping the silver light in Conlan's hand. "Ah-ha!" he yelled only to hiss and jerk away fast. James' gaze locked firmly on my stomach and his eyes widened. "Bloody hell! You're taking the piss! No way is ... Giovanni will rip my balls off and shove them up my arse before he ever lets me near his daughter."

Gasping, I covered my mouth. "I knew it! I told you once before that I was positive we were meant to be family that's why we bonded the way we did. I knew it!"

True to James' prediction, Giovanni went at him but I caught him around the waist. "Stop!"

"He is not setting foot near our daughter. Do you honestly want someone like James to be whom our daughter ...."

I cupped his face. "Yes. And so do you. Think about it. He loves life and he's fun, Giovanni. He's also got a heart of gold. James is powerful. More powerful than any of you give him credit for and he's never made a play to take you out of the running and become a master himself. He's a great man. One you should be proud to know will be there for our daughter someday when she needs him most."

He didn't appear convinced. His gaze went to Pallo. "Do not let him near us. I will not have him fawning over a baby."

Conlan laughed. "Have no fear, Giovanni. I learned the hard way that supernatural males need nothing in the way of a spell to prevent them from acting indecently with their mate. They have an inborn switch that simply shuts off the moment they encounter their mate before she is of age. Depending upon the era and the culture, the switch will not flip back on until it is socially acceptable for them to be a mated pair. Though, he will be very protective of her always, even when she is growing within Gwyneth."

I took Giovanni's hand in mine. "He's exactly who I'd want her to be with. Please be happy for him. And, look at it this way, because James is who he is, you already know him so you don't have to worry about her bringing home someone like you."

His mouth dropped open. "I am not that bad! I would be ...." He paled.

I grinned. "Horried if she brought home an ex-henchman for the King of the Dark Realm and a Master vampire whose very name strikes fear in most."

He looked at James. "No encouraging her to dye her hair bizarre colors. No drunken orgies. No sex period. Ever. No touching her ever."

I gave James a sympathetic look. "I'll work on him. We have a little bit yet."

"Yes." Conlan laughed. "Eighteen years for the idea to grow on him before she does everything she can to defy him in order to be with the man she will be born to love. Correct me if I am wrong but was that not what the two of you did? Did you not permit Gwyneth to defy her father and run off with you?"

Giovanni cursed repeatedly in Italian making Pallo laugh.

Conlan pointed at him. "Watch what you find funny, Pallo. I have foreseen children in your future. Multiple children. You will be in need of Giovanni's guidance in the area of raising a daughter in the midst of supernatural males. You do not see it now, but one day, all of you will be very close, as will your families."

Caleb took a step back. "Don't go aiming that wishing daughters upon me. Uh-uh. Just sons. I'm not spending the rest of my life constantly worrying about men touching them. Not happening. I'll take six sons before I take one daughter. I'm not a fool. I know Gwyneth and if the King of the Dark Realm has issues controlling his daughter, what the hell makes me think I can do any better with one of my own?"

We laughed.

Conlan stared at him. "Careful what you wish for, Caleb."

"That or be damn happy you're not on Giovanni's hit list for the next eighteen years," James added, keeping his distance from Giovanni.

Conlan glanced at Giovanni. "Stop worrying. Not only will she be born healthy and happy, she will not be what you hate most about yourself, Giovanni. She will be your little angel, always. It could be worse, you know."

"In what way?" Giovanni glared at James, who looked downright terrified.

“Your daughter could be destined for ...” He looked at Pallo. “Explaining why it was her father sired the man and her mother... well... it could be much worse.”

“Ol’ violet eyes has a point,” James offered. “Though, I’d like to be the first to put in a request to have the torch passed to Pallo. At least he and Giovanni would hold true to form and keep trying to kill each other then.”

“Do not fear, James.” Conlan winked. “Your mate has many adoptive uncles. They’ll want to kill you, as well. Should make for a fun time for you. I know how much you like pushing the buttons of those around you.”

James cringed.

My stomach fluttered and the silver light in Conlan’s hand grew bigger, taking him by surprise, too. “Gwyneth?”

“I-I’m not doing it.”

Giovanni slid his arms around my stomach. “Wonderful, already my daughter takes after her mother, acting out at will.” He chuckled.

The silver light grew even larger. We all stood in awe as it filled with an image of Pallo with a little girl who looked to be around the age of four on his lap. She had on a yellow dress, her jet-black, straight hair was long and in a ponytail. Her obsidian eyes were wide as she stared at Pallo’s hand as he did a magik trick for her, making her giggle. “Do it again, Uncle Pallo! Again!”

He repeated it, the smile on his face huge, bigger than I could ever remember seeing it. He laughed as she jolted then giggled. She clapped her hands and gave him a serious look. “Bravo.”

Pallo laughed long and hard before kissing the top of her head. She twisted and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Tell me again, the story ‘bout how I got my name. Tell me ‘bout how you saw me in a v-v...”

“Vision,” he supplied.

She nodded emphatically. “Yes. Vision. Tell me about how you saw me with you and how you just said my name out loud and Mommy and Daddy knew it was what my name should be.”

Pallo watched the image playing out. “Sophie,” he said softly.

Giovanni hugged me tightly and I knew then that Pallo had just helped us name her.

The image kept going. The little girl touched his dimpled chin. “Are you my other daddy? Like my brother? He has two. You and Daddy. Are you my other one?”

“Non, Sophie,” the Pallo in the vision said. “I am not your step-father, as your father is to Nicholas.”

She stuck her bottom lip out and fat tears dripped down her cheek. “I want two daddies, too. Why does Nick get to have two?” She crossed her arms over her chest. “He gets to stay up late, too. Daddy never makes him take a bath and then get in bed. He never makes him stop getting his clothes dirty right after Mommy puts him in a dress. Wait!” She tugged her lower lip. “He doesn’t wear dresses but if he did, I don’t think Daddy would make him be good and sit still until the company left before he could run around again. See. You should be my other daddy.”

Pallo fought laughter. “And why is that, Sophie?”

“Because all I gotta do is this.” She batted her long thick black lashes at him before giving him a quick peck on the cheek. “And you let me have my way. Mommy

said you're not nearly as mean and ferocious as you think you are. She said you and Uncle Caleb and Uncle Caradoc and Uncle Mikhail are tied around my pinky fingers." She blew out a long breath. "I told her you're too big to fit around my little fingers."

He laughed harder. "Your mother may be on to something. Tell me, Sophie, where does James fit into all of this?"

She gave him a look, saying she didn't understand.

Just then, James entered the image. His hair was bright green. Pallo looked up at him. "What did you do to your head?"

"Stood on his head in the grass," Sophie said with all seriousness. "That's what he told Daddy. Then James fell over but nothing was there to push him. It was strange. Like Uncle James."

James cringed. "Not uncle, pet."

She arched a brow. "Brother James?"

"No, duck. Not brother either."

She smiled wide. "Daddy James!"

James paled considerably. "Bloody hell, no!"

"Bloody hell, no, duck," Sophie said mimicking his accent exactly.

Pallo laughed and tipped his head back. "Giovanni, James is teaching Sophie to curse."

Sophie covered her eyes.

"What are you doing?" Pallo asked.

"Not looking. Daddy's gonna kill James. I can't watch."

Pallo laughed harder.

"Uncle Pallo," she said sweetly, batting her eyes.

"Yes?"

"Can you make sure Daddy doesn't kill James? I think his head looks like grass but other than that, I don't want Daddy to really hurt him. Pretty please?"

Pallo lifted her gently and set her on the table before standing and catching Giovanni a second before he would have grabbed James.

"Let me go."

"I was asked nicely to keep you from injuring him." Pallo glanced at Sophie.

Giovanni in turn looked down at her. "What has James taught you to say, Sophie?"

She got an innocent look on her face. "He told me to say that you're the bestest daddy ever and that it's good I love you lots and lots."

Pallo roared with laughter. "Oh, you are your mother's daughter!"

"Of course I am. Who else's daughter would I be, Uncle Pallo? You're silly." She stopped and then squealed. "Uncle Caleb is here! I want to see the twins! I want to see the twins!"

The image faded away and we all stood, staring at one another. Caleb swayed and caught himself on the wall. "Twins? Tell me I was babysitting for someone."

Conlan merely laughed.

Pallo turned, his gaze meeting Giovanni's. "Your daughter will be precious." He said something else, in Italian and they shocked the living hell out of me by moving to one another, embracing quickly, then backing away from one another.

I took Giovanni's hand in mine and exhaled slowly. For the moment, nothing

else mattered. Our enemies faded from my mind, our differences washed away and our torrid pasts meant nothing. All that mattered was that, for this very minute, we were all friends and all on the same page.

Peace was at the end of a rocky road, one I knew we'd all only just begun to travel.

## Epilogue

My father stood before us, his look somber but better than it had been when I unleashed about three hours worth of tongue-lashings upon him. Clearing his throat, he took my hand in his before looking out and over the gathered crowd. "Six moon cycles ago, I promised you a wedding. A wedding is what I am delivering to you." He glanced to my right, his gaze meeting Giovanni's. "Though the groom has changed. He is who should rightfully be here."

Hushed murmurs echoed through the oversized hall. The minute my father put his hand up, everyone fell silent.

He looked at me but spoke to everyone. "Giovanni and I were close friends at one point in time. I hope, for the sake of my daughter, that we find that place again."

I teared up.

Giovanni took my hand in his and brought it to his lips, kissing it gently. "We will, Kerrigan."

Nodding, my father drew upon his power, coating us in it as he began to speak in ancient Fae. I didn't understand what he was saying, but Giovanni did. He squeezed my hand tighter, giving me an encouraging look. For a split second, it felt like something within me shattered.

I gasped and reached for Giovanni with my free hand. He caught it and dragged me against him, whispering softly, "Kerrigan has broken the bonds he forced upon you, Caleb and Pallo. He freed your soul so that it may be mine fully, *Bella mia*."

I looked at my father and nodded, tears streaking my cheeks. "T-thank you."

He winked. "I am not done yet, Gwyneth. You do still wish to marry him, right?"

"Oh." I squared my shoulders. "Yes."

The crowd laughed.

Chuckling, my father leaned in close to us. "Did neither of you feel the need to tell me I am to be a grandfather?"

"Actually," I said, thinking of Nicholas. "You've been one for about two hundred years or so."

His eyes widened and Giovanni put his hand up, whispering to my father so low even I couldn't hear. My father gasped. "Truly? He is?" He looked out and over the crowd, his gaze landing on Nicholas. "Come forward, Nicholas Baldassare."

Reluctantly, Nicholas obeyed. He came to a stop next to me, his arm coming around me in a protective manner.

My father smiled wide. "This, indeed, is a joyous day. It is the day I offer my daughter's hand in marriage to a man who will always love and honor her." He looked at Giovanni. "And it is a day I publicly acknowledge my grandson, Nicholas. He is under my protection now. To harm him or..." Kerrigan motioned to my stomach. "His younger sibling, will be considered an act of war."

I lost it then, crying so hard that a hiccupped sob came from me. I went at my



father, tossing my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

Giovanni and Nicholas had to pry me off him. Nicholas nudged me. "If I call him Pops, will you laugh and stop crying. Seeing you upset makes me want to hit shit, erm, stuff."

The crowd laughed again.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I can't help it."

All the men around me looked down at my stomach. "Hormones," they mouthed.

Giovanni took my hands in his. "My King, if you would do the honors of cementing my claiming upon Gwyneth it would make calming her down much easier and perhaps salvage body parts she may unintentionally rip off should her mood head south."

Tipping his head back, my father roared with laughter.

So did Nicholas.

Once they were done, my father proceeded with the ceremony. It was done in ancient Fae so I got about none of it, but it didn't take a genius to figure out when he'd gotten to the part where Giovanni and I were officially wed according to Fae law because Giovanni grabbed me to him, his lips crashing down on mine. His kiss was explosive. I ate at his mouth and ran my hands over his shoulders to the back of his neck.

Vaguely, I heard someone clearing their throat but I ignored them. It wasn't until Nicholas actually pried Giovanni and me apart that I realized my father was there, looking incredibly uncomfortable. I gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

"I'm not," Giovanni said, yanking me back to him, kissing me tenderly. When he broke the kiss, he turned us to face the crowd.

My father put his hands on our shoulders. "I now give you Mr. and Mrs. Giovanni Baldassare. Or, the Princess and her husband."

The crowd roared, clapping and standing for us as Giovanni kept hold of me, walking down the center aisle. I scanned the audience for Caleb and Pallo but found no sign of them. It wasn't until we were at the back of the hall, near the doors that I found them standing side by side, waiting for us. Ken was there, as well.

The three men pulled me into their embrace and then took turns shaking Giovanni's hand. When it came time for Pallo to shake, he punched out fast, going for Giovanni's jaw.

Giovanni caught Pallo's hand in mid-motion. "I take that to mean you are not offering your blessing to me?"

"Oh ...." Pallo narrowed his brown gaze on Giovanni. "I planned to offer it after I hit you."

"I see," Giovanni said, releasing Pallo's hand.

Pallo looked down at me, his expression softening. "It has always been my wish for you to find happiness, Gwyneth." He stared at my stomach. "Sophie will be as amazing as her mother and ...." He nodded to Caleb, Ken and the three stooges to his right—James, Caradoc and Mikhail, "guarded always."

"Thank you, Pallo," I said, hugging him again. I kissed his cheek. "That means a lot to me. You mean a lot to me." And he did.

James, Caradoc, and Mikhail were next to approach. Caradoc embraced me tightly, lifting me off my feet. If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn he sniffled. When Mikhail hugged me, he turned me in a circle. "Take care of him always, Gwen. He doesn't hand his heart to just anyone."

“Aside from reincarnated lovers and deranged sorceresses, you mean.” I winked. He laughed and set me down gently. “Speaking of deranged sorceresses.”

“You found her?”

“No.” He glanced at Pallo and Caleb. “But we did track Malita down.”

My smile widened.

Caleb took hold of my hands. “Mikhail and Pallo wanted to wrap her head up and give it to you as a wedding present. I trumped that.”

“She would have enjoyed it more than cookware,” Pallo said with a grunt.

Mikhail snorted. “So would I.”

I kept hold of Caleb’s hands and teared up. He bent, pressing a chaste kiss to my lips. “None of that, Gwen. Did you feel it? Did you feel Kerrigan breaking the bonds that should have never been?”

I nodded, too emotional to speak.

Caleb kissed me again and Giovanni cleared his throat. “I have a fondness for you Faerie but do not think you can continue making out with my wife and live to tell the tale.”

His wife.

Hearing it made me cry harder.

Caradoc looked at Giovanni. “Master, you broke her.”

Caleb smiled, running his finger over my cheek. “No, Caradoc. These are happy tears. Plus, I think her hormones are out of muck with the pregnancy.”

“If one more person blames my hormones for my tears I’m going to ....”

Giovanni wrapped an arm around me. “*Bella*, no killing the wedding guests.”

That made me laugh.

James approached slowly, his blue gaze wide and locked on my stomach. He walked clear around Giovanni, making Pallo and Caleb snicker. When he got to me, he leaned in to hug me but kept a large distance between our bodies, leaving his fingers barely brushing my shoulders.

“James?”

“Yes, luv?” he asked, his voice squeaking.

“What are you doing?”

“Hugging you,” he replied

“Uh, this isn’t a hug.”

Caradoc cracked a smile and it caught me off guard. “He fears rubbing against your stomach in any way. Perhaps he thinks it is catchy.”

“Or he’s scared he’ll bump Gwen’s stomach and end up impotent until Sophie is of age to accept him.”

“And,” Mikhail lifted a dark brow, “who gave him that idea?”

Caleb pursed his lips and shrugged, doing his best to look as if he’d had nothing to do with it.

Pallo flashed a bit of fang. “Or, he fears Giovanni will kill him for being near his child, even if she is still within her mother’s womb.”

Ken laughed. “Look at the kid. It’s all of the above.”

Someone touched my shoulder and I found Nicholas there. He and Pallo were now standing face to face. I looked at Nicholas. No words were spoken between them and that was probably best. I did however catch the telltale sound of Nicholas growling

before Pallo's eyes swirled quickly with flecks of red and black before returning to chocolate brown.

Guess it was too much to hope all would be blissful and right in the world, even if only for an hour. Giovanni led me out away from everyone and into the corridor. He stared down at me, his gaze intense. "*Bella*, the reception will begin in a few hours. Of course, for the guests, it starts sooner. I believe your father has the Ballet of the Damned set to perform for them prior to our arrival.

"Do I even want to know what they do? It doesn't involved dancing on rotting corpses does it?"

"Rotting?" He shook his head. "No. That would leave a smell."

I did my best not to laugh as he walked me through the castle corridors, holding my hand, knowing the place well. "Giovanni, where are we going?"

"To your room." He licked his lower lip. "I only have you to myself for a few hours. Hardly seems long enough."

I grinned. "Mr. Foreplay, a few hours is likely to kill me."

Dragging me into my room, he laughed as he began yanking his ceremonial robes off, casting them aside, revealing his designer attire beneath. He made quick work of it as I shut the door. I locked it and Giovanni spun me around gently, his fingers going to the straps of my black wedding dress.

I know. I know. White.

It wasn't like I didn't make a play for it but you trying to talk the King of Darkness into a white wedding. I was damn lucky my father gave on the releasing of doves in place of bats.

"*Bella*," Giovanni whispered, his mouth finding mine. I moaned against him, my hands roaming over his steely chest.

He eased my dress down, exposing my breasts to him. A Cheshire cat smile spread over his handsome face. "They are getting bigger."

"Like that, huh?"

"Very much." He bent before me, capturing a nipple in his mouth. He sucked, making my body tingle before he showered kisses down my stomach. He stared up at me as he inched my dress over my hips. A silly look came over him.

"Giovanni?"

"Three hundred years, *Bella*. That is how long our engagement was. I thought this moment would never come. Words cannot ...." He choked up and I bent, too.

"I love you." I tugged, trying to convince him to the go to the floor with me.

He refused to, choosing instead to sweep me up and off my feet. My dress pooled on the floor. He carried me to the oversized bed. "The floor is no place for you, *Bella*."

I kissed his jaw line.

"*Ti amo*," he whispered, laying me out before him, spreading my legs wide before thrusting into me.

I cried out and clung to his shoulders, surprised he'd skipped the foreplay.

For you, *Bella*, I am willing to do anything. But you should know I fully intend to have my way with you many times over before we head down to the guests.

I stiffened. "Giovanni?"

"Our souls are linked now, Gwyneth. As are our minds. Forever."

Pressing my lips to his, I knew I'd found my Prince Charming, my fairytale

ending.

## THE END

Mandy M. Roth loves hearing from readers. You can read more about her other New Concept titles by visiting [www.mandyroth.com](http://www.mandyroth.com) or send by emailing [mandy@mandyroth.com](mailto:mandy@mandyroth.com).

Excerpt from THE GUARDIANS by Mandy M. Roth, available from New Concepts Publishing.

## Chapter One

I propped my feet up on the Formica table and leaned back in my chair to see if Brady was done filming his scene yet. He was already running an hour and a half behind schedule. Typical, but it still pissed me off. Since he was my ride home, I was stuck. I didn't really mind. I'd also come prepared with things to do while I waited. Watching him work was rather amusing. It was especially funny when he and his co-star didn't see eye to eye as was the case now.

The skinny redhead in front of him was having trouble getting into the "zone" in regards to chemistry. She was supposed to look like she couldn't get enough of Brady in a sensual, erotic sort of way. That hadn't happened as of yet. Instead, she was coming across as a giddy teenage girl who might faint at the slightest bit of attention from him. Sadly, I think that's exactly what she was.

Every time Brady moved in to her to say his lines, she giggled. I wanted to buy her an ice cream cone and the newest heartthrob magazine before sending her on her merry way. Yeah, I was that annoyed with her. It didn't help she'd started aggravating me about forty minutes earlier, leaving me no choice but to do mischievous magikal things to her from afar. Since I didn't have to actually lay a hand on her, I looked innocent. Only Brady knew what I was doing. He was the only person present who was aware I was more than human. Each time I zapped the redhead, he laughed so hard they had to restart the scene. His running behind might have had something to do with my shenanigans but it was so much easier to point the finger of blame in another direction.

David, the director, yelled "cut" and announced another break. At this rate, we'd be spending the night at the studio. The lights came on and the set cleared almost instantly. I couldn't blame the crew for being in a hurry, I was a little sick of it all too. Though, shocking the redhead did make me giddy.

Brady grabbed his long-sleeved, white cotton shirt and tossed it on, not bothering to button it. The solid wall of tawny muscle left showing made me do a slight double-take. He was certainly a fine specimen. That much was for sure.

He nodded towards me. His tousled blond hair was purposely messy, styled in one of those shorter cuts, leaving the top about two inches long and the sides and back

cut close. Brady's hair routine consisted of pouring a glop of gel in his hands and running them through his hair. That was it. Anything above that was primping in his book and just wasn't done.

Sadly enough, our rituals weren't altogether that different. I tended to avoid the gel and just let my hair air dry. I had little room to comment on his laziness. Especially since most people assumed I was high maintenance.

As he neared, I spotted smudged lipstick on his face and laughed. Leaning forward, I grabbed my red handbag and tossed it to him. "Catch, Casanova."

Brady wrinkled his nose and sighed. "Is it bad?"

Looking up into his blue eyes, I snickered. We'd been through enough of these types of scenes to know he was covered in lipstick. "It sort of looks like you've been attacked by an entire team of Great-Aunt Ednas, who all took turns laying one on you, but it could be worse." I snorted. "They really should take that off her. It doesn't do a thing for her. Light peach would have been a perfect color for her. It wouldn't show so bad on you and it'd bring out her eyes."

Brady chuckled and opened my handbag. "You know, when you go all girlie you make me wonder how we ended up friends." Reaching into my bag, his eyes widened and the color drained from his face as he pulled out a handful of condoms. "Madelyn?"

I grinned. "Yes?"

"What are these?"

"Brady, you of all people, know what those are. Don't even pretend like you don't sleep with every girl who throws herself at you."

The thick muscles in his neck worked overtime as he appeared to have momentary issues swallowing. I considered patting his back but held back. "Uhh, Mads, I thought you and Vance were taking some time apart?"

Flashing him a bad girl smile, I stood slowly. It felt good to stretch after sitting for so long. "We are on, if you'll recall, what Vance likes to refer to as a break and I like to call broken up, because he did what...?" Tipping my head, I put my hand out to Brady, prompting him to take a guess.

Brady gave me the "I really don't want to discuss this look" and grabbed a tissue out of my bag. "Because he cheated on you."

"With how many women?"

"Two," he sighed before tapping a condom package, "at the same time."

"Ding, ding. We have a winner." Taking my bag from him, I tossed it aside and put my hand out. A woman's touch was needed. Brady relinquished the tissue and stood still. I moved in close and went to work on cleaning him up. I thought about putting my mule heels back on. They gave me an additional two inches of height. Not that I normally needed any more but Brady was six-four and I was five-nine. Compared to many women I knew, I was tall. Compared to Brady, I wasn't.

Tilting his head to the side, I cleaned his cheek before going to work on his neck. I wrinkled my nose as I found something wet and slimy on him. "Gawd, did she drool on you too? This is ridiculous." Grinning, I added my own saliva to the mix by spitting on the tissue before going back to the task at hand. Surprisingly enough, Brady wasn't fazed.

"Tell me about it." Brady shifted, not seeming pleased in the least. "So far today, I've been pushed off a building so many times I lost count and pawed by a girl who

barely looks legal.”

I laughed and finished wiping him. “You noticed that too, huh?”

“Yeah.” The look on his face said he wasn’t happy about the age thing. It was surprising because I’d have guessed most men in their late twenties would be all over a hot little redhead wanting them regardless of her age. Guess I was wrong. Though, Brady wasn’t like most men I knew.

“Her file says she’s nineteen. I don’t see it.”

Brady grabbed my wrist and held it gently. “Been peeking in Daddy’s files again, I see.”

“Yep.” Bending over, I reached for my shoes and stilled as I felt Brady’s hand on my ass. “Why, exactly, are you touching me?”

“Uhh, you had something on the back of your jeans. It’s gone now.”

Right. So much for my theory on him not being like most men.

I slipped my shoes on and began the fun task of cleaning up my area. “So, how long do you think we’ll be here tonight?” I asked, tossing my books back in my bag. My Ancient Civilizations class was killing my GPA and I was sick of staring at the text book.

He shrugged. “A while yet. Do you want me to send for a car?”

“Nah, my movie star roommate isn’t home yet and since the house is huge, I get lost often.” I’d have laughed but it was true. I still got a bit turned around and I’d lived there with Brady for two years now.

Brady smiled wide and nodded. “This guy must be a real winner, leaving you alone to fend for yourself.”

Pushing past him, I headed towards the sound system behind the backdrop. I turned it on and selected random play. The first MP3 kicked on and I laughed. Typical Brady music came blaring out—classic rock. “My roommate’s not so bad. Though he does have the worst taste in music.”

Turning to look back at Brady, I gasped and backed up when I found him standing directly behind me. He had the uncanny ability to sneak up on me. As much as I trusted Brady, it was still a bit unnerving. Part of my life left me utilizing my skills and being on guard at all times. The fact I let it go, dropping my natural shields for Brady, meant something. What, I wasn’t sure quite yet.

He took hold of my waist and steadied me. “I love catching you by surprise, Mads.”

I smacked his rock hard, six pack abs with the back of my hand. The man was muscled perfection at its finest. “Yeah, well I hate it. One of these days I’m going to level your butt.” Sadly enough, I meant every word I said. It would be accidental, I’m sure of it, but it would happen.

“Are you going to start tossing magik at me, too?” he asked, his blue gaze raking over me. “I almost begged you to electrocute the barely legal girl.”

“Hey, I zapped her in the rump at least four times. Maybe more. Those were for you by the way. I noticed she kept grabbing your backside and you kept pulling her hand off. If you’d rather I didn’t toy with her. I’ll stop.”

His eyes widened as I reached up and hit the search button on the sound system. “No. Please feel free to do whatever you want to her, Mads. She’s purposely delaying the scene and it’s pissing me off. Why the hell they picked her is beyond me. We obviously don’t connect.”

"You better start connecting real soon, Brady. She's your romantic lead. So in between things blowing up and you kicking the bad guys' asses, you have to look like you can't get enough of her." I gave him a droll look. "Currently, you're coming across as not being able to get far enough away from her."

"That would be because I can't get far enough away from her. Trust me, I've tried." He ran a hand through his hair and then over his squared jaw. He scratched his neck and yawned, proving what I already knew, he was tired. It had been a long day, full of action packed scenes and endless retakes, not to mention his lack of enthusiasm over the redhead. All things considered, Brady had the right to be a bit worn around the edges. As his best friend, I had the right to try to cheer him up.

I headed towards the set and smiled wide at the mock nightclub that had been erected several years back. In reality it was a half square that pulled apart for shooting purposes. On film, it was anything from a happening dance club to a raunchy bar, dependent upon what movie was being filmed there at the time. Currently, it was a high class strip club—a gentleman's club. That struck me as funny.

Yes, often I equate a gentleman with some guy ogling chicks' breasts. Not.

Arching a brow, I cast a questioning look at Brady and let my gaze travel over his bare pecs. "Tell me again why they have you with your shirt off in the middle of a crowded club? No other men have their shirts off. What? Was your character suffering from hot flashes? I don't get it."

Brady smiled as he stretched his arms high above his head, yawning so loud that for a moment, he covered the music playing in the background. He also did a fine job of showing off every muscle as it rippled with his movements. "I asked them the same thing. They told me your dad ordered it." A sly grin spread over his sleepy face. "Something about my sex-appeal."

It sounded exactly like something my father would say. He owned the production company and did whatever the hell he wanted. Exploiting his hottest star, Brady, was one of his favorite pastimes. I hated every second of it and always felt bad for Brady. I wasn't sure if he agreed to my father's demands because he wanted to or if he did it to please me. "Do you want me to get that changed for you?"

For some reason, I was one of the only people who could get my father to budge on anything in the way of toning down how much he tried to exploit Brady. He knew I hated it. My father also knew Brady wasn't fond of stripping down in front of millions yet he still tried to push the envelope.

"Let me think about it. If the barely legal gal keeps being all touchy-feely I might. She tried to slide her hand down my pants three times already. And I'm not trying to be a dick but the girl can't dance."

Running my hand over the black bar, I glanced around the set again. They tweaked it enough to not be recognizable from movie to movie but the general layout stayed the same.

"What ya thinking about?" he asked, watching me closely.

I laughed softly. "I was just thinking of how much fun it was to practically grow up here. I've seen just about everything. The first time I asked to go out dancing with my girlfriends, my father freaked out and had us use this place instead. I'm fairly sure we filled it to capacity. They all enjoyed it. I kind of wanted to go somewhere else but they had fun and that's what was important." I glanced back at him, recalling he was

there as well. "Did you have fun?"

Brady nodded slowly as he walked towards me. "I enjoyed watching from the sidelines. I didn't enjoy every one of your little girlfriends swarming around me until your mother came to my aid by kissing me on the cheek and putting her arm through mine. Your girlfriends looked pissed. Your mom just smiled."

"Did you know she cornered me later about not coming to your rescue?" I asked, giving him the evil eye.

"Nope, but from the look on your face, it was my fault."

"Mmmhmm, she told me I should have done that for you. I should have been the one to rescue you from them all. I laughed but she didn't. I then went on to tell her I didn't understand what the big deal was. It's not like she looked a day over thirty. And I think you've gotten locked in some weird time warp too because you've looked exactly the same since I met you." I cast him a wary look as I flipped the disco lights on, instantly bathing us in a multi-colored shower of light.

Brady moved up behind me and gave me the courtesy of dragging his feet a bit to warn me he was there. "Why did your mother think you should have been the one who saved me from your friends?"

"I'm not sure. You know how she is. She's crazier than I am. But she went on and on about it. Mom even got to the point she told me, don't laugh, millions of women around the world would die to get to kiss your cheek."

Sure, it was true but it wasn't something I expected to come out of my mouth. I tended to ignore Brady's celebrity status unless picking on it. I wasn't one for the public eye and still couldn't understand how comfortable he was with all the attention he received. Of course, he didn't have to hide his true calling from the world for fear he'd inadvertently notify all humans that demons were not only real but living among them.

Despite what I said, Brady laughed and took my hand in his. "What did you say?"

"I shook my head and told her I was still baffled by the idea of anyone purposely lining up to kiss you. She whapped me in the back of the head. When I pointed out it was only you, she did it again. And then she told me if I dared to dance with Michael Serener one more time she'd personally see to it I never saw the light of day again."

Brady pulled me against his expansive chest, moving our bodies back and forth as the music played. He'd always been one to spontaneously grab me and dance. It always felt right. Nothing about Brady put me off. Tossing my arm over his shoulder, I smiled. He pressed his thigh between my legs and began to rock his lower body in slow circles, taking me with him. I rubbed against him, following him move for move.

"So, what you're saying is that you, my roommate and extremely close friend, do not find me attractive?"

I took hold of the hand he had on my hip and moved it to my butt. He cocked an eyebrow and I laughed softly, as I leaned back slowly, still riding his leg as I went. "You do realize we may be the only two people in the world who do this while having a full conversation like nothing is going on."

Brady's warm hand touched my bare midriff and I drew in a sharp breath as my body reacted to him. He slid it up, going under my green silk cami. I moved, backing up slowly, watching him intensely as I did. Every now and then, my body would react to him sexually. It was fairly easy to squish because he was my friend and it felt different.



For some reason, it had been getting a bit harder to ignore as of late.

I thought Brady would move his hand down, like he always did. He didn't. His fingers brushed the underside of my breast before he pulled his hand away. I smiled wide at his shock. "Surprise, no bra."

A cunning smile spread over his face. "I noticed. And you never answered my question about finding me attractive."

Pressing my body against his, I licked a line up his neck to his jaw. His entire body stiffened. It was too fun to toy with him. I kept going. I ran my nails down the front of his chiseled chest as I lowered myself on him, licking and kissing as I went. Each muscle on his stomach rippled as we continued to dance. I kept rhythm with him as I headed lower. Brady jerked, his entire body went rigid.

When I got to his navel, I licked around it carefully. Moving down, I kissed the tiny start of sandy blond hair trailing its way down into his jeans. I knew I was pushing past the point of acceptable behavior but I didn't care. He'd stolen my breath when he'd skimmed over my breast. It was my turn to return the favor.

Looking up, I met his eyes with mine and slipped my fingers into the top of his jeans. I slid around the front. Unzipping him just a bit, I licked and kissed him. His stomach tightened and I nipped playfully at the skin there.

His jaw dropped as he ran his hand into the back of my hair. I stood quickly and backed away from him. He took a deep breath.

"Aww, aren't paybacks a bitch?" I asked, backing up more.

Brady crouched slightly, putting his hands out on each side of him. He shook his head. "Hey, not nice. I brushed past your breast on accident and get that punishment in return?"

I stuck my bottom lip out, hoping to achieve a sexy pout. From the pained look on his face, I did. "I'm hurt. That was so bad it's been labeled punishment?"

"Don't try it, Mads, you know exactly what you just did and how it qualifies as punishment."

I glanced behind me to see what would be the best escape route and then turned to face Brady. "Women do that and more to you when you're working. Is it considered punishment then? The horny yet scorned look you're wearing makes me want to do it again just to piss you off, Brady."

"Really?" he asked, circling me. Brady took on the look of a predator and I loved every second of it.

"Ooo, I can now tell everyone I licked a movie star." I winked and backed up again. "I've been told that millions of women would die to kiss your cheek. How many more would join in if we were talking about licking those abs?"

"That's it. You're mine."

I did a rather dramatic full body shudder. "I'm shaking. There's no net here, Brady. If you fall, it might hurt."

The laughter that came from him made my body tingle in ways it shouldn't. Stunned, I gave Brady the opening he needed. Instantly, he was on me, picking me up high in the air and growling. He tossed me over his shoulder as if I weighed nothing.

"Brady!" I cried out as I found myself staring at his tight jean covered ass. I smacked it and made my hand sting. "Ouch, remind me to never do that again."

Something pinched my butt, sending me jerking upwards. Seeing Brady's mouth

clamped down on my butt cheek shocked me to the point I accidentally let too much magik surface. I'd spent many years learning how to control it. He released his hold on me and I pushed for him to put me down. He didn't budge. When I realized what I'd done and what he didn't do--fall over--my eyes widened. Brady's did too.

"I can't believe you bit me in the butt!"

He wagged his brows. "Really, because I could bite you again so you're sure it was me who did and that it happened. Nice touch with the trying to zap me with your power, Mads."

My jaw dropped. I didn't try. I did zap him. How he was still standing was a mystery to me. "Put me down."

He quickly kissed my backside and tossed a sly grin my way. "Okay." He dropped his shoulder and released his hold on me.

The hard floor came upon me without warning. My right shoulder hit first, followed closely by my hip then head. Pain shot through me as I laid there stunned by the fact he'd dropped me. I tasted something metallic and knew it was my blood. I'd gotten my ass kicked enough during my secret nocturnal activities to know what my blood tasted like. Demons seemed to get great joy out of making me bleed and I seemed to bleed well so all was right in my fucked up world.

Brady dropped down next to me, looking mortified and put a hand out. "Oh God, Mads. I'm so sorry. I thought you'd... umm... I thought you'd..."

Lifting my head slowly, I glared at him as I pushed off the floor. My shoulder and elbow hurt like hell. I winced. "You thought what, Brady? Did you think I'd bounce to my feet and be fine?"

He shook his head. "Baby, I didn't think you'd get hurt. I—"

Shocked, I stared at him, waiting for a punch line that didn't come. "Did you just call me baby?"

Brady stopped and seemed to think about what I'd just asked him. "I don't know. Maybe. Here." He slid his arms under mine and lifted me effortlessly. "Sorry. Are you okay?"

I nodded. The urge to slap him upside the head was great. Somehow, I managed to resist. It was difficult.

His eyes widened as he reached for my face. "You're bleeding. Fuck, I split your lip. Oh God, Madelyn, I am so sorry. Come on, let's get you home."

I rotated my shoulder and stretched my arm. "Don't worry about it. I'll be fine."

"Don't worry about it? Are you nuts?"

I patted his chest. I couldn't really tell him that big bad supernatural things did far more than drop me on my backside and split my lip on a nightly basis. They gave it their all to kill me. No. Brady was human and wasn't to know the entire truth about me. I forced a smile to my face. "I'll be fine. No big deal. Although, should I ever ask you to put me down again, could you maybe ease me to my feet? Tossing me off your shoulder doesn't feel so good."

Brady took hold of me and pulled me into a tight hug. It was different, very different from the way we normally embraced. When he kissed the side of my head, I damn near fell over. Pushing on his chest, I groaned. "Get off, you're creepin' me out. I'm fine. It happened. I'm not mad at you. Although, I am thinking of making you kiss my hip. And I'd also like to state for the record, that I promise to never lick you again as

payback. It only leaves me aching. I get a bite on the ass and then tossed on it. Hardly seems fair.”

Brady sighed. “I’m so sorry, Mads. I mean it.”

The sound of people approaching made me push on Brady again until he let go. “Looks like it’s time for you to get back to work.”

Cupping my face, he leaned in close to me. “I am so unbelievably sorry, Mads. I swear.” Suddenly, his lips were pressed against mine. Shocked, I opened my mouth to protest. Brady opened his as well and slid his tongue against mine. I wanted to push him away and smack him upside his blond head. I didn’t. Instead, I surrendered to him, allowing his tongue free reign of my mouth.

His hands stayed on my face. He held me firmly as if he was afraid I’d pull away. I thought I’d pull away, too. I didn’t. Pushing my tongue into his mouth, I could barely breathe as my entire body began to tingle.

Hello? It’s Brady you’re kissing! Snap out of it.

Never one to listen to anyone, including myself, I kept my lips pressed to his. I slid my arms up and took hold of the back of his neck as I rose onto my tiptoes. The kiss became more aggressive, our tongues diving in and out of the other’s mouth. The coppery metallic taste of my blood mixed in and I went to draw back. Brady held me tighter and went nuts, licking, sucking, as though it were no big deal I was bleeding and we were kissing. He moaned. I followed suit.

Brady tasted so good, unlike any other man I’d ever kissed. Our tongues maintained constant contact, each naturally following the other as if they’d had years and years of practice when in truth, it was their first encounter. He pressed his body to mine and moved to the beat of the music. I swayed with him, thrust for thrust. Something came over me and I had to touch more of him, feel his skin under my fingertips. Sliding my hands down him, I moaned into his mouth as I retraced my way down his torso.

The feel of hands going up and under the sides of my cami threatened to send me into overdrive. I broke free of the kiss and went to turn away. I managed to make it a whole step before Brady captured my hand and spun me into him. Suddenly, my back was pressed to his front. He moved again, rubbing his body against mine. I gasped when the hard bulge beneath his jeans rubbed against my low back.

Rocking with him, I moved my arm up behind his neck. Tilting my head back, I locked gazes with him. For a second, neither one of us did a thing. Then, Brady bent his head and took control of my mouth once more, sliding his tongue in and finding mine. His hands splayed across my stomach. I dropped my free hand and grabbed the back of his thigh, pulling him tighter to me as we simulated sex to the beat.

Every ounce of me wanted the sex to be real. I wanted Brady buried to the hilt in me, ramming his cock in me as I clung to him. The very thought of that made my pussy damp and shocked me to the core. What was happening to me? To us?

It’s Brady you’re kissing!

Tearing my mouth free of his, I turned my head slowly and looked up. I froze. Brady did the same. The entire crew stood there staring at us with their mouths wide open. “Umm, Brady?”

He shifted behind me. Sighing deeply, he pressed lips against my ear and whispered, “I’m sorry, Madelyn. I forgot where we were. Don’t be upset. Please. I know how you are about keeping your private life private.”

Brady was right. I did guard my privacy heavily. So did he, to a point. But he always took it in stride when a tabloid ran something about him. Nine times out of ten, it was false but he never got worked up. As I stood there, frozen against Brady's warm body, I knew I had two choices—freak out or go with the flow. Surprisingly enough, I chose option B.

“Ah, Brady, do you know what's going to happen now?”

“Mads, I'm—”

I elbowed him in the stomach and he shut up. Nodding, I tossed my hands in the air. “Great, just great! Now my parents are going to find out we're having quadruplets. You swore you were going to tell my dad first. Now it'll be plastered all over the front of every tabloid from here to infinity. Wait until they find out I'm already four months pregnant. They'll not only freak over you and me but the poor babies will be subjected to them, as well. It's a good thing I'm not showing yet.”

Brady was silent. Turning to him, I found him with his mouth hanging open. His brow furrowed as he stared down at me. “Madelyn...?”

“Oh, don't you stand there pretending to be shocked. You know damn well you're their father! Don't try to get out of it this late in the game.”

He touched my shoulder gently and tried to speak again. Nothing but a strangled cry came out. I did my best to hold in the smile wanting to come. When it was clear Brady was lost and looking a bit nauseous, I gave in and patted him on the chest.

“Sorry, everyone else claims they're giving birth to your child. I felt left out.” I glanced back at the crew. “I bet he goes with double layering his condoms from now on. What do you guys think?”

The entire group burst into laughter. Turning back to face Brady, I winked and pulled his head down. Planting a tiny kiss on his forehead, I whispered to him, “Breathe. It was a joke. We'd have to actually have sex for you to get me pregnant. Relax.”

He remained locked in his state of shock.

I drew back and pointed at his redheaded co-star. “You, come here.”

Her eyes widened but she ran to me all the same. I took her hand and put it on Brady's shoulder. “Now, try to stop acting like a complete and utter idiot around him. He's human not a god. He doesn't find your behavior cute or attractive. None of us do. Pull yourself together and act a hair above your age.” I smacked Brady's abs lightly. “He should be all set for the scene now. Try not to drool on him again or leave him covered in lipstick. Take care now.”

I walked past her and winked at the crew. They clapped and laughed harder. Grabbing my backpack and handbag, I headed towards the door.

“My work here is done.”