



Vampire: (noun) Bloodsucker, murderer, bedpost-notcher, God's gift to women, fiend.

Seth Gramble is a prince among his people. Half vampire, half jaguar, he is one of a rare few who can shift into an animal form. Both his halves have found their mate in a female detective determined to lump all vampires in with the rogue who killed her former lover. He's given her six months to see him differently. He's done waiting.

Paxton Tenor wants nothing to do with a blood-sucking fiend, no matter how much he makes her body sing. Nothing good can come of a vampire. A case she's working on partners her with Seth, and she's forced to reconsider her hatred. He doesn't seem at all like the rogue who sucked the life from her boyfriend in cold blood.

When Seth's kitty comes out to play, Paxton realizes she's been stupid to deny herself this man. And when he puts his life on the line to protect hers? All bets are off.

Warning: Let's be realistic here people; there's sex. Who doesn't want to be coerced into bed by a sexy, God's-gift-to-women vampire? And when they can be undressed and on you before you can blink—hello. Even if said vampire faints at the sight of his own blood...

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Tooth and Claw

Annmarie McKenna

Dedication

I want to dedicate this book to my kind and loving sister, without whom my life would be frivolous and uninteresting, not to mention wrought with grammatical errors and misspellings. Plus, she is super pretty and talented and I want every day to strive to be more like her.

Okay, okay, so I didn't really write that. My sister did. She just never thought I would actually include it. She obviously doesn't know me at all! But I love her just the same and owe her for all her IMs—"Why aren't you writing? Where's the next part? Why are you leaving me hanging like this?" She's been riding herd on me since I started writing and is my number one fan. Love ya, sis. Mwah.

Chapter One

Everything in Seth Gramble's world came to a crashing halt the second Paxton Tenor entered the bar. The singer's country twang ceased, the clank of beer bottles and glasses disappeared, and the din of loud voices over the cadence of the music evaporated until there was nothing left but her.

He wanted her.

Had wanted her since meeting her six months ago. When they'd crossed paths he'd been working a case as a consultant for Leid's—a firm that supplied vampires and their extra-sensory perceptions to police departments and private security companies across the country. Seth had run into his best friend, Luke Summers, at the precinct where he was a detective. Luke introduced Seth to his partner, Paxton.

At first she'd been warm toward him, friendly even. Right up to the second Luke mentioned Seth was a vampire. Then she'd gone into lockdown and Seth hadn't gotten anything but the cold shoulder from her since.

And who could blame her for the emotion, since one of his kind had killed her long-time lover two years ago. One rogue had turned Miss Paxton against vampires for life it seemed.

Two years was long enough to mourn, wasn't it?

He was surprised he'd made it these last six months without claiming her. Only his business with Leid's had protected her from his soul-deep desire of having her.

Perhaps wanting her was too soft an expression.

He *needed* her. In every sense of the word. He needed her trust. Needed her essence surrounding him. Needed her body beneath his, his cock buried as deep inside her as he could go, his teeth imbedded in her soft skin. Needed her love.

Sitting back, waiting for her to get over her fear of him, wasn't cutting it anymore. Watching a smile tug at the corners of her beautiful, bow-shaped mouth made Seth decide then and there that now was the time to do something about her dislike of his species.

Paxton smiled again, those full, ripe lips just begging to be kissed. She never looked at him that way, and his jealousy toward the woman now receiving the grin raged beneath his skin.

Just once he wanted that smile directed at him instead of her usual hide-behind-some-excuse reaction whenever he came near.

Paxton Tenor, the one woman in the world made for him, didn't like him. Or at least didn't like what he embodied. That fucking bad seed had condemned the whole of his species in her eyes.

Her head tilted back, causing waves of auburn curls caught in a ponytail to cascade down her back and revealing her long, slender neck as she laughed at something her friend said. The sound made his balls tighten and his cock thicken and harden to the point of pain. His incisors elongated, ready to penetrate the tender skin of her throat, allowing him to drink from her.

If he walked over to her, the melodic, orgasm-inducing laughter would stop, simply because he was near. Her pulse would speed up, allowing him to hear it beating, and the soft *whoosh, whoosh* would become a persistent hammer in her veins. Her muscles would tense, her hands would shake and a flush would stain her cheeks a pretty shade of pink.

It was the same flush he was sure he'd find on her body when he made her come the first time. And every time thereafter.

He'd make love to her. Soon. Because despite her cool demeanor, her nipples always tightened into little buds and the tell-tale scent of her arousal inevitably wafted across his nose whenever he was near her.

She wanted him.

She grotesquely hated that she did, but she wanted him just the same.

"Seth."

He allowed the rumble that bubbled from deep inside at Luke's interruption.

"Hey, man, don't eat the messenger." The man threw his hands up in mock surrender.

"What?" Seth crumpled the napkin he'd swiped from beneath the bottle of Synth he hadn't touched and urged his third persona, the jaguar, not to come forth and attack his best friend.

"You meeting with Cap tonight?"

Seth grunted and kept his gaze on Paxton as she stretched her arms above her head. The act elongated her torso and pushed her breasts against the fabric of the silky button-down shirt she wore.

"I thought so, but he hasn't called yet," Seth had known the captain wanted to see him. The owner of Leid's Consulting had told Seth he'd been requested. That's why he was here waiting for the captain's call instead of back at home enjoying the ballgame in peace and quiet. Why go home when he was just going to get called in to work again?

What-the-hell-ever. He was here because he'd known Paxton would be here after a long day on the job.

"Yeah. He did. Said he couldn't get a hold of you for some reason." Luke's tone was dry as he turned toward Paxton. "Can't *imagine* what might be causing your brain to tune out."

"Me neither." Seth shook his head to clear it and forced himself to look away from the woman who'd made him miss a call. Not only had he not heard his phone, but he'd tuned out his telepathy as well. Damn psychic ability shorted out whenever Paxton was around. She made him useless.

"I tried to call your cell too. No answer. You're so preoccupied your superior hearing isn't even working?" Luke quirked an eyebrow and Seth could tell he was trying not to laugh. "We need you."

Seth glanced at the phone on his hip and saw that he had in fact missed two calls, then slid his gaze to the reason he'd missed them. Paxton laughed again, sending every ounce of blood in Seth's body to his groin.

"What's the case?" His boss at Leid's hadn't specified what Captain Quinn wanted him for. Could be for any number of things. A serial rapist, an arsonist, a drug ring? He'd even taken part in a sting operation involving the trafficking of young girls.

Seth took a long drag of the Synth and grimaced at its coolness. He much preferred it warm. Or at the very least, room temperature. Too bad manufacturers hadn't figured out a way to keep it fresh without refrigeration. Maybe he'd go out later for the real thing.

He eyed Paxton and there went his desire for the real thing. No other woman would be able to slake his hunger.

Luke slapped Seth on the shoulder. "The Panty Bandit, my friend."

Seth choked on the Synth he'd yet to fully swallow, spraying the table with synthetic blood. Christ, he'd been thinking arsonist and they wanted him to find some dickweed with a panty fetish? "Are you shitting me?"

"Nope. Fucker's been raiding panty drawers all over town, and Cap's taking the heat from the mayor to catch the ass."

Luke's pager beeped at his waist. He looked down at the same exact moment Paxton did, indicating her pager had gone off too. Not surprising with them being partners.

"We gotta go. You too, Toothy. Your royal presence has been requested by Cap himself. Since you wouldn't answer any of your usual methods of communication, he sent me as his errand boy to retrieve you. Next time, leave your brain on and open the airwaves so I don't have to be his bitch."

Sucking down the last of the Synth with a grimace, Seth stood. Paxton did also, still laughing at something her friend said and making Seth's dick emulate his upright position, the same way it did every time he saw her.

"You like being his bitch, Luke, don't deny it." He threw a couple of bucks on the table as a tip.

"Only for you, vamp. Only for you."

"How is your ass, by the way?" Seth taunted, continuing their longstanding joke of Luke being the captain's bitch.

"You wish. Now shut the fuck up, Toothy, and let's go before Cap shits a diamond."

They both turned to Paxton, who was watching them warily, apparently not wanting to get too close to Seth, which irritated him. Fuck it. He was done being irritated with her brushing him off. It was time to step into her personal space.

"You got your car, Pax, or you need a ride?" Luke asked.

She took a few steps forward. Seth stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans to try and look less intimidating. Or maybe it was because what he really wanted to do was tear that band out of her hair, tangle his hands in the long, silky strands, pull her to him and kiss the living hell out of her.

His fangs dropped, nicking his lip as if he were some out-of-control adolescent vamp. Wishing it was her blood, he licked the drop that welled, then heard her sharp intake of breath as he looked at her from beneath his lowered lids. Those beautiful green eyes were locked on his mouth, and the tip of her tongue came out to swipe across her own lips.

Holy mother of vampirism. Her pupils dilated, her nostrils flared and the pulse at the base of her throat went into overdrive. Seth didn't let his gaze travel down to her breasts where he knew he'd find her nipples hard as rocks.

Goddammit. He wasn't going to look.

"I have mine," she snapped, yanking his attention from her chest. "I'll meet you there."

"Fine." Luke palmed his keys then reached for Seth's face with his thumb. "You got a little blood there, sweetie."

Paxton smothered a laugh, and Seth wished he'd never vowed not to read her mind. He wanted to know all the things that made her laugh. *He* wanted to be the one to make her smile instead of pissing her off.

Seth slapped his moron friend's hand away from his face. "I'll follow you."

Paxton walked beside her partner and nudged him with her elbow. "Why are you here?"

"To pick up Seth."

"You mean Cap made you do his bidding again, huh?"

"Shad up." He threw his arm around her neck and gave her a noogie.

Seth's cat clamored inside his head again, and along with a few claws appearing at his fingertips, he couldn't stop the possessive hiss that escaped his lips. Seeing his best friend's arms around *his* woman did not sit well with any of his three personas—vamp, jaguar or human.

"You too, Toothy," Luke said over his shoulder. "Your hissing doesn't scare me."

"What do we need him for?" Paxton whispered to Luke.

No need for her to whisper, Seth could hear every word, and she damn well knew it. Ah, the joy of being the bane of her existence. No problem. He'd take pleasure in teaching her that not all vampires were cut of the same cloth as the one who'd killed her lover.

The gun at Paxton's right hip caught on Luke's at his left as they walked, they were so close. Seth silently thanked God for making Luke a lefty. The small amount of space created by their weapons was the only thing keeping them from being glued together from shoulder to ankle.

Luke shrugged. "Maybe he can sniff out the bandit."

"By smelling underwear? *This* I've got to see."

Luke chuckled. "I don't know exactly why Cap wanted him, but the mayor's having a conniption, and I wasn't about to question him."

"I still don't understand why you had to come get him. I thought the captain could...you know, talk to him. In his head or something. Don't all vampires do that shit? And doesn't the man own a phone?" she grumbled, still talking under her breath.

"He can, normally," Seth answered, even though he knew she'd been speaking to Luke.

"Don't do that." Paxton stopped so fast Seth had to put his hands up to keep from running over her.

Her shoulders under his fingers—thank God his claws had disappeared—felt fantastic. It was all he could do not to run his hands down her body to her waist where he could yank her close and smother her lips with his.

He raised an eyebrow. "Do what?" he asked innocently.

"Read my mind."

"But I didn't. You said that out loud."

"You did, Pax," Luke confirmed. "Sorry."

Paxton swallowed and lifted her eyes to Seth in an almost-shy way. "I didn't say it loud enough for anyone else to hear."

"For another human, sure. But to a vamp? I can hear your pulse, sweetheart."

Her hand shot to the base of her throat, covering it.

Oh, Princess, give me an inch...

He leaned in close and inhaled the scent of her hair and skin. "Don't cover it, baby. Won't make it go away." He pressed his lips to the area just below her ear, reveling in the fact she didn't jump back from him this time. Her blood pounded in her veins, louder as she held her breath.

"Breathe, baby. I won't hurt you."

She sucked in a breath, shocked no doubt that he'd spoken in her head for the first time. "How do you do that?"

He straightened. "Part of who I am."

"Can I—? Never mind," she spat, cutting herself off.

Damn. For a minute there he'd thought he had her intrigued. He answered her anyway. "Not yet."

Her eyes narrowed in confusion, and Seth eased her forward with a hand at the small of her back. Her partner held the door open as they walked out of the cop-filled bar into the warm night air.

"What do you mean 'not yet'?"

"We haven't bonded."

"Bonded?"

Son of a bitch. He hadn't meant to say that. Not until he'd made love to her and told her she was his mate. Oh, and there was the little problem of convincing her that not all vampires were created equal.

Sighing, he stopped her and tilted her face with a finger under her chin. Now that he'd made the decision to go for her, he wasn't about to stop touching her. "Yes."

"What do you mean, 'bonded'?"

"Jesus, Pax, you sound like a parrot. Bonded. Had sex. Mated," Luke rattled off.

Seth swore and stomped on Luke's foot. The man grunted and cursed like a girl then punched Seth's shoulder. Seth barely felt it, though knowing Luke, it was probably a hefty left jab.

Paxton huffed. "I'm not having sex with you."

Seth grinned. "You will."

This time her eyes narrowed in anger. "Think so?"

"Nope. I know so." He nudged her forward again, heading for the parking lot and her six-year-old, blue Toyota Camry.

"Arrogant prick." She spoke from the corner of her mouth.

Luke propped his arms on top of the driver door when Seth pulled it open for Paxton. "So if bonding is how you're able to hear someone else talking to you, maybe we should ask Cap how *his* ass is."

Seth laughed out loud. "Go right ahead. I dare you. But promise you'll let me be in the room when you ask." He motioned Paxton into the driver's seat. Before she could stick her key in the ignition he reached across her with the seat belt and buckled her in.

"I can buckle my own seat belt, thank you very much, and don't think for one second I will ever sleep with you," she ground out, leaning as far back in the seat as possible to avoid his crowding her.

"I know you can buckle yourself, but it gave me a good excuse to touch you again. And I never said anything about sleeping, Princess." He drew his lips across hers as he backed out and was fairly surprised she didn't smack him in return. Especially since, in all the time he'd known her, he hadn't touched her once, and now he'd nuzzled her ear and kissed her lightly in the space of a few minutes. He'd waited long enough for her to feel comfortable in his presence. He was done waiting. Might as well push the envelope and drag her feelings out of her.

She pressed her lips together, whether in mutiny or excitement, he couldn't tell. The one thing he did know was that at the moment she wasn't really frightened of *him*, per se, but of what she felt between them. The same thing he felt.

A minor victory, he considered, based on her view of vampirism.

"Be safe," he murmured and yanked the door out from under Luke's arms to shut it.

This time he was pretty sure she was pissed because she mouthed the word asshole before cranking the engine to life and backing out of the space, leaving Seth standing there chuckling and Luke grinning from ear to ear.

"She must like you. She doesn't call just anyone asshole."

“You saw that too, did you?” Seth’s fangs dropped to razor-sharp points. If she could call him an asshole, it meant she was warming up to him.

And he was about to take full advantage of the situation.

Chapter Two

“Princess my ass,” Paxton muttered. “Probably some metaphor for vampire whore.” That’s all the blood-sucking fiends called vampires were good for. Notching their bedposts, then leaving women craving more and acting like over-sexed groupies. That, and cold-blooded murder. *Never forget the murdering bit.*

“Not in a million fucking years.”

Paxton forced herself to breathe. Her lips still tingled where Seth’s lips had grazed hers. And they for damn sure weren’t the only things tingling. If her clit didn’t stop buzzing she would likely come in her seat. And God forbid he could smell her sopping-wet pussy. Then he’d realize just how much he turned her on and she’d be no better than any of the human women who whored themselves to vamps. Seemed vamp sex was a powerful aphrodisiac. Plenty of women *and* men had gotten addicted to the high of fucking a vamp. And since there were no female vampires, humans were who vamps turned to when they wanted sex.

Paxton didn’t want to be one of them.

Of course, it seemed like that’s where she was heading. Especially since she already had a hard time trying to turn off her libido and keep her hands from stroking Seth’s skin whenever he was near. It had been far too long since she’d been with a man if she couldn’t keep her pants on around him.

Maybe if she found a normal man, one who could cure her lust, she’d get over her infatuation with Seth. A nice man to ease the ache between her legs but one she wouldn’t want to feel committed to. And definitely not one as sexually aware of women as Seth Gramble.

“Stop it,” she admonished. “No vampires, no matter how sexy.”

No matter how fantabulous the rumors claimed sex with a vampire could be. Hell, who knew how many women he’d taken to bed in his—how old had Luke said Seth was?—two hundred something years. That was a lot of women. She didn’t for one second imagine the man was celibate.

Her clit did that throbbing thing again just thinking about being in bed with Seth. His rock-hard body moving over hers, *in* hers, touching her all over.

“Oh my God, I’m turning into a groupie. *Dillon*, Pax, remember your boyfriend? The one murdered in cold blood? Drained of his essence by the mouth of a freakin’ bloodsucker?”

He’d only been doing his job, trying to protect a woman, when he was ambushed by a “supposed” rogue vampire. She huffed at supposed. All vampires were rogues in her eyes. Had justice been served for Dillon? Hell no. The vamp had gotten away.

She sucked in a deep breath. “Do not fall for Seth’s charm. Do not.”

Christ. She stabbed at the air-conditioner button, throwing it on full blast in an attempt to cool her heated skin and nerves. This was why she stayed away from Seth and his freaking good looks. Every time she got within twenty feet of the man her body went into overdrive, craving him in a way she'd never craved another man. Her reaction to him wasn't right. It wasn't normal.

And it certainly did nothing to uphold the memory of finding her boyfriend dead and left like yesterday's trash in a prostitute's apartment. The prostitute had lived through the attack, thanks to Dillon, but the vamp had turned his feeding on the cop who'd saved her life. Paxton would never forget the look in his eyes when she walked into that room and saw him lying there. Glassy. Gone.

She'd thrown up all over the scene.

Paxton knew Seth was aware of all she'd been through. The major problem? He didn't seem to be getting the message that she wanted nothing to do with him. And if tonight was any indication, he was moving in for the kill. Metaphorically speaking.

She hoped.

Her attitude toward him should have run him off the first time they met six months ago. But no. He just kept coming and coming and coming. No pun intended.

And she would not lose herself to a vampire. Ever.

"Son of a bitch." She slapped the wheel and stomped on the brake when the light in front of her turned from a quick yellow to red. Damn Seth for making her think about him when, for the sake of her own sanity, she'd vowed she'd never let herself be taken in by one of them.

Sooner or later her libido would shut off.

It would.

"God," she groaned. "When? When will it shut off, Pax, huh? Tomorrow? Next year?"

Could she have sex with the man and be done with it? Would that get him out of her head so she could move on with her life? Surely the man could fuck like a normal human and leave the biting out of it, right? They'd be out of each other's systems and all would go back to the way it should be.

What in the *hell* was she thinking?

She didn't want to have sex with Seth, didn't want to be one of his notches or become a groupie. He was a vampire. All his women were fuck buddies. She'd never heard Luke say the man ever got romantically involved, which just proved her opinion. He probably brainwashed all his women to be at his beck and call.

On the other hand, though she knew he was interested in her, until tonight he hadn't put the moves on her. So what did that say about him?

"That he has an extremely high threshold for patience, or that he's amusing himself with other bimbos while waiting for you?"

Far better to ignore the vamp no matter what he did to her pussy. Or her lips, or her nipples, or her entire freaking system.

“Ugh. Who am I kidding?” The man invaded her dreams every night. He scraped those long-ass vampire teeth along her throat while he played with one of her nipples and burrowed his cock deep inside her drenched vagina. And then, the moment he sank those teeth into the flesh above her breast, she exploded in an orgasm to beat all orgasms.

Night after flipping night, no matter how much she tried to put him out of her mind, she woke up sweaty and sated from an actual climax.

She didn’t remember moving again or the drive to the precinct. It was a damn wonder she’d made it there alive. Of course with Seth right behind her, and Luke right behind him, she’d have had plenty of rescue help had she crashed because of her completely useless state of mind.

She pulled into her spot and sat looking at the lights shining from the precinct’s windows. Ten o’clock. Most of the city was getting ready for bed, if they weren’t there already. But her? She was heading into work. After already working a full day.

Not to mention she was about to enter with *him* by her side, making her horny as all hell despite how she reasoned with herself that he was evil incarnate. She wondered what the captain would say about her shitty attitude with Seth around. He’d probably think she was losing her mind.

Why, oh why, did he have to ask for Seth?

Luke tapped on the window. “You gettin’ out or you gonna stay in your car all night?”

“Stay,” she muttered to herself, only to look up and see Seth smiling and running a hand through his thick black hair that curled a bit too long over his ears and at the back of his neck. She suddenly wanted to comb her fingers through his hair too.

Damn him. She jerked the keys from the ignition, yanked her over-the-shoulder bag from the seat next to her and shoved the door open, taking satisfaction when it plowed into Luke’s smirking self and knocked the wind out of him. If he hadn’t introduced her to his best friend, this little problem of hers never would have happened in the first place. It was all his fault.

Seth, wisely, didn’t say a word, though she did see his smile morph into a shit-eating grin. Paxton strode past him, somehow finding the strength not to inhale his scent. Or worse, lick him.

She moved inside, leaving the boys to follow. Okay, perhaps that wasn’t the best idea since she felt Seth’s eyes on her ass. Thank God she was still wearing her work slacks. They were, quite possibly, the least revealing item of clothing she owned.

Ha. Served him right to be thwarted by her granny pants.

Unless he had the ability to see through... No. No way. Vamps didn’t have x-ray vision.

Did they? Damn it. Other than the way they tended to make humans addicted to being a food source and the way her boyfriend had so ruthlessly been slaughtered, she didn’t know much about Seth’s kind.

Rumors and hearsay were the sum of her knowledge. Her fault since she persistently neglected to ask Luke about Seth because she didn't want to seem at all interested in his best friend.

She bit her lip and fisted her hands. She would not look back. Let him stare all he wanted. If her black, cotton-covered ass turned him on, so be it. He wouldn't affect *her* in the least.

"You practicing for a marathon, Pax?" Luke chuckled behind her. If she'd had a pencil in her hand she would have turned and stabbed him in the eye. Ass. No matter how hard she tried to hide her feelings from Luke, he probably knew exactly how conflicted she felt about Seth. Shithead knew everything. It's what made him a great detective.

"Can't you keep up, *bitch* boy?" If it appeared she was hiding behind the attitude, well then, so be it.

She sensed Luke come to a stop but didn't wait for him.

"Did she just call me a *bitch* boy?"

"I believe she did." Seth's deep baritone voice skittered across her nerves. She nearly gave in and turned back, if for nothing else than to see the gleam in his eye. He was twisting everything she believed about his species into knots.

Nonsense, you fool. Remember Dillon. Remember Dillon.

The reminder of his wasted life did wonders in keeping her on course as she headed for the captain's office. Hopefully she only had to get through this impromptu meeting, then she'd be free of her worst nightmare. Or best female version of a wet dream. Whichever.

Paxton had a horrible feeling the two were one and the same.

Being paired with Paxton in a small enclosed space was not a good idea, Seth decided after Luke closed the door to the captain's office behind them. Paxton's luscious scent permeated the area, causing his teeth to descend in need. He imagined her panties being damp with her juices. How the hell was he supposed to find some panty drawer raider if he was only interested in one pair of panties? Specifically the ones adorning Paxton's ass. If he wasn't careful he'd have her up against the captain's desk and be buried inside her before she could protest.

"What the hell happened to open communication, Gramble?"

Seth blinked at the captain. What could he say? *I was thinking about fucking your detective's vampire misgivings right out of her?* That ought to go over well.

He cleared his throat. "I was otherwise occupied."

The captain snorted. "At a bar?" He held up a hand. "Don't answer that."

Seth looked to Paxton who stood, hands behind her back, trying not to smile. Or was that a snarl? Didn't matter. All he could think about was tying those hands in place where they were and laying her on a bed, head on the mattress, ass up in the air. The pose would give him an all-access pass no amount of

wiggling would get her out of, while he proceeded to pleasure her in ways she had only previously imagined.

His cock twitched inside his jeans. Damn thing hadn't been anything but hard since the second she walked into the bar. She stoically tried to avoid looking at him, but her gaze traveled his way from the corners of her eyes.

Her chest heaved, and her nipples hardened beneath her shirt. At least he wasn't the only one in a constant state of arousal. Try as she might to avoid him or give him the cold shoulder, she wasn't as unaffected by him as she wanted to be.

No, she was completely affected by him.

"Gramble," Captain Quinn barked. "Where the hell are you tonight?"

"Right here, Cap. Can't you see me?" He gazed at his hands, wondering if he were going invisible. Lack of blood had, on rare occasion, been known to cause the skin to become somewhat translucent. But hadn't he partaken of Synth at the bar? It had tasted all right even though it'd been cold.

"Jesus, you *are* distracted."

Who wouldn't be with their woman standing so close? So dangerously, enticingly close. Close enough to touch, to lick, to eat. To fuck.

"I need your expert senses to help find the Panty Bandit."

Seth doubted his expert senses would be anything but shit if he didn't slake his insatiable need sometime in the very near future.

Quinn turned to his detectives and rubbed at his right ear. "The, uh, mayor's been, er...raided."

Luke snickered and Paxton gasped. Seth couldn't help but snort himself.

The captain nodded. "Do not let the mayor see you laugh. He's asked for the best and most discreet. Apparently his drawers were...somewhat on the racy side."

"You mean the bandit made off with Mayor Perkins's wife's undies?" Luke asked, gripping the back of the chair in front of him.

Captain Quinn sighed. "No. It was the mayor's. Something to do with red and lace, and if any of you laugh..."

"Oh my God." Paxton hung her head. "Who would have thought the mayor had an underwear fetish."

"Yes, well the bandit has a worse fetish in stealing other people's panties, so let's find him, shall we?"

Seth pinched the bridge of his nose. How had he gone from catching murderers to panty thieves? If Leid's knew about this and didn't warn him... He'd have to remember to thank his friend profusely, he thought sarcastically. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Whatever the hell it is you normally do with your vamp senses," Quinn barked. "Mayor Perkins specifically asked for a vamp. He wants this guy caught, and fast. So," Cap continued, picking up a file

folder, “a woman arrived home late this evening to find her skivvies on the floor and her prized Victoria’s Secret’s filched.”

“How does she connect with the mayor?” Paxton asked.

“She doesn’t, but she’s the latest to report the bandit. He hit the mayor’s house last night, so he’s been a busy boy.”

“Why are we just now finding out about the mayor then?” Luke interjected.

Cap’s eyebrow rose. “Would you jump on calling the police if your lacy thong got snatched? The only reason he came to me at all was because he found out through the grapevine that our Panty Bandit is a serial thief. One little pic on YouTube and Perkins is a laughingstock.”

He turned to Seth. “Get over to this address. I don’t care if you have to sniff every pair of this lady’s unmentionables to catch a scent of this ass. Just do it.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “I doubt it’ll come down to that.”

“Whatever. Luke and Paxton are your backup.”

Seth nearly groaned aloud. When he glanced at Paxton he didn’t find the sympathy he wanted to see for being put in this position. Instead, was she...laughing? The little wench was laughing at his predicament. She must think his job was going to be hilarious. He wondered if she would laugh when she found herself the object of his panty sniffing.

No way would he be able to work with Paxton’s scent so close and her unknowingly teasing him every second. The only thing on his mind would be the boner between his legs.

On the other hand, it might act like some sort of divining rod. Could he find the Panty Bandit with his penis? God, look what he’d been reduced to. There was only one set of panties he wanted to find with his cock and the woman wearing them continued to try not to laugh. If she knew what he was thinking the smirk would come right off her pretty face.

Luke clapped him on the back. “Don’t try to get out of it, Your Highness, you’re stuck with us.”

Paxton shifted her weight onto one foot and made an exasperated sound. “Any time you want to tell me why he always calls you ‘Your Highness’ I’d be good with that. We’re about to work together. I think I’ve earned the right to know what’s up with the royal-highness shit.”

“Because he’s a prince,” Cap answered gruffly. “Do you mind if we get on with it? It’s late. You’ve got a potential public relations nightmare of a case to solve and I’ve got a wife who keeps insisting I come home for some reason.”

“A prince?” Paxton’s face screwed up in incredulity. Seth ignored her question for the time being. He could explain later. “Mind if I talk to you about this alone, sir?” He really didn’t think he should spend any amount of time in close contact to Paxton right now or she’d find herself being fucked. His body was ready to take control.

“See there, Summers? Even royalty calls me sir, which is more respect than you’ve ever shown.” Cap stuffed some files in a briefcase.

“A prince?” Paxton echoed again, still apparently unable to wrap her brain around the whole prince issue.

“You’re beginning to hurt my feelings, Toothy. Why the hell can’t you talk to Cap with me in the room?” Luke pouted, batted his eyelashes and gave a fake sniff before leaning into Seth and putting his head on Seth’s shoulder. “You don’t like me anymore?”

Seth gritted his teeth against his best friend’s goofy behavior and shoved him off. “It’s not you.”

He glanced up at Paxton’s confused face at the same time Luke blurted, “Oh, so it’s Pax who smells. I told her to shower this morning.”

Paxton’s eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. She threw a surprisingly strong punch at Luke’s shoulder, making her partner squeal like a girl.

“Children.” The captain’s bark made them all jump. “I don’t have time for this shit. Get whatever the hell your problem is out of your system, Gramble, and get on scene. Apparently this panty raider trumps all our other cases.” Quinn mumbled to himself, something about hating shithead panty thieves when they had murderers, rapists and armed burglars to deal with. He stood and started shoving papers into a file folder before thrusting the folder at Luke.

Unfortunately, Seth thought, getting his problem out of his system wasn’t going to be easy. Paxton wasn’t just a short-term fling one fuck would take care of. He’d need a much longer time. Like forever.

“Paxton, take him down to the cage and fit him with a vest. And don’t let him tell you he doesn’t need one.”

Paxton’s mouth gaped as if taking him anywhere was the last thing on Earth she wanted to do. And who could blame her? Despite the anger he’d seen on her face, Seth knew he’d managed to hurt her feelings by implying she was the reason he needed to talk to the captain alone. Which, of course, she was, but he hadn’t meant for her to know that. He simply had needed to tell Cap why it was a bad idea for him to be around her at this particular moment.

“I really don’t think a vest is necessary, sir.” Wearing a vest to find a freak with a panty fetish? He hated wearing the damn things when he hunted serial killers so he for damn sure didn’t want to wear one while tiptoeing through underwear.

“And I don’t really give a rat’s ass what you think. Department policy, Gramble. You get shot, I gotta pay Leid’s big money. He thinks your vampire asses are worth something. Since I agree with him, you wear a vest. I don’t care if this is the lowliest case we ever work. Now get. All of you. And don’t come back without something. Red lace would be great.”

Paxton grumbled to herself all the way downstairs to the cage while Seth, the freakin' *prince*, trailed behind. The day just kept getting better and better. Why the hell hadn't she insisted on Luke telling her what he meant by the phrase every time she heard him say it?

She felt Seth's stare on her butt once more. Did she have panty lines going on back there?

Jesus Christ.

He could probably see through her pants and panties anyway so what did it matter if he saw panty lines?

Wasn't it ironic they were on the hunt for a Panty Bandit and she was worried about whether hers were showing or not?

"I'm sorry."

Paxton whipped around at the sound of his voice and the sincere apology. She hadn't expected that. It made her stop short.

"For what?"

He ran into her. Would have laid her flat if his damn reflexes weren't like lightning so that he caught her a second before plowing her over. Her heart thudded against his rib cage where he had her crushed to him. She could feel it, could he? His breath fanned across her hair, making her whole body tingle to awareness.

Well, not to awareness, she was already aware. She didn't want to be aware. This nearness to him only boosted the flames.

Lord she was in so much trouble.

"For hurting your feelings back there." His hands clenched and unclenched on her upper arms. She wanted to feel those hands further down her body. Starting at her breasts.

Paxton shook her head. He had to have possessed her. Another one of his talents, no doubt, the shithead. Did he have the ability to make her want him? "It's all right. I hadn't expected anything else from a vampire." She pursed her lips and swallowed. Was that fair? "Besides. You didn't hurt my feelings." *Much.*

Seth snorted a laugh. "You never pull any punches, do you?" He gently pushed a lock of hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. Her throat suddenly went dry. "I've waited six months, Paxton."

His golden eyes glittered in an almost primitive, "me man, you woman" way, and his nostrils flared. Vampire, she reminded herself. The man was created to be a woman's wet dream. To entice women into his bed so he could feed off them. Capable of bringing even the most repressed woman to heel. Not to mention to orgasm. Ugh. She should be sickened by him. How many women *had* he schmoozed and bedded anyway?

They were killers. That thought brought things back into perspective.

"We will talk about the prince issue later," he promised, stroking her cheek.

“Pfft.” She tried to be nonchalant and wave him off, but if the look he gave her said anything, he saw past the attempt. She admitted, if only to herself, that she was beginning to want to know more about him. The prince thing had really thrown her, and she cursed Luke again for not telling her.

Maybe because you were so busy trying to make Seth go away you never outright demanded Luke tell you more.

Why do you freakin’ care?

“All right then. Whatever. Let’s go get you that vest.” She extracted herself from his arms, telling herself she did not feel bereft at the loss of his touch. Could not feel bereft because she didn’t like him.

“I don’t need a vest.”

He damn well did, she fumed, suddenly seeing red and not knowing why. She wasn’t going to let him die on her watch. Not before she got him out of her system.

She was losing her ever-loving mind.

“Do you know how much it hurts to have a pair of panties snapped against your skin?”

She thought his eyeballs might pop out of their sockets the way they widened, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

“Scuse me?”

“Stings like a son of a bitch. Kind of bites into the skin, leaves a welt. ’Course, we could be dealing with an amateur. In which case he might not get much velocity on the elastic.”

One eyebrow rose. “And you know this because of personal experience?”

A rush of liquid heat shimmied through her belly as he skimmed his gaze from her face to her waist. She could have sworn his eyes had a glow to them. Damn it. That had backfired on her.

“Doesn’t matter, *Princey*. Point is, we all have to wear the Kevlar so suck it up.”

Maybe she should just submit to what she knew he wanted and go for it. One night. What could it hurt? She could get the insane...obsession with his looks out of the way, they could both have a little fun and part ways in the morning as if nothing had happened.

Vampire, stupid. Stop thinking with your clit. He’ll probably use his vampire voodoo on you and make you want more than one night.

She slammed open the door to the basement with enough force to shake it from its hinges. Even she wasn’t naïve enough to believe she could get up and leave in the morning as if they hadn’t spent the night doing the mattress mambo. Voodoo or not. If he were a *human* man she wouldn’t be able to either. She didn’t do one-night stands.

Plus she had the uber-aggravating feeling that one night wouldn’t be long enough to get him out of her system.

She took the steps a little too carelessly, stumbling as her foot hit the edge of the stair. With a quick grab of her hand, Seth saved her from tumbling head first, and steadied her.

"I'm fine," she said and tugged at her hand, which he didn't release.

"Yes. I can see that."

Damn man and his supernatural ability to make her want sex.

With him.

Now.

He traced his thumb over her palm, causing her pulse to race.

Why was she feeling so slutty?

"Where are we going?"

Part of her delighted that he was so discombobulated as to forget where they were headed. The other part of her dreaded the reason he wasn't thinking clearly.

She lifted her chin. "To the cage, remember? To get a vest so you don't get yourself killed at the scene."

"Killed sniffing underwear?"

"Hey, you never know what might be lurking in a woman's unmentionables. Besides, if I have to wear one, so do you."

"Seems like a trivial case for two seasoned detectives to be put on."

"Yeah, well, you heard the captain. The mayor asked for the best." Paxton shivered at his touch and admitted feeling silly about investigating a panty snatcher. But what the mayor wanted, the mayor got. No matter what.

The mayor and this latest robbery made cases number twenty-one and twenty-two. That they knew of, anyway. How many other people had had their undies swiped but were too embarrassed to come forward? The Panty Bandit was starting to make the department look totally inept.

She led him to the cage door, only realizing as she reached to sign in at the window that he was still holding her hand. And that she didn't want him to let go.

She gritted her teeth. "Gutiérrez," she greeted the man on duty.

"Tenor."

"We need to find a vest for Mr. Gramble."

The officer looked down to where their hands connected and hid a smile by coughing. Heat flooded Paxton's face. Great. Now she'd be the talk of the squad room. *Did you see Paxton and the vampire?* She could already hear the rumors. Their holding hands would turn into them groping each other at her desk. She tried to withdraw her hand again only to be thwarted. The ass. Didn't he know what would happen?

Of course not. And as a man, a typical ego-ridden vampire, he wouldn't care either.

Still smiling, Gutiérrez pressed a button next to him, and the door behind them buzzed, allowing them entrance into the cage.

“Would you let go?” she spat and yanked her hand free. How in the hell would she ever cover up his holding her hand?

“Only because you asked so nicely.”

Paxton ripped the door open and held it for Toothy, as Luke so often referred to him. His eyes held amusement as he passed her, his hands firmly in his pockets.

“They’re in the back.” She pointed in the direction he needed to go, doing her best to keep from slapping the look off his face. Or worse, from grabbing him and pulling off his clothes to ravish him.

Temptation was a bitch. But God the way he filled out those jeans...

She pinched her hip and tried to shake the desire to shove him into the corner and have her way with him.

Chapter Three

The door clicked shut behind them, closing them once again in a small space and trapping him with her scent. Sweet and spicy and impossible to ignore any longer. She sighed behind him.

“I think you’ll probably need one of...these.” She brushed past him, heading for the wall holding a line of vests, and pulled out something from the larger-sized end.

“I’ve tried to tell you, I don’t need one.”

“Look, macho man, while you might think you don’t need protection, the department does. Personally I don’t give a rat’s ass what you think. You’re with me and Luke. You don’t wear one, I get put in the corner because you didn’t follow policy. So don’t tell—”

Seth grasped her wrist and dragged her next to him. The act was effective in cutting her off. The way her eyes glittered and her chest heaved with her anger had done nothing but make his cock harder. Gently holding the back of her head in one hand, he lowered his mouth to hers, giving her plenty of time to curse him, smack him or back off. She melted against him with a moan and tilted her head, allowing him better access. He wasted no time taking it.

She was made for him. Just like he’d known since first meeting her. He loosened his hold on her head and wound his other arm around her. Perfect.

One hand slid down to the small of her back, then lower, settling on the firm roundness of her ass. Paxton acquiesced, and her tongue swept out to tangle with his. He finally had her right where he wanted her.

He swung her around and pressed her back against the wall of vests she so adamantly said her department wanted him in, using them to cushion her. Her fingers clawed at his shoulders and her legs wrapped around his as she tried to get closer. Seth happily helped, gripping her thighs and lifting her higher.

He devoured her, tasting her, until he felt his teeth start to grow and sharpen. Backing off, he allowed Paxton to catch her breath. Her chest bellowed against his and he savored the soft, warm weight of her body.

“If you don’t want this, you better say so now. In a minute I won’t be able to stop.”

Paxton licked her lips, making Seth think about that tongue on his cock, tracing the thick vein that ran its length or sliding through the slit at its head.

He dropped his chin toward his chest. She would kill him before any damn panty bandit would.

“And what if I don’t want to stop?”

Seth smiled, opening his mouth to remind her what she was getting into. For a split second her eyes widened, but then she rubbed a thumb over his upper lip.

“Is it really as fantastic as they say it is?” she whispered.

“Is what?”

“Sex with a vampire.”

He hoped to God she wasn’t doing this just to get her rocks off with a vampire.

He shrugged. How the hell would he know since he’d never been a human. “I’ve never had any complaints.”

“I love a man with a big ego,” she said sarcastically, then grabbed his ears and pulled him closer. “Now let’s hurry. Gutiérrez is out there waiting for us to check out, and I don’t need to add any more fuel to the fire of the gossip hounds.”

Though he had to wonder about her abrupt change of mind, especially since she’d asked him about it being good, he slowly let her feet slide to the floor, giving her plenty of time to feel the erection she’d caused. He searched her face for any sign that she didn’t want what she said she did. He guessed there was no question when she attacked his fly, tearing at the button and zipper like a woman possessed.

Placing his hand over hers, he stopped her. “Whoa.”

She looked up at him as if he were crazy.

“I’m serious, Paxton. Make sure this is something you want because this won’t be a one-time thing for me. If you’re looking for a one-night stand”—he gritted his teeth against what he was about to say—“then...”

“I thought one-night stands were all vampires—” She looked as though she was having a battle in her head. Finally, she said, “I’m not sure I can do one-night stands either, Seth.”

Thank heaven.

More than one night meant he had a longer time to convince her his race wasn’t as horrid as she believed.

“Then by all means, be my guest.” He relinquished his hold and let his arms sag to his sides. Within seconds she had his cock out and in hand.

Holy shit. He was sure his head would explode. Her touch was exquisite, her fingers slowly squeezing his length, giving a rub around the head, then back down, some sort of twist, up, over, around, down. Seth sucked in a breath and felt his body waver.

“Stop,” he panted, never remembering a time when any other woman could literally bring him to begging. And he’d lived a long, long time. Two hundred and forty-two years meant a lot of women had graced his bed.

But none had been his mate. None had mattered.

He carefully lifted her hands away from his rock-hard cock and placed them above her head.

"Do not move them," he growled, and emphasized his point by curling her fingers around the vests hanging behind her.

Paxton nodded, her breath still coming hard. "Just hurry."

He kissed her hard and quick. "I'll hurry. This time, baby. Next time, there will be no such thing as hurry."

A few heartbeats later he had her pants off along with her shoes and panties.

"How'd you do that?" she croaked, staring at her clothes on the floor as if they'd jumped off her by themselves.

"Vampire ability. Now where were we?"

"I'd say, about here." Her legs hefted upward, wrapping around his waist and nestling her wet, heated pussy against his cock.

He looked up to find she'd moved her hands from where he'd put them and now clung to the bar the vests were hung on.

"You're going to kill me, woman."

"Oh, did you need a vest already? I can't even reach my panties. Surely they won't hurt you lying on the floor."

An inhuman snarl rumbled out of his chest, surprising her. She squeaked and nearly lost her hold. Seth hauled her to him, breaking her grip and sinking his cock into her very tight sheath at the same time. She gasped and he swore he heard her mutter, "Oh, fucking gods above."

He thought he heard because he was too busy trying not to pass out from the feel of his mate surrounding his cock for the first time. Even his wildest imaginings didn't measure up to this.

"Why the hell have I been denying myself?" Paxton breathed.

"What was that?" Seth wondered if his eyes were crossed. They sure as shit felt like they were.

"Nothing. Move. We're in a hurry, remember?"

"Most definitely." He pushed her back against the wall of vests and thrust his hips, impaling her to the hilt.

Then thanked God he didn't come with the first penetration.

"Oh my God, what did you just do?"

Seth withdrew, sucking in a breath at the feel of her sheath pulling at his cock. "This," he said, sweat beading on his forehead as he thrust back in.

"Yes, yes," she panted. Her eyes slid shut and her chest pushed out, pressing her nipples against the fabric of her shirt and reminding him there was more to taste.

He unbuttoned the silk, exposing her bra and plump breasts. His mouth watered, and if his teeth weren't already down, they would have descended now.

Paxton grabbed his collar and bumped his nose with hers. "Don't stop."

He calmly flicked the closure between her breasts, releasing the magnificent mounds. Her nipples, stiff peaks, a beautiful mauve, begged for his mouth, his lips. The pale skin above those taut beads waited patiently for his bite.

He wasn't a patient sort of man.

Seth swooped in and licked a turgid nipple, curled his tongue around it and flicked it, wringing another long groan from Paxton. Her hips shot forward, setting a pace of her own on his erection. He palmed her buttocks and held her tight.

"I will smack you," she snapped.

Seth chuckled. "I'm going to bite you, baby."

"Whatever, just...make me come."

"I will. Promise."

Placing his lips on the fleshy part of her breast, he gently nipped her skin. To add to the sensation, he withdrew from her pussy once again. He couldn't wait any more himself. Twice more he penetrated her. Sweat dripped from his brow.

Juvenile, he chastised himself. Getting off with very little effort.

Paxton whimpered in his arms. "Please."

I love you. He sank his incisors into her chest, hugging her tight when she sucked in a breath.

Warm, tinny, nectar-of-the-vampire-gods blood flooded his mouth, his senses. Better than any he'd ever tasted in all his life. She was his essence. She was his mate.

His.

All his.

Her head fell back in ecstasy as an orgasm washed over her. Her thighs tightened around his waist, her heels dug into the small of his back. She cried out as her pussy clenched his cock, dragging his own climax from him. Pump after pump of come shot from the tip, drenching her womb with his DNA, starting the process of their mating.

He traced her mind, looking for a connection and finding one almost immediately.

"That's it, Princess. Take me. Make me yours."

"Huh?"

He felt her head snap up above where he drank from her. Careful not to drain too much, he stopped his feeding, sealing the wound with a long lick on the mark. As his mate, his bite would remain on her skin, a reminder to all others like him that she belonged to another.

To him.

He could hardly believe it.

Seth gradually lifted his head, unable to take his eyes off the mark he'd left.

"I barely felt it." Her voice was scarcely a whisper as she reached to move her shirt out of the way so she could see what he'd done. "Did you just talk in my head?" This time her voice was laced with a tinge of anger.

"I did." He kissed her nose, unwilling to slide from her vagina just yet, content to be part of her forever.

"Oh my God, we just fucked in the cage." Her eyes widened and Seth had a feeling she wasn't only concerned with them fucking in the cage, but with them fucking at all.

Paxton dropped her head to Seth's shoulder. How long had they been in here? Five minutes? Ten? Would Gutiérrez come looking for them? Shit. He would find them half naked and her with a vamp's cock riding snugly in her nicely satiated pussy.

She so should have done this sooner. Why oh why had she listened to her brain and done her best to stay away from Seth? Her next thought? Why on Earth had she done this?

Seth snorted in her ear.

"Okay, dammit, if what we've done just enabled you to talk in my head or...or, read my mind, or whatever, you better just stop right now."

"It's not necessarily sex that makes me able to talk in your head. I just can with certain people. Those open to it. Others are closed up tight. Sex can help open those doorways, though. Frees the mind somehow."

His tongue lapped at her earlobe. She mewled. Mewled! Like a freakin' cat getting her head scratched.

"Meow..."

"Oh, for God's sake." She reared back and smacked her new lover upside the head. Her new lover! A freaking vampire lover. Oh, she had sunk low.

This made him laugh harder. "I am sorry, Princess. You are an open book right now, broadcasting everything. This is so new to you, it will be impossible for me to keep out for a short time. It gets easier."

Something nagged at her, and she thought about what he said for several heartbeats.

"So if sex is one way to open the doors...how is it that you and Cap can talk? Please God, don't tell me you're bi or something, cuz if you're doing the captain—"

He put a hand over her mouth, effectively shutting her up.

"I am not doing your boss, nor am I bi. I told you. Some people are naturally receptive. Quinn happens to be one of them. It's not something he tells anyone, we just sort of happened across it one day and we use it to our advantage. That's all." He grinned and lifted her, which allowed his penis to slip free from her body.

She bit her lip and swore not to protest at the movement, at the sadness of not being filled by him anymore. She was not sad, dang it.

Seth set her on her feet and steadied her with his hands on her shoulders. The cool air of the cage against her skin made her shiver as she looked for her clothes.

“We have to get out of here. Jesus, I am so gonna get talked about,” she muttered, thinking about her partner and all the other detectives razzing her. As if that were worse than giving herself to a vampire. Hello, notch on the bedpost.

“No one will know,” he said in all seriousness.

“Oh yeah?” Her panties were still stuck in the waist of her pants and she pulled both garments on while Seth zipped his luscious—yes, she admitted to herself, the man was hung nicely—cock back away. She almost said goodbye to the damn thing and watched it longingly as it disappeared behind the denim.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to wipe their memories or something?” She reached for the edges of her bra to reconnect them only to have her hands swiped away. Seth did the job, lingering a tad and brushing his thumbs over her still very-sensitive nipples.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured.

Paxton swallowed at the heat she saw in his eyes and suddenly hated her job. All she wanted to do was take Seth home and make love to him all night long.

Oh God, she didn’t. She didn’t want that.

Did she?

He smiled again.

“All right, you bastard, you have to stop that.”

“I am sorry.” He wrapped his hand around her nape and nuzzled the side of her neck with his nose. She swore he inhaled her.

“Mmm...” he hummed against her throat.

“Oh Jesus. You must have taken too much blood because there is no way I should be enjoying this.”

“Are you weak?”

“N-no. Not yet.” She angled her head for him. “Are you going to bite me again? Cuz then I’m thinking I might like to get a little weak.”

“I won’t let you faint, Princess.”

She stepped back out of his reach, yanking the silk shirt together to cover her breasts. Wasn’t she just a fountain of contradictions? One minute she hated the man, the next she was ready to graciously offer herself as a snack. Fucking vampire mojo making her do things she didn’t want.

“Why do you keep calling me that?” she grumbled, doing her best to get back on level ground.

Seth sighed, which only served to fill her with dread. She wasn't going to like what he had to say, she knew it.

When she finished buttoning the shirt, he took one of her hands in both of his and kissed each fingertip. "I promised we'd talk about it. But here"—he glanced around the dim cage—"is not the place for it. Besides, we're late and Luke will be waiting for us. I'm sure you know how impatient he can be." He grinned once more and Paxton was astonished to see his wicked incisors shrink into regular teeth.

"Fine. Later." She whipped around, not wanting him to see how he affected her. Not that he couldn't pick her brain and discover all of her dirty little secrets if he wanted to, apparently. "You still need a vest."

She shivered at the strange snarl at the back of her neck.

"For you, I will wear one."

"Christ, you idiot." She slapped his chest. "You're going to get me demoted from detective to beat cop if you don't wear the damn thing. Granted, we're going into a woman's house to see the damage done to her underwear drawer, not staking out Al Capone. Do I think you'll get shot by anything other than a possible errant mothball? No, but too fucking bad cause it's policy. P-O-L-I-C-Y. Take the fucking thing and shut up or I'll shoot you myself." She was steaming. Her face had to be an angry red, based on the heat she felt there. His defiance was pissing her off.

She'd called him an idiot. And he guessed he was being one in human terms. As a vampire, bullets couldn't hurt him, silver or not. He healed very quickly. Even a shot through the heart wouldn't do much harm, and he hated wearing the somewhat-inhibitive vest. It was especially ridiculous considering the nature of the case. He rather doubted the man, or woman, who'd been swiping unders was likely to pull a gun should they happen upon him or her. Their bandit seemed to be more the grab-and-go kind of snatcher. He hit when no one was home and was gone within minutes.

Now, should they stab a stake through Seth's sternum, there might be a problem. If someone were around to help pull it out before too much damage was done, he'd live through it. He'd had it happen once about a hundred years ago even, and he was still around to talk about it.

Not that he did.

Seth watched Paxton stalk away, a vest in hand that she'd held up to his chest for sizing, and shook his head. Not many women had questioned him in all his years. He wasn't used to being told what to do. He guessed he'd need to learn how to cope because Paxton, he was sure, would question him a lot. It was her nature to be inquisitive. It was one of the reasons she made such a good detective.

When Paxton opened the door, he heard Gutiérrez grunt across the hall. The sound snapped him from his thoughts, and suddenly there was a palpable release of tension from the room. Sexual tension. He hadn't come close to sating himself with her and hoped they could dispense with their fact-finding mission as quickly as possible.

“Get what you came for, Tenor?” Gutiérrez sneered.

Paxton didn’t stop walking, but Seth noticed the way her shoulders stiffened. Her chin rose before she answered the cocky bastard Seth automatically wanted to put his fist through.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“I think you got a button missing there, uh, Detective.”

Paxton’s gaze shot downward, Seth growled and pushed past her.

“Don’t be an ass—” Paxton hissed.

“I’ll handle this.” He shoved Paxton behind him and faced the simpering officer. “We came to get a vest and left. Nothing else.”

Gutiérrez cleared his throat, then looked at his paperwork. “Find one?” he asked as if nothing were out of the ordinary, like he couldn’t tell a vampire and a detective had just stepped out of the cage flushed from sex.

Paxton’s jaw dropped. Seth nudged her forward with a hand at her back. “I believe you need to sign something, Detective.”

“What? Oh, right.” She scrawled her name and got the hell out of there as though someone were chasing her with a gun.

“How did you do that?” she snapped when they were safe in the stairwell.

He took the vest from her and winked. “Vampire power,” he whispered, like he wanted to keep it secret. The expression on her face was priceless and made him laugh.

“You mean you weren’t kidding about wiping their memories clean?”

“When it suits me.”

She stopped dead on the steps. “Have you done that to me?”

“No. I didn’t get in your head until oh”—he glanced at his watch—“ten minutes ago.”

“You talked to me earlier tonight,” she accused. “Which is disturbing. You know that, right?”

“I spoke to you telepathically. I didn’t read your thoughts.”

Because she was standing one step above him, they were about the same height. He leaned in and rubbed his lips across hers before gently fixing her misbuttoned clothing.

“And there was nothing disturbing about what we just did. I, for one, can’t wait until we can do it again, properly.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Is there a way to have sex properly?”

“Yes.” He kissed along her jaw and up to her ear. “When I can have you spread out, naked, open for my touch, my mouth, my cock. There won’t be an inch of you I won’t have covered by the time I’m done with you, Princess.”

Paxton shivered. “Do I get to reciprocate? No, wait, don’t answer that.”

“Most certainly.”

“I said don’t answer. We shouldn’t have done what we did. Ooh, can we go now?”

“Just one more thing.” He grasped her face in his hands and held her still for a long kiss, something he couldn’t resist. “Now we can go,” he said, separating himself from her. Turning her around, he patted her butt. “Get moving, Princess, we’ve got an investigation to get to.”

Luke met them at his and Paxton’s desks where Paxton retrieved her own vest. Seth deduced immediately that his best friend knew what they’d done in the cage. His words confirmed it.

“Bout time you got that out of the way.”

Paxton punched her partner on the shoulder for the second time that night.

“Ouch,” Luke complained, rubbing at the spot. “It’s only the truth. You two have been dancing around each other for too long. I’m tired of mediating.”

“I hardly think you’ve done anything close to mediating, you horse’s ass.” She rummaged through the notes on her desk with her free hand.

Seth ignored him completely and instead turned to Paxton. “I told you it would be all right up here.” He nodded toward the few officers still working this late at night. Not one of them looked their direction or laughed or whispered to each other the way she’d envisioned.

Paxton rolled her eyes. “Because you messed with everyone’s thoughts.”

“No I didn’t. Only Gutiérrez’s. He needed a good sweeping anyway. I should have done more than make him think we’d only been in there a couple of minutes. Like break his nose for the things he was thinking about you. Boy’s got a mind like an open book.”

“Fucker.” Luke’s jaw ticked. “I’d have paid money to see you put your fist through his nose. I thought that asshole had his eye on you, Pax. Damn, I wish I could do that mind-wiping thing. There’s quite a few people I would have done it to a long time ago.” He turned back to Paxton. “You ready?” Luke led them out the door to one of the department’s unmarked SUVs, still grumbling about the asshole Gutiérrez. “Have everything you need, Toothy? Kitty litter, kibbles?”

Seth smacked the back of Luke’s head. “Shut up.”

“What’s he talking about?” Paxton asked.

“Nothing.” Damn Luke and his big mouth. Not that Paxton wouldn’t know soon enough what Luke kept jabbering on about, but still. He needed to be the one to tell her about his other persona. Seth could only imagine how well she’d take the new information.

He’d expected Paxton would get in the front with her partner, but she surprised him by stashing her vest in the passenger seat then following Seth into the back and shutting the door. Her scent would drive him crazy no matter where she sat. So would his cock. Damn thing hadn’t gone down yet and was ready, willing and able to take her again. In fact, the backseat looked plenty big enough.

“Kitty’s gonna come out and play tonight.” Luke shoved the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life. The man sounded like Santa Claus was about to bring him the present he’d been waiting all year for. Seth was half surprised Luke hadn’t clapped his hands in excitement.

“Still lost.” Paxton rolled her eyes and turned to face Seth.

Seth sighed, not wanting to have this conversation at the moment. But he had a feeling she wouldn’t let it go. Best he divulge the information right now and get it out of the way.

He contemplated the best way to tell her about his jaguar third.

“Might as well spit it out,” Luke offered. “If you already mated with her, it’s not like she won’t find out.”

“You’re not helping,” Seth snapped. He turned to Paxton who sat waiting, not quite patiently. She’d sucked one cheek in and one eyebrow rose to meet her bangs.

“I think I’d like to talk about the whole mating thing later. Right now I’m interested in the kitty part.”

Seth cleared his throat. “Jaguar, actually.”

She twirled her hand in the air. “And...”

“I am one of a few rare vampires who can shape-shift.”

“So forgive me for being clueless here, but what exactly does that mean? You mean like a werewolf?”

“For lack of a better visual, yes. I can become a jaguar.”

“Huh.” She sank back in the seat and seemed to absorb that bit of information. A minute later, when he thought perhaps she was taking it better than he expected, she jerked forward and shrieked, “You can turn into a jaguar?”

“Let me start at the beginning,” he said, begging her to hear him out. “You already know that thirty years ago a large coven of vampires were discovered in New York. The spiral-down effect had all of us coming out of the woodwork to show ourselves.”

“Right,” she agreed, encouraging him to keep going.

“Well, there are some of us, very few of us, who can shape-shift. Many hundreds of years ago, a vampire mated with a jaguar shifter, creating a dual being.”

“How few?”

“About ten. Not here in the States, but Europe. I think there’s a couple in Australia.”

“And no one knows about this?” She had a look on her face like she didn’t quite believe him.

“Some do. Luke, Captain Quinn, Leid’s, and various other vamps here and there. Most vampires believe us to be some kind of legend. A story passed down through the generations. Others feel we’re some kind of royalty.”

“That’s why he calls you a prince.”

“Yes.”

“What else? I suppose you’re going to tell me now there’s a whole race of shape-shifters out there too.”

He nodded. “There is.” Of course shape-shifting was the stuff of legend too. God help the public when that secret came out. “A hell of lot more than there are vampires. Creating shifter offspring is ten times easier than vampire conception. While shifters mate for life the same as vamps do, they have the added advantage of being able to pair with either human or shifter. And their human mates can bear shifter children, male and female. Only vampire males carry the so-called blood-sucking gene. If we are lucky enough to find the one human woman meant for us, we still run the risk of our line being discontinued. The woman might not bear him any children, or she might conceive a girl. A human girl. To be cherished, yes. Perhaps to be applauded for not having to live the life of a blood-sucker, but she would still be human. Without a son, a vamp’s lineage is discontinued. Even though a vamp might live a few hundred years, and his mate a much longer than normal life, the end of his life would be just that. The end. So far there has been a boy child in each of my previous generations. And, for whatever reason, even though the jaguar gene can be passed on to a female, it seems to have skipped all the females in my family tree.”

“I see.”

Did she? Based on the speculative look on her face, Seth sort of doubted it.

Chapter Four

“All right, dammit, what other superpowers do you have?” she asked after she’d calmed down enough to speak without shouting. He had dropped a bomb in her lap after all.

The night kept getting weirder and weirder. First she’d had sex with the one species she’d said she never would, now she’d found out this same man could become a freaking jaguar.

She had to be dreaming.

“I can make things move with my mind.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” she yelled, despite doing her best not to, and hurting her own ears in the confines of the car.

He smiled and placated her with his palms out. “I’m kidding. I’m kidding. There’s nothing else.”

“Only if you consider that mind-bending thing nothing else,” Luke said from the front seat.

“I do not.” Who the hell had she been kidding? *I don’t think I can do one-night stands either?* One time with Seth was going to have to be enough no matter how much her body wanted a repeat. Never in a million years could she live in his world, nor did she want to. They were on complete opposite sides of the spectrum. She a human with no abilities whatsoever, he a freakin’ royal bloodsucking fiend who could become a jaguar and get people to forget who they were.

“Seems there’s a lot we need to talk about later,” she grumbled.

“Seems so.” He put his arm around her shoulders and damn him if the position didn’t feel absolutely perfect.

She didn’t want to feel perfect with him. Not when any relationship between them was obviously doomed from the get-go.

“You’re breathing too hard.” His lips brushed against her ear and she nearly broke down and straddled his lap.

What the hell was wrong with her? He’d turned her into some kind of raving nymphomaniac.

“What did you do to me?”

He looked surprised when he pulled back from kissing her jawline. She ought to be punching him in the nose for doing so while her partner sat not three feet away. So why wasn’t she?

“Do to you?”

“Yes,” she hissed, lowering her voice so Luke might not be able to hear. “Did you drug me or something?”

Now he simply looked amused. “And just when would I have done that?”

“I don’t know, maybe your saliva is enhanced. Or your semen, I don’t know.”

Semen.

Son of a bitch. The mention of semen made her realize they hadn’t used any protection back in the cage. Another thing they would have to talk about without Luke’s prying ears.

“I’m not aware of either my saliva or semen having drugging properties, Princess.”

“Don’t call me Princess.”

Seth grabbed her hand and laced his fingers through hers. Again, his touch soothed her.

“I can’t promise the word won’t slip through my teeth.”

“Try really hard.”

“You are hilarious, you know that, Pax?” Luke laughed from the front seat and glanced at her in the rearview mirror. His grin was so big it made his eyes crinkle.

“Don’t need your help.” She slouched in her seat, her cheeks heated because deep down she knew her partner was right. She was being silly about this whole thing. She’d fucked Seth; she’d gotten him out of her system. She could go back to hating him. Right?

“It’s true. You lust after the man for months—”

“I did not,” she huffed, though it didn’t sound too convincing even to her own ears. Somehow the dumb man had eaten away little by little at her hatred and now he was making her rethink everything she’d ever thought about vampires.

“Everyone could see it, Paxy. They’re all talking about it. Keller and Matts took bets about when you would finally crack.”

“Are you shitting me?”

Seth’s thumb traced methodically over her palm now, calming her when she should be going crazy about her supposed friends taking bets over her.

“I lost,” Luke grumbled. “Cost me fifty bucks.”

“You swine. I’m sorry it wasn’t more.” She stabbed Seth in the stomach with her free hand, hoping to get a reaction out of him. After all, he was the other half of the bet. He didn’t move, just stared straight ahead and continued stroking her hand. His stoic behavior was starting to give her a sneaky suspicion.

“Did you know about this?”

“No. Wouldn’t have changed a damn thing if I did, except I can see it’s hurting you so I would have put a stop to it. Regardless, I still would have made you mine.”

“That sounds a little archaic. Are you going to drag me around by my hair too?”

“Perhaps. If that’s what you want.”

“Did you ever stop to think maybe I didn’t want to be yours?”

Luke turned the car and hit the brakes. It was only then that Paxton realized how far they'd come. They parked in front of their latest victim's house, a modest ranch at the end of a cul-de-sac. It was late but the house was lit up like a Christmas tree inside and out, as the occupant waited for them to arrive. Paxton wondered what the woman would think when they showed up with a vampire in tow to smell her intimates.

"Looks innocent enough. Wonder if we can get them to kill the lights," Seth said smoothly, and Paxton felt him shift subtly beside her.

"What for? We can't very well investigate in the dark." In the glow of the house's security beams Paxton watched Seth reach for the hem of his shirt and start to lift it.

"What are you doing? The vest can go on the outside." She yanked it up from the floorboard where he'd stashed his after getting in.

"I told you, I don't need a vest."

"And I told you I want to keep my detective status, so you wear the vest." She grabbed his shirt before he could lift it off and yanked his head close. "Don't temp me to shoot you myself, you jerk."

"Relax, Pax." Luke opened his door, illuminating the car with the interior lights.

Paxton gasped at the glow in Seth's eyes. She couldn't look away from the golden intensity that hadn't been there earlier.

"Remember I told you the kitty was coming out to play?" Luke said from his doorway as he shrugged on his own vest then a jacket to cover the Kevlar. She'd need to put hers on as well.

She searched Seth's face for an explanation. He laid his lips on hers.

"Everything will be fine. I promise."

"So what? You're just gonna...what? What exactly are you going to do?"

"Like Luke said. Let my kitty free." He smiled as if he were excited about the prospect.

She swore he purred. But she refused to believe the sound make her clit tingle.

"That's great. Aren't jaguars like, really big? Don't you think that'll look a little strange, having a gigantic *kitty* wandering around with us? I hardly think asking our victim to allow a jaguar to roam through her house will go over well."

He kissed her again, somehow opening her mouth and rubbing his tongue along hers before pulling away again.

"Which is why I asked you to kill the lights. You guys can take care of keeping her occupied while I search."

Dammit. She narrowed her eyes. "And just how will you see, *Toothy*?" Pathetic. Why was she needling him when he was here to help catch a two-bit thief?

"Ever heard a cat ask you to turn on the lights so he could see to pee?"

"Uh, dur. No."

“Exactly.” He ripped off the shirt. “I have excellent eyesight, Princess. Better than my normal superior vamp sight. Having those ungodly beams turned off is all the protection I need. It’ll keep the neighbors from seeing the *kitty* walking around.”

His hands went to his waist and unbuttoned then unzipped. “Very few people know about my jaguar side, Paxton. I have the added advantage of being mostly black spots. It’s a nice camouflage. Thus, I’ll blend right in with the night. Without the lights, no one will see me.”

“Fine.” If he wanted to out himself, she wasn’t going to stop him.

The house suddenly went dark. Luke had obviously used his charm and got the owner to turn the lights off.

“Try not to get lost in the underwear.”

He smiled. “I’ll do my best. I’ll sneak around a bit while you talk. It won’t take the cat’s nose long to get what you need. Then when you’re done here, you and I are going back to your place to finish what we started in the cage.”

The glow flickered in his eyes, sending an arrow of heat to her clit. “Why my place?”

“So you can kick me out if it gets to be too much for you.” He lifted his hips and shucked his pants, leaving him gloriously naked. Paxton licked her lips and almost leaned over to taste the erection standing so proudly upward. She was damn glad the car and the darkness shielded him from lookie-loos.

“It won’t be too much.” Was that her raspy voice? *One-night stand, remember? Jesus you’re getting soft.*

“I hope not.”

His skin rippled, muscles bunched. “It’s time. If you don’t want to see this...”

“I want to.” How could she not? Was it painful?

He morphed. One minute he was human, or at least, human-like, all hard-muscled flesh and soft skin, the next he was feline, sleek black-spotted, tawny fur and swishy tail. Those glowing eyes were the same though. He took up almost all of the backseat and if she hadn’t scampered to the far door, he would be lying on top of her. As it was, his nose twitched on her crotch and she found herself spreading her legs to grant him access.

Oh God. She was a freak, letting a man-eating *jaguar* nose her clit when she should be pissing in her pants. She bit her lip to keep from making any noise as he did so.

A long pink tongue whipped out and licked her core through her slacks, and she wished them gone so she could feel it against her skin.

“You’re losing it,” she whispered.

The cat purred in her lap, his tail batted at the door.

“Not losing it, Princess.”

Paxton blinked. “You can hear me?”

The cat nodded. She hesitantly put her hand on the massive head of the jaguar and petted the smooth fur. “Incredible.”

The knock on the door behind her made her jump. Luke stared back at her, a shit-eating grin on his face. She opened the window.

“Mind if I let the cat out of the bag?” he asked.

A low sort of growling hiss filled the air.

“I think he would prefer to stay.” *I know I would prefer it.*

Shit. She hadn’t thought that.

“After, Toothy,” Luke admonished. “Work first, play later.” He pulled the door open.

Paxton was so close, smashed up against it really, that she fell out. Her partner caught her only to be serenaded by another growl from Seth.

“Down, boy,” he joked, then turned serious. “We’ll be meeting in the living room, Seth. No one else is home. The woman’s a widow and here alone tonight, but I convinced her to douse the high beams at least while we’re here.”

Seth nodded in response then jumped out. He must have weighed two hundred pounds. He was right though. In the dark no one could see the jaguar alight or stalk off to the scene. Hell, she couldn’t see him after fifteen yards or so. He just kind of vanished right near the corner of the house.

A dog started barking, then another and another until it seemed the entire neighborhood’s dogs were voicing their displeasure.

“Yep,” Luke snorted. “The kitty is real good at bringing out the best in his canine companions.”

“Is that what all the noise is about?”

Paxton snagged her vest from the front seat as an inhuman screech strong enough to vibrate in her chest ripped through the night. She pictured the man she’d very recently made frantic love to and then watched turn into a huge black-spotted panther, tell all the obnoxious dogs to shut the hell up.

She was close to covering her ears when the barking suddenly stopped.

Should she be concerned that she wanted to spend more time in bed with a man who was not only a vampire but also had the ability to become a feline?

A rather large, scary-looking feline with teeth big and sharp enough to rip her to shreds? Not that a vamp’s teeth were any different, but still, those had brought blinding pleasure. She had a hard time thinking a jaguar’s teeth would be anything less than excruciating.

“Am I dreaming?”

Luke pinched her arm.

“Ow. What’d you do that for, asshole?”

“You asked if you were dreaming. I was only confirming you weren’t.”

“Crap. This day has been really weird.”

“Always is with Seth.”

She cleared her throat, not willing or ready to delve into her conflicted feelings concerning Seth. “So how, exactly, is this going to work?”

“He’ll pick up any scents and try to match them to a person later.”

“And this is going to hold up in court how?”

“Hey, he just points us in the right direction. We have to do the rest.”

“Right. Shall we talk to Ms. Carmichael?”

“Yep.”

After Paxton fastened her own vest on and covered it with the jacket she always left in the back, they joined the middle-aged woman at the front door where she waited for them. Ava Carmichael looked sweet, but she was noticeably nervous and probably feeling rightfully violated.

“Ms. Carmichael, I’m Detective Paxton Tenor.” She took the seat Ava indicated she should on a mauve, flowered sofa.

Luke excused himself on the grounds of checking the perimeter of the house, and Paxton wondered if he’d only done so to let a gigantic cat into the home.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Ava bit her lip, her eyes following Luke as he walked toward the kitchen.

“No, no. Thank you though.” Paxton could only imagine what the older woman would find if she let her go fetch drinks. Maybe she should ask Ms. Carmichael to leave a bowl of warm milk out for the kitty.

She couldn’t help but listen for any indication that Seth was inside already. There wasn’t any, and a few minutes later Luke returned from the kitchen area and sat next to her.

Paxton eyeballed her partner before speaking to Ava. “Did you notice any sign of forced entry after you got home?”

“No. Nothing,” Ava said, twisting her hands. “Everything seemed normal until I got into the bedroom and found my...underwear on the floor.” Her cheeks took on a red hue under Paxton and Luke’s watchful gazes.

“Does anyone besides you have a key to the house? Do you keep a spare outside or at a neighbor’s?” Luke asked.

“My neighbor has a key. And my son.”

“Your son?” Paxton sat forward on the couch.

“Yes. He’s away at college. Well, not away really, but he lives at the dorms right here at Central State. He usually comes home on the weekends. This weekend he’s staying with a friend or else he might have been here when the burglar came. I’m so glad he wasn’t. I can’t imagine what might have happened if he’d been here.”

Ava rattled on about her son. “Chris is a good boy. Got himself together and went to college after his father died. I’m so proud of him. His father would be too. Getting straight As. He’s going to be a lawyer. So smart,” she said, rather emphatically Paxton thought, but nonetheless, the woman couldn’t tell them anything more about the break-in.

“Nothing else was taken?” Luke stood and took in the room. Paxton swore he cocked his head, listening for the jaguar roaming the house.

“No,” Ava said, blushing again. “Do you think this was that guy? That Panty guy I heard about on the news?”

“We don’t know that, Ms. Carmichael,” Luke answered, slipping toward the hall. “We’ll have the techs come and see if they can get any prints. Do you mind if I take a closer look?”

“Oh. I thought you had.”

“Actually I was making sure the perpetrator was no longer here. I only glanced over the scene as I walked through.”

Ms. Carmichael pursed her lips. It was clear to Paxton that Ms. Carmichael would rather Luke not look at her personals.

“Um, sure.” Ava led the way to her room and Paxton hoped to hell Seth wasn’t still there. She wasn’t sure how they would explain away a jaguar.

He wasn’t. The only things out of place were the two pairs of white silk panties on the floor and the open top right-hand drawer of the dresser.

“I didn’t touch anything.”

“Good,” said Luke. “Leave it this way until the techs get here. That’ll be sometime in the morning.”

“All right.”

“For tonight, keep your doors locked and don’t hesitate to call us for any reason.” Luke handed her a business card with his name and number on it.

The woman hugged it to her chest and Paxton couldn’t help but feel sorry for her.

“I will,” she said, lifting her chin, and Paxton wondered about the strange look in Ava’s eyes. They were almost sad. Regretful?

She showed them to the front door. “Thank you, again.”

“We’ll do our best to catch whoever did this.” Paxton put her hand on the woman’s arm to comfort her.

Ava nodded, her expression still sorrowful, and Paxton suddenly felt like the woman wanted to tell them more but couldn’t. Then she smiled, giving off a false sense of bravado.

“Maybe you could call your son to come and stay with you for the rest of the weekend. Might make you relax if you weren’t alone.”

For a split second, Ava’s eyes widened but then she nodded again. “I will.”

“Good.”

Paxton turned with Luke and walked back to the car. As soon as she heard the front door shut, she said, “Did you get the same strange vibe from her that I did?”

“Yep.”

“K. What the hell you think’s up with that?”

“I don’t know, but I’d love to be a fly on the wall when her son gets home. I couldn’t tell if she wanted to spoonfeed him, tuck him in or both, the way she talked about him.”

“Me either.”

A shadow passed in front of them about ten feet or so away. Paxton strained to see what it was, then yelped when two hands landed on her shoulders, nearly scaring the piss out of her.

“Hello,” Seth murmured, shoving his nose into her hair. He loved the way she smelled, and after having to root through another woman’s scent, he wanted nothing more than to replace the aroma with something much more desirable.

“Discern anything, Toothy?” Luke popped a piece a gum from his pocket into his mouth and wadded the paper in his fist.

“There’s only two scents in the house. The woman’s and a man’s.”

“That would probably be her son’s,” Paxton confirmed.

“He lives there?”

“Only on the weekends. He lives in the dorms at Central State during the week.”

“Ah.” Seth rubbed his thumbs along the back of Paxton’s neck. Her head curled backward in response.

“Ah, what?” Luke asked.

“Explains why his scent is so fresh.”

“Fresh?” Paxton lifted her head and looked over her shoulder at him. “Ms. Carmichael said he was staying with a friend this weekend.”

“Then he’s been home today because his smell is fresh and all over her room *and* the underwear on the floor.”

“Shit. Maybe he does the laundry?” Luke rifled his fingers through his hair.

Paxton cursed too. “I just told her to call him home to be with her.”

“Then we’ll post a car here. Maybe we’ll get lucky and she’ll do just that.” Luke took his cell phone from his pocket and turned to make the call for a surveillance team.

Seth snuggled against Paxton’s back, drawing her in to the curves of his arms and rejoicing when she didn’t pull away. She warmed him more than any clothes ever could.

Luke spun back around and flipped his phone closed. “There’s an unmarked car in the area. They’ll be here in about ten. I think I’ll wait with them. My curiosity is piqued now. In the morning we can meet at the precinct so you can match smells to the evidence we’ve already got. Maybe we’ll get lucky and get a match. Then again, it’s not too big a leap to find his scent in the house. He does live there after all.”

“No problem. I love smelling women’s underwear.” He grinned at Paxton so she would know he was teasing and got smacked on the chest for the effort.

“Um, Seth?” Paxton tugged at a few chest hairs.

“Yes?”

“You’re still naked.”

Damn straight he was. Being in his other form didn’t help. Always made Seth horny to let the cat loose.

No, that wasn’t true. Being in any form near Paxton made him horny. He wished they were anywhere but in the middle of a neighborhood, surrounded by cops and probably an entire street full of prying, nosy eyes. The only things keeping them from seeing a full-grown naked man was the fact they were behind the SUV in the dark.

He slipped into the jeans Luke handed him and zipped himself up.

“Hey, I’m man enough to say thanks for putting your sizeable piece away, Toothy.”

“Aw. Your ass still too sore, Lukey?”

“You know it.”

“Mine’s not,” Paxton declared, her eyes glued to his crotch.

Seth raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, ho. Not something I ever expected to hear from my partner’s mouth.”

Paxton snorted. “That’s because you’re too busy hearing it out of your own.”

Seth threw back his head and laughed, knowing Luke would never be offended.

“Now I know I’ll stay with the surveillance team while you two go work off some calories.” His friend dug the keys from his pocket.

Seth yanked his shirt over his head and addressed Paxton. “Are you sure you don’t need to be in on this?”

“Nope. Luke can handle it.”

“Good.” He grabbed the back of her head and tugged her to him. “I need you,” he whispered in her ear.

She paused before answering and Seth stopped breathing. When she looked up at him, he could tell she’d come to a major decision. “You can have me.”

He tore open the driver's door, pressed Paxton inside, forced her over the console and gear shift to the other side, then followed her in. He took the keys from Luke's outstretched hand, shoved them in the ignition and cranked the engine.

Before Seth slammed the door shut he heard Luke mutter something that sounded suspiciously like, "Lucky bastard."

Chapter Five

Paxton jerked off the vest and stowed it at her feet before buckling her seat belt. She had serious doubts about being able to make it all the way to her home before jumping the man sitting next to her. She had serious doubts about her sanity also, but she could no longer deny the feelings she had for Seth. Sometime during his romp she'd decided one bad vampire didn't mean the entire race was bad. After all, she dealt with the scourge of the human race every day. That didn't make all humans bad.

Dillon had been killed in cold blood by a vampire, yes. But he could have just as easily been killed by a human. She had to accept that fact and move on with her life. Dillon would want her to.

Besides, there was something hideously sexy about the way Seth had gone from virile, naked human male—Luke hadn't been kidding earlier about the nice size of heat Seth was packing—to sleek jaguar. If she hadn't already known of the existence of vampires, something straight out of supposed myths, she might have thought she was going insane. If there were vampires among them it didn't take much to leap to the conclusion there might be other things out there that went bump in the night. Like the other shifters he claimed lived among them.

"If you keep throwing pheromones, we won't make it." The smooth baritone of his voice made her clit tingle.

"Then we're in complete agreement. Nearest hotel?" He'd succeeded in turning her into a groupie, for God's sake. A raving nymphomaniac.

"You aren't a nympho, Princess. And I don't have groupies."

She hummed in response. "There's one way to keep our minds off sex 'til we get home."

"How's that?"

"I'm dying to know about how my dating you makes me a princess."

The steering wheel creaked where he gripped it. "We aren't...*dating*." He sounded pained to say that.

Paxton's heart sank and a lump formed in her throat, threatening to choke her. A groupie. Just like she'd thought.

"My mistake." They were merely on their way to tangling the sheets into oblivion. They only had sex going for them. In the cage. He was right, they weren't dating. She'd just thought what they'd done meant something more to him than scratching an itch.

"We're sort of...mated."

“Mated?” Her heart leapt this time, shooting north with hope. Mated sounded better than, “we aren’t dating”. Sounded a hell of a lot more like married. Long term. Happily ever after.

“Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t give you the chance to decide. You sort of went against everything I knew about you and surprised me. You were too hard to resist.”

“Right,” she murmured. “What, exactly, did you know about me?”

“Honestly? I thought you hated me. You did your best to avoid me, yet when you were close your body responded to me.”

She gasped. “I don’t hate you. Well, okay, I did hate you. Sort of. Not really you, but what you are. Because of what happened—I don’t hate you anymore.” She’d done her best to avoid him, yes, but only because she’d been afraid of what he was. And then there was the part where she’d worried about being a vampire’s one-night stand.

“Trust me, you’ll hold my interest. Forever.”

“And that mind-reading thing you do is a little weird, so try not to answer my thoughts a whole lot, ‘kay?”

“Promise.”

“Turn left at the next street.”

“I know.”

“So this mate thing...”

“I knew you were the only woman for me the first time I met you. I tried as hard as I could to stay away because Luke told me about your boyfriend, but being with you tonight pushed me over the edge. Jaguar shifters and vampires both mate for life. And remember that bit about the whole ‘royalty’ thing?” He turned to her and grinned. “I guess that sort of makes you my princess.”

She couldn’t resist. “Do I get a crown?”

He flicked his gaze to her and his mouth opened and closed. “I was joking. It’s really only an implied title, I don’t really—”

Paxton laughed. “I know, I know. I was kidding too.”

He pulled up in front of her house. “It’s probably not wise to kid me, sweetheart.”

“Oh, yeah? What’ll you do? Spank me?”

“For starters.”

Damn it. She’d been teasing. Partially. Now she was imagining her upturned ass and his big hand landing on her pale cheeks. Her face heated. She actually wanted him to spank her. Any other man, any other time, she’d have pulled her Glock on the dick and told him to get lost before she blew his head off.

And why the shit wasn’t she more concerned about his telling her she was his mate? She’d only just decided she didn’t want to stay away from him. Shouldn’t she be more worried about the forever part?

Seth was out of the car and around to her door before she could reach for the handle. He offered his hand. Who was she to say no? She accepted and allowed him to pull her from the SUV, trying her best to be patient when what she really wanted was to throw him to the ground and get him out of those clothes once more. Wouldn't the crotchety Ms. Stella across the street love that?

"I believe we talked of using a bed this time around. I'm all for standing when in a hurry but when I have the time, I like to be lying down where I can savor every single inch of your skin."

"You did it again."

He shrugged but didn't look the least bit contrite. "Sorry. Can't help it. You're in my head now. I only said I'd try and it's so new. Give me a chance to work on it."

Paxton shoved him forward. "Get in there before we get caught."

"Yes, ma'am."

She unlocked the door and kicked it shut when they were both safely inside, then attacked.

"Off. Now." Now that she'd made her decision about him, she didn't want to waste any more precious time being without him. He had to have drugged her. She suddenly didn't care.

His teeth descended. She blinked to make sure she'd really seen what she thought she had. Even if her eyes hadn't registered them, her nipples did. They peaked, hardening under her bra so they rubbed irritatingly against the cotton material. She jerked her shirt off while Seth, the maddening bastard, took his time, moving slow as molasses until she thought she'd go nuts.

He watched her as she toed her shoes off and kicked them across the entryway. The butt-hiding pants were next to go, following her shoes. She faced him in her bra and panties, her breath coming in pants.

"Damn it, why aren't you naked? Sure didn't take you any time when we were on scene."

One corner of his sexy mouth curved up. "Just watching the show, Princess." He twirled his finger in the air, asking her to turn around.

She did, glancing over her shoulder with a pout.

"Take off the panties. Slowly."

Paxton loved the guttural tone. He was just as affected as she was. She didn't need to see the impressive bulge at his fly to know it.

Still with her back to him, she bent ever so deliberately, dragging the panties down her legs as she went.

Lord. Not only had she become a nympho but an exhibitionist as well.

"Mine," he growled.

When she had the offensive material off, he grunted. "Spread your legs."

Her stomach fluttered as she complied. Never even thought of disobeying him.

"Grab your ankles."

Paxton moaned and wrapped her fingers where he wanted them, wondering what he saw when he looked at her this way.

“Beautiful.” He’d wandered over to her and now his fingertips brushed her backside, sending a shiver over her skin. He traced her crack, pausing for a moment to press gently on the one area of her body no other man had touched, before moving on to her slit and swirling in her juice.

“Oh God,” she whimpered, hanging her head when he reached her clit and trapped it between his thumb and forefinger.

His other hand slid up her spine to stop at her bra. He traced the material around to her front and unhooked the closure, causing her breasts to swing free.

“Stay,” he ordered when she would have wiggled to take the bra off.

Shock ripped through her along with a squeak when his tongue landed squarely on her anus, circling and tasting the tight ring which only got tighter when she squeezed her ass. A sharp slap landed on her right cheek.

“Relax.”

“How the *hell* do you expect me to do that?”

Chapter Six

Seth stroked the redness of the cheek he'd smacked. A pretty pink. Needed to be darker.

He struck it again, grinning at the groan the slap elicited. He found her clit once more and pressed. Paxton's knees quivered and for a second Seth thought she might collapse.

"I thought we were using a bed this time," she panted, her bottom tensing as he rubbed along her very wet pussy.

"Didn't know you were going to try and tempt me the second we walked in the door."

"Bullshit." She twisted and gave him a dirty look.

"I don't know. I kinda like you how you are, all bent over and open for me."

"Might be nice for you. You're not the one curled like a pretzel. The back won't hold out too long here. Besides, I've heard the rumor about how long vampires can last so starting out in this position might not be the best."

"Ah." Seth grazed his fingertips down her spine and laughed when her butt cheeks clenched again, trying to deny him access to the taut pucker there.

She could try all night. Eventually he would breach the barrier.

He patted her beautiful ass. "Stand."

She did. "I'm just gonna let you know right now, I'm not into BDSM. So don't think you can order me to do whatever you want and I'll bow down to your demands."

He nodded. "We'll see. Go get on your bed. I want you spread-eagle for me by the time I get my clothes off."

She licked her lips, and a split second later she bolted. Seth's jaguar purred at the sight of her round bottom in flight.

Using his vampire speed, he undressed and made it to her room just as she was turning around, on all fours, to face the door.

Lounging against the wall, Seth cocked an eyebrow. "I thought I said spread-eagle."

"Shit." Sitting, Paxton wrenched her head up and stared at him.

Her gaze took in his nakedness, raking him from head to toe, lingering on his stiff cock, before moving on.

"I'd love to taste your pussy, Princess, but you haven't done what I asked."

She looked at her lap. "Oh." Her legs shot open.

Seth smiled to himself as he crawled between her spread thighs, right to the heart of her, and licked her slit.

“Oh my God.” She collapsed onto her back. Her heels dug into the mattress and her thighs pressed in on his head.

He stopped.

“No, no, no. Don’t stop.”

“Legs wide,” he ordered, and waited for her to comply.

Her belly trembled under the hand he placed just below her navel, and she sucked in a breath.

“That’s my girl. Stay.”

Using his forefinger, he touched her, spreading her juices, circling her clit, teasing her until her hands fisted in the comforter.

He’d never seen anything more beautiful than the feast laid out before him.

Five feet seven inches of creamy flesh just waiting to be devoured. His incisors lengthened even more. Nibbling ever so gently at her labia, Seth worked a finger inside her sheath. She tightened on him, squeezing him with those inner muscles so he wished his cock was there instead of his finger.

He wanted her to come first. Screaming his name.

The pulse at the inside of her thigh called to him, beckoning him with its rapid tattoo. Who was he to resist?

Flicking at her clit with his tongue and thrusting his finger in and out of her heat, he drove her to the pinnacle. Her back arched and she held her breath, waiting for the exact moment of release.

He sensed it. A millisecond before she exploded, he bit her. Just as her sweet, tangy blood crossed his lips, bursting on his taste buds like a ripe, juicy peach, she shouted his name.

Her vagina gripped his finger in time with the throbbing at her clit as he took in her life’s blood.

He didn’t want it to end.

He carefully swiped his tongue over the punctures to seal them and rose.

Breathing heavily, Paxton’s body went lax.

“Not so fast, sweetheart.” He chuckled. She could barely open her eyes.

“Wha...?”

“My turn.”

“Oh, right. Uh-huh.” She tried to lift a hand to his face as he covered her body with his, his rigid cock nestled against her sopping folds.

On his knees, Seth grabbed hers and brought her legs up to his waist. The move aligned her opening with the head of his dick. The thick, broad head wept with pre-come as if begging for release.

“Fuck me, Seth.”

Her murmured plea pushed him into action. He slid inside her, only stopping when he came to the resistance of her womb.

She felt so perfect.

“You have a little...blood, on your lip. Right here.” Paxton reached for his mouth and wiped the spot away. She astonished him when she licked the evidence of his bite off the tip of her finger. “Warn a girl before you bite her next time, won’t you?”

“Sure.” He punctuated his answer by withdrawing from her pussy and driving back in.

Her eyes rolled.

“Fuck, that’s never felt so good before.”

“It better not have,” he growled. Thinking about her with another man was not acceptable.

“Do it again.”

“With pleasure.” His balls drew up tight. He wasn’t going to last with this slow thrusting. Hell, he wouldn’t last with fast either. Damn catch twenty-two. Damned if he did and damned if he didn’t.

Oh well, they had the rest of their lifetimes to figure out speed.

He watched his cock slide from her body, glistening with her come in the overhead light. He liked her like this, all spread out for his use, her body giving in to his demands. She might say she wasn’t into BDSM but he had a feeling she’d try anything he asked of her. He couldn’t wait to get her hands tied behind her back so he could bend her over, up on her knees with her cheek resting on the pillow while he fucked her ass.

“Please,” she ground out. “Faster.”

With her head thrown back, he clearly saw the pronounced vein carrying blood down her neck. He pounded into her, anxious to bite, to taste her yet another time.

“Do it,” she commanded in his head.

“Now who’s talking in whose mind?”

“Now who’s taking too fucking long?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The orgasm tingled at his balls, building until sweat formed on his forehead and dripped onto Paxton’s cheek. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. Her body seized against his, signaling her own release. The soft, fast *swoosh, swoosh* of her pulse drew him in. Pressing his lips to her throat, he waited for the precise moment when their climaxes would rush to the forefront.

Not yet...not...yet...

It slammed into him. With one final thrust, Seth buried his cock in Paxton’s pussy. She screamed his name again.

And Seth’s teeth sank into her jugular.

Her arms folded around him, hugging him close, keeping him from leaving.

"Silly girl. Never. I will never leave you."

"I know. I don't know how I know, but I do." She angled her head even further, allowing him total access to the rush of blood on his tongue.

"Taste so good, Princess."

"Just don't make too much of a habit of this or I won't be able to stand."

He sighed and closed the small wound, thereby cutting off the temptation of taking more.

She gripped him with her arms and legs when he tried to withdraw.

"I'm not going anywhere, Princess." He rolled, taking her with him so they lay side by side, facing each other.

Paxton tucked her head against his chest and shivered as the cool air wafted over her sweat-slicked skin. "How crazy would it be for me to say I think I love you?"

"Not crazy. I love *you*."

"Ugh. It's just so weird. I've done so well avoiding you and now after one romp in the sack I'm professing my undying love to you. Why?"

"Well, technically, that's twice we've made love. You forget the cage so quickly?" he baited. "It's the mating thing. Once I've come inside you we will always be connected. I guess it was nature's perverse way of tying a female to a vampire male. I don't really know." He tensed. "Does it upset you?"

Her head snapped up and she looked at him as though he were crazy. "No."

"Good." He tucked her head back under his chin, content to stay with her this way for eternity, skin to skin.

The phone rang.

"Shit."

"Let the machine pick up."

It rang two more times while they waited to hear if the caller left a message.

"Pax, since I couldn't get you on your cell, I figure you and Toothy are probably busy," Luke snorted into the machine, "but we got Ava Carmichael's son. Cap wants you and Seth to meet us at the precinct. Call me." The phone clicked off.

"Damn." Paxton groaned and stretched in Seth's arms.

"Probably won't take too long."

"I know." She yawned. It was the middle of night and while he was wide awake and fresh, Paxton probably wasn't used to keeping long nights all the time.

She scrambled off the bed and down the hall to look for her clothes.

"Speaking of semen," she said when she came back.

Seth cleared his throat before answering her. "Were we talking about semen?"

"Yes. We haven't used any protection."

He cursed himself for being so caught up in having her that he hadn't thought about protecting her.
"You're right. I'm sorry."

She waved him off. "I'm on the pill, so there shouldn't be a problem."

"Uh, about that."

"What?"

"The, um, pill won't have any effect on my sperm. I should have thought first. I'm sorry."

"You've said that." She touched her hand to her firm abdomen. "So you're saying I could have just gotten pregnant?"

"Are you fertile right now?" He hadn't smelled her ovulating, but then that had been the furthest thing from his mind.

She thought about it for a minute, mentally calculating, he guessed. "It's close."

Seth got off the bed, feeling like such a heel for letting her body get the better of his brain. "No use thinking about it right now. If it happens, we'll deal with it."

She nodded. "You're right. It isn't like getting pregnant is new to the world, right?"

He took her face in his hands and kissed her tenderly. "Not that I'm aware of." Of course, if she were to carry his child, there was a fifty-fifty chance she would also carry the new prince, the next generation of vampire shifters. The child would be special and extra care would have to be taken to ensure his safety. Not many knew of him, but of those who did, there were some who would like to see him destroyed.

"Besides," he continued, "it could always be a girl."

"And that matters why?"

"It doesn't matter to me. I just thought you might be more comfortable with another little human around than a miniature me."

"Oh." She looked a tad unsure which gave him hope. Perhaps she didn't care either.

Seth patted her butt, content with the knowledge she was altering her view of his species, and changed the subject.

"We better go. Impatient Luke, remember?"

Chapter Seven

Paxton thought she had herself composed, for the most part, by the time they reached the precinct. Tonight had been a roller coaster of emotions. She'd smeared on some lip gloss and even managed to make sure her buttons were done properly and that her pants weren't on backward or something equally as freakish.

"You look fine, Paxton."

"So says the man who just screwed my brains out."

"Hmm...if you're lacking brains, perhaps there's no reason to go in there."

She narrowed her eyes at him and flung the door open. "Maybe we shouldn't go in together."

"Still worried about your coworkers? Should I wait out here for a few minutes and act like I'm so happy to see you again once I get inside?" He grabbed her hand when she swung at him.

"This coming from a man. I'm telling you gossip amongst men can be worse than between women. And in a precinct, worse than anywhere else."

"I wouldn't think a woman like you would care what anyone else thinks."

"I don't, but it's damn hard to quell rumors. It's hard enough to be a woman in a man's world."

"So noted."

Seth half dragged her to the front doors. Really, why should she feel embarrassed by the act of walking into her own place of work with a man on her arm? She sucked in a deep breath and mentally pulled up her big-girl panties. Her coworkers hadn't said anything after the cage incident, and Paxton had a sneaking suspicion Seth would make it so they didn't say anything this time either.

Ava Carmichael sat at one of the officer's desks, clutching her purse in one hand.

"Ms. Carmichael?" Paxton asked, going over to her. The woman's eyes were filled with tears.

"They arrested my Chris."

"I think they're just going to question him right now, Ava." Paxton tried to console the poor woman who looked like she was going to collapse.

"Chris is not a bad boy, Detective. He just took his father's death very hard. He can't be blamed for what that other boy put him up to."

"Other boy?"

"Yes. I told them they had to talk to Chris's roommate, Brian, too if they were going to talk to my Chris. I know this is all Brian's doing."

“Well I’m sure they’ll question anyone they think might be involved.”

“Speak of the devil,” Ava spat, directing her gaze to front entrance.

Two policemen flanked a young man Paxton could only assume was the infamous Brian. He wasn’t handcuffed, which meant he wasn’t under arrest and had come willingly to be questioned, but he had a sneer on his face that made Paxton want to slap him.

Seth took her hand and started to push her in the opposite direction, an act that efficiently put him between her and the smirking, angry man.

“I am a cop, Seth. I don’t need your protection.”

“Sorry. Comes with the territory.”

“Well make it go away. I’ve got a job to do and you can’t hold my hand when I go on a case.”

“Too bad.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Too bad, he was going to do it anyway, or too bad, he wasn’t allowed to?

“You.” Ava leapt to her feet, her face an angry red. “My Chris wouldn’t be in this situation if it weren’t for you.”

The man laughed. “He’s in it because you smother him to death. You made him a momma’s boy.”

“He did it,” Ava shrieked, stabbing her finger in his direction.

Paxton’s heart nearly tore in half at the desperation in Ava’s voice. The woman stuck her hand in her purse and jerked out a knife, brandishing it in a fist above her head. Two officers jumped to get a hold of her before she attacked.

Seth was quicker.

“Knife,” Paxton shouted.

Every officer went for their weapons, drawing and pinning the woman in their sights. Even Paxton had hers in hand.

By the time she got her eye trained on the woman, Seth was already there. Her stomach rolled. In a blur of movement he’d put himself in the direct line of the knife-wielding woman whose arm was slicing through the air.

Seth jerked backward with a grunt, leaving a space between him and the stunned, wide-eyed woman. Paxton had a clear shot between two of her fellow officers and took it. Her aim rang true, punching into Ava’s upper arm and forcing her to drop the knife with a strangled yelp. The room descended. Half on Ava, pinning her to the ground, and half on Seth.

“Oh God, oh God.” She flew across the room to him, knowing he could have been stabbed anywhere. Blood poured from a wound in his side even as someone pressed on it. His eyes were closed, his body still.

“Goddamn you, Seth,” she cried, shoving an officer out of the way and kneeling near his head.

Someone yelled to call the paramedics but she heard Luke say behind her, “Don’t bother for Seth.”

Paxton turned and glared at her partner. “What the hell is wrong with you? We still have time.” Her face was wet with tears as she elevated his head and put it on her thighs.

Luke knelt beside her. “If you will give him some space he’ll be fine.”

“He’s not a fucking god, Luke, he’s a man.”

“He’s a vampire, Pax. He’s hurt, yes, but not mortally wounded. His body will heal itself in rather quick fashion.”

“How do you know?”

“His head has not been severed from his body,” Luke said dryly.

“I’m glad you can be so cavalier about this.”

He looked hurt by her words. “Have I ever lied to you, Pax?” he asked softly.

“No.” She could say that with one hundred percent certainty. Her partner had never once lied to her. Never pulled his punches. And he’d never been this quiet before. He was her friend more than anything, and she felt like she’d kicked a puppy the way he was searching her face with sad eyes.

Seth moaned. His head turned on her thighs, his hand lifted across his body to the knife wound on the opposite side and he peered down at the blood.

“Damn that’s a lot of...blood.” His voice quavered.

Paxton rubbed his cheek with her palm. “Nice to have you back, Toothy.”

He stared for another second at his side before looking up at her. His face leached of color and his eyes rolled back in his head. A heartbeat later his head lolled to the side.

“Seth.” She slapped at his cheek. “Oh shit.”

Luke cleared his throat. “Um...did I forget to mention he faints at the sight of blood?”

Seth tilted the bottle of Synth Cap had given him to his lips and drained the rest of the liquid. Someone had been thoughtful enough to warm it for him so it wasn’t cold the way they’d served it at the bar earlier.

“Feeling better?” Paxton’s fingers combed through the hair at his nape.

If she wasn’t careful he’d have her on her back right there on Cap’s couch. He might have gotten stabbed but he’d have to be dead, literally, not to want to fuck her.

“A little sore. Tomorrow I’ll be good as new.”

She grunted. “Any chance you’ll tell me how a vampire gets woozy seeing blood?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll just ask Luke then.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Well technically—”

He rounded on her, laying her back on the arm of the couch. "Listen, Princess, not one word unless you want me to strip off your pants and put my hand on your backside."

She smiled and smoothed a thumb over his eyebrows. "It's a really endearing quality for a vamp to have, don't you think? Makes you more...human."

He growled at her.

The door behind them opened. "Oh come on, now. I just had that couch cleaned."

Paxton squeaked and shoved at Seth's chest, trying her best to shove him off. He wasn't ready to move, though.

"Chris and Brian confessed," Cap said.

Seth watched Quinn sit at his desk, unruffled by the vision of one of his detectives under a vampire.

"Move it, Toothy," Paxton rasped, one eyebrow rose while she ever so lightly lifted her thigh between his to press against his erection. What man wouldn't back down?

They both sat up straight. Seth wrapped his arm around her shoulder and drew her closer, unable to be apart from her.

Luke entered, a Coke in one hand, and grinned. "You guys are so cute." He saluted Seth. "Nice one out there, by the way."

Seth nodded. He hadn't done it for himself. When he'd seen the woman pull a knife, the only thing he'd thought about was protecting his mate. If he'd saved another life in doing what he'd done, then great.

"Guy's name is Brian Zeebol." Cap stuck a pair of wire-rim glasses on his face and looked at the report he'd carried in with him. "Says he and Chris Carmichael started off stealing panties as a game. Who could get the most. Then it turned into who could fleece the most money off the undies by blackmailing their victims with photos. They were friends with the mayor's son and thus had access to his house. They were under the impression they were going to make a lot of money off Mayor Perkins's fetish."

Seth squeezed Paxton's shoulder. She melted into his side with a sigh.

Cap continued. "Chris was short a couple pair, though, so he got into his mother's drawer to even up the count with Brian. He was in a hurry and didn't realize he'd dropped some on his way out."

Foiled at last, Seth supposed. "His mother knew something was up with her son, didn't she?"

"Yes. She just didn't want to believe it. She's been on some pretty heavy meds since her husband died a year ago. Then her son got paired with his roommate, things went steadily downhill, and she unraveled. She'll be okay, by the way. You just nicked her. Seth's wound would have been much more life threatening than her scratch had he been human. Anyway, whenever you're good to go, get out of here, Seth." Captain Quinn stood and reached for a briefcase on the floor. "Got to get back to the wife myself. And don't bother coming in tomorrow, Paxton." There was a gleam in Cap's eye and Seth smiled. He'd have to remember to thank the man later. "You've got to talk to the psychologist before coming back anyway."

“How 'bout me? Do I get to go too?” Luke lounged against the doorframe. He tossed his empty can toward the trash and shrugged when it missed by a mile.

Cap looked over the edge of his glasses at him. “After you pick that up. Oh, and one more thing, Seth. Get whatever the hell you need to out of your system this weekend so I don’t have to send Lukey here after you anymore, would you?”

Paxton snorted and Seth laughed. He would certainly try and work some things out of his system in the next couple of days. He’d never get rid of it entirely, but he’d give it his best shot.

Luke flipped the captain off before heading for the can. On his way out the door he winked over his shoulder. “See you guys later.”

“Right.” With Paxton’s help, Seth pushed up from the couch, grimacing at the stitch of pain in his side.

“See, if you’d been wearing a vest, this wouldn’t be so bad right now.”

He cupped the back of her neck and planted his lips on hers. Deepening the kiss, he claimed her, letting her know who was boss.

“Won’t get you out of wearing one next time,” she whispered.

“I wouldn’t dream of putting myself in danger anymore.”

“Don’t forget you said that.”

“Never.” They walked side by side out of the precinct. Seth leaned on Paxton for support. The knife wound might not have killed him and it was healing at a fast rate, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt like hell.

“So, um, are you too sore to...”

Seth rounded on her, forcing her back against the car and lowering his mouth to hers. He swiped his tongue against hers, tasting her, feeling the rest of his life beginning.

“Never.”

About the Author

Annmarie McKenna lives in Missouri where she stays busy writing, shuffling four kids to various activities, and training for triathlons. She loves to hear from readers and can be reached at annmarmck@yahoo.com. To learn more about Annmarie, please visit www.annmariemckenna.com or join her Yahoo! group for updates on her latest releases or other information. [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Annmarie McKenna](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Annmarie_McKenna).

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Is it love? Or sabotage?

Between a Ridge and a Hard Place

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After a year of being ignored as a woman by her boss, Morgan steps up her game—and strips down. What better way than a miniskirt to capture her hardheaded boss's attention? The butt floss she can do without, but hey, if the ploy works...and it does, with spectacular results. Now if only she can keep him interested permanently.

Ridge can't believe it when the woman he's quietly lusted after for a year shows up dressed...or rather, undressed...to drop any man to his knees. Instead of worrying about winning a bid after losing the last two under strange circumstances, he whisks her to his place to demolish any notion she might have of changing her mind.

Then it becomes clear why his company is losing bids—there's a mole planted in their midst. Ridge suddenly has to question Morgan's sudden transformation from faithful P.A. to office vixen.

Is she the woman he's been waiting for? Or a corporate saboteur sent to take him down?

Warning: Contains several graphic love scenes. You know, on the bed, on the couch...whichever is closest at the time.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Between a Ridge and a Hard Place:

Ridge came to a dead stop at the door to his office, those fantastic navy blue eyes facing away from her, his hand resting on the knob.

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

He cleared his throat. "Morgan?" His voice cracked despite how he'd tried to avoid it, but he didn't turn.

His broad shoulders were rigid beneath the starched white shirt that tapered down to lean hips. His ass clenched under his slacks. Morgan did a double take. *His ass clenched?* Had to be her imagination. She openly gawked—he *was* facing away from her, after all. There! He did it again. This time she didn't miss the action. No doubt his jaw was making the same movement. The man had a tic in his jaw whenever he was angry.

"Morgan," he said with more force, snapping her out of her perusal of his very fine backside.

"Yes, sir?"

His shoulders relaxed, as did his butt. Damn. He nodded once. "Just making sure it was you." Why did he sound so strangled?

Oh that's just great. She'd worn the dang clothes for nothing. Ridge opened the door to his inner office and stepped through, having yet to meet her gaze. Stare. She'd been staring, no question. He paused

again and she thought this time he would face her, but after a slight hesitation and a shake of his head, he continued on. Perhaps her boss had been more affected by her virtual state of undress than he was prepared to be.

The corners of her mouth lifted. Maybe today would be her day after all.

Holy shit.

What the hell had happened to his PA? Taking a seat behind the huge mahogany desk that had been his grandfather's, he leaned a few inches to the left until he could see out the door to make sure he hadn't been dreaming.

Holy shit.

Nope. He'd seen right. His tomboy PA wasn't a tomboy anymore. She was all woman, and his cock agreed, coming to life to tent his slacks. Thank God he didn't have any clients this morning. In fact, if he could make it to the front door and turn the OPEN sign to CLOSED, he could make fine use of his massive erection. Too bad shutting out the public wouldn't keep the rest of the employees at bay. Hell, he needn't go any further than his own door to do that. All he had to do was bring her in his office, lock the door and—

Stop. Stop right there. This is your PA, for God's sake. He didn't date employees. Or fuck them on his desk with that glorious chestnut hair spread out across his memos, her legs wrapped around his waist while he plunged in and out of her sopping...

Holy shit.

Ridge shook his head to clear it. He didn't need this. It was hard enough to keep his mind from wandering to the woman just outside his door. The one he spent more time with and knew more about than any other woman in the world besides his sister and mother. The only one he really *wanted* to know more about.

Maybe she had a twin. Had to. Maybe Morgan was sick and she'd sent the identical twin she'd only met last night to take her place so she wouldn't have to take a sick day. No way would his sensible, blend-into-the-crowd Morgan ever show up at work dressed the way she was. It was inappropriate. It was scandalous.

He had to see the whole thing.

"Morgan, get in here," he barked. He should not be thinking about this right now. Their recent bid was what he should be focused on. The bid they should win hands down. But given the way their last two bids—which should have also been won hands down—had gone, he wouldn't take an easy breath until he saw a winning result.

"Yes, sir."

The shy, nervous reply made him lower his brows. She'd never been afraid of him. They had an easy companionship. He was her boss, she was his assistant, even though he wanted more and she'd never shown any interest. Hell, Morgan knew more about him than he did.

Holy shit.

Long, long legs—hell, those fucking pants she always wore had to go so he could see those beautiful legs of hers more often—balanced somewhat precariously on high heels. Not stiletto, but high enough, which made her legs look even longer.

A miniskirt covered the tops of her thighs. Barely. Just barely. Ridge swallowed and continued his open study of the transformed woman before him. A strip of tanned belly was visible between the fabric someone had deemed a skirt and the hem of her...tank top? Her small breasts strained the top, making his mouth water. He could even see her beaded nipples poking out, begging for him to take them in his mouth.

Holy—

“Goddammit.” How many times had he mentally repeated that phrase in the last few minutes?

Morgan jumped with a squeak and looked ready to bolt. Her gorgeous green eyes—now those he had noticed *many* times before—were wide disks on her petite face. Big enough to drown a man in. His erection jumped and he cursed under his breath when she took a step back.

“Stop.”

She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and looked anywhere but at him. Better get to the bottom of this now before he did ravish her on his grandfather's desk, OPEN sign and unlocked door, or not.

“Morgan, what's going on, sweetheart?”

Forever an outsider...until love beckons her home.

Trust the Moon

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In the small shifter community of Delta, Utah, there's no such thing as a stranger. Everyone knows everyone, so a new face in town doesn't go unnoticed. When a woman Dylan Peterson doesn't recognize shows up at his twenty-first birthday bonfire bash, he does what comes naturally as a host—he introduces himself.

The enigmatic Gena Pelletier is the most gorgeous woman he's ever seen, and the most aloof. A scorching encounter with her under the moon blindsides him, leaving him wondering what just happened—and watching her disappear into the night.

Gena wasn't born wild, but ever since her father's murder she's lived outside Delta borders on her own terms. She has no desire to return to civilization, not to its constraints, nor its rules. So what if Dylan is sweet and the sex is amazing? He's just a way to scratch an itch. Funny thing is, Dylan is an itch a one-time scratch won't satisfy.

Neither of them knows what to make of the other...and neither can walk away.

Warning: Contains graphic language, as well as hot shifter sex under the moon and in the water, long moonlit runs, and a hero bent on doing everything he can to show the woman he loves what happiness can be.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Trust the Moon:

Dylan sat perched on the roof of his house, his knees pulled up close to his chest, his eyes narrowed as he contemplated the moon. He clutched a pair of jeans in his fingers—her jeans—letting them dangle casually over the edge. If he waited one more night, the moon would be gone completely, leaving him only cold starlight to guide him as he sought her out. It would probably be easier to sneak up to her home, or her lair, or wherever she was living, in the dark. On the other hand, he didn't think she would run far if she did notice him.

And he didn't want to wait another night.

Gena Pelletier. It hadn't been hard for Dylan to find out. Several people saw her at the party—a few even saw them leave together and witnessed his solitary return—and they were happy enough to volunteer her family name. Samson Watts added that Gena had been living in the desert, on her own, for twelve years. Or so he had heard. Samson Watts wasn't exactly the most trustworthy source, so Dylan attempted to call his father and find out what he knew. Only Cory Peterson had been serious about his vacation to Hawaii, and Dylan hadn't been able to get a hold of his parents at all. Dylan only hoped that if they were

out scuba diving, they were actually using scuba gear and not darting through the crystal blue water as little fish.

He wanted his father to verify that Gena had really been living in the wild for twelve years because the thought startled Dylan. Was she living like an animal out there? Had she gone completely feral? And if so, what had prompted her to find him? Loneliness?

Loneliness was as likely as any other explanation. Even a feral shifter would have need for human contact every now and then. Which meant that if she got lonely again, and if she wanted to see him again, she was more than capable of seeking him out. He did not need to go to her. But he wanted to go to her. And the warnings he had heard—she was wild, her family had been crazy, she couldn't be trusted—only made him hungry for her. Just the thought of her vibrant hair was enough to make his cock twitch. Though the scratches were gone, he still had bites and bruises from their fucking, and every time he brushed against the tender skin, his cock hardened completely.

Knowing how easily he could find her increased the temptation to unbearable levels.

Below him, Delta began to darken, lights clicking off one by one. It was a deceptive darkness, though. The shifters in town who felt more comfortable as nocturnal animals would begin to filter out of their homes soon, slinking along the soft dirt, or soaring through the warm, summer air. If he wanted to leave undetected, he would have to leave sooner rather than later. A lesson he learned at an early age. The first time he snuck out of the house he was ten, and he thought he was being quite clever. He moved with stealth, stayed in the shadows, and finally galloped down the street on four paws, ears flat on his head, tongue lolling. Only to run into his second-grade teacher and her family. Who, in turn, were going to meet up with the high-school track coach and his buddies. They kept an eye on him until his parents showed up to claim him. Of course, neither Cory nor Irene Peterson believed in punishing their children for shifting, but they did make sure he wasn't to leave the house without their permission.

That didn't stop him. Not completely. By the time he was twelve, he knew exactly when to leave to avoid meeting half the community.

He pushed himself off the roof and landed on the grass below with a soft grunt. It would be easier, and faster, if he flew into the desert, but he wanted to bring her clothes with him.

With that thought, he shifted into his totem animal. It wasn't a part of who he was; as a shapeshifter, he could take any form he wanted. Totems were an expression of freedom, an animal of choice each shifter selected to commune with the greater earthly forces they were all a part of. Some were cats, others birds. His parents were canines, as were his grandparents. It had always seemed more natural to choose that shape than any other, to answer the call of the moon, especially since he enjoyed the protection and fellowship of being a pack animal. Choosing a wolf as a totem also had another distinct advantage. Nobody reacted with shock when he strayed from the pack to spend time on his own. Shifters with wolf totems were notoriously

moody. His mother always insisted that he was just like his great-grandfather. A huge, white wolf who wandered around the new streets of Delta like he owned the place.

Dylan gripped Gena's pants tightly in his jaw, the scent of her flesh and sweat invading his nostrils. He hoped it would be a simple matter of following that sweet smell once he ventured beyond Delta and into the desert.

He began his search at the site of the bonfire. She had suggested he leave her clothes there for her to retrieve later; maybe she'd come back to check. His first circuit found nothing. Neither did his slightly wider second. On the third, he was about ready to try a different tactic when the faintest of whiffs of her body's unique scent drifted to his nose.

Dylan stopped and lifted his head. He had to concentrate to separate the scent of the jeans from that in the air, but eventually he found it, wispy tendrils that beckoned him to follow.

He set off at a loping pace. The trail wasn't straight. It veered in odd directions, and more than once, the scent pooled in a single spot, indicating she had stopped to rest. He put his nose to the earth in one of them, snuffling around in the dust. Part of him wanted to roll in it. He liked the way he'd worn her smells for the day after his party. He ignored the impulse for fear of distorting his tracking, and he picked up her jeans again to return to his task.

Delta was a faint glow in the distance when he saw the cave. No signs of civilization were nearby. He had no idea where the closest road was. But her scent was stronger here, and it led directly to the mouth of the cave. There was nowhere else to go but there.

Dylan dropped her pants to the ground before venturing farther, but he didn't shift to his human form. If she was inside, and he startled her, there was a very good chance she would cause him serious harm. He'd be better able to defend himself as a wolf. He dropped to his stomach and pulled himself forward, slinking into the inky darkness.

The mouth was narrow. His shoulders scraped against the walls, and a few times he thought about shifting into something smaller. But it never got too uncomfortable, and so he kept moving forward, following her heady scent. Several yards into the cave, hints of light bounced off the walls. Encouraged, he moved faster, until finally, he came to a sweeping curve. At the other side of that curve was the den he had been hunting for.

The far wall glowed from a small kerosene camping lamp resting on the packed earth. It illuminated a small chest and a set of shelves with a few basic supplies on it, but most importantly, it showed Gena sitting cross-legged in front of a small mirror, brushing her hair.

She was more beautiful than he remembered.

She watched him in the reflection as he dropped into the cavern. Already, he was more than a little intoxicated by the scent of her home. Even more, she smelled delicious. Not wanting to give up the force of

that sense, he slinked across the room to lie at her side. He pushed his snout around the ground near her, then against her smooth thigh.

“I was shifted when you crawled in, you know. I would’ve torn your throat out if I hadn’t recognized your scent. I only changed into human form to find out what you wanted.” Her hand dropped to his head, her nails scratching at the soft spots behind his ears. “But you really are the most gorgeous wolf. The best one I’ve ever seen, even.”

Dylan closed his eyes in bliss. He wanted to talk to her. He wanted to kiss her again because nobody’s mouth had ever fit his quite like hers did. But he was loath to lose the contact and the simple pleasure that came from lying at her side, feeling her fingers, listening to the soft cadence of her voice.

Only in each other will they discover how to be truly free.

Puma

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Callie, a cat-shifter, is a loner by virtue of the puma that lives inside her. After a job gone bad, her very human need for contact sends her in search of the only family she has. Callie finds her foster sister in a disturbing living arrangement. Something is seriously wrong in a place where people “belong” to one man and silence is enforced to the point a seven-year-old girl pretends to be autistic.

Dev Malik thinks it’s odd to see a strange woman in the tall grass behind his house, but he doesn’t have the time to ponder why. He’s too busy trying to shelter the child and woman in his household from Scott, the control freak who lives with them.

The truth is more dangerous than Callie imagines. Scott’s control is powerfully real. And Dev’s need to protect the vulnerable is as strong as Callie’s own. Their desire is as inevitable as it is frightening, for only by looking deep within each other will they find the strength to free them all from an unspeakable evil.

Warning: This title contains explicit sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Puma:

Instead of replying, or even responding to her statement, his gaze dropped to her mouth. His hand slid over her shoulder, across to her neck; fingers forked up into her hair and made a fist to anchor her head so she couldn’t move. His mouth was a mere breath from hers.

“I’m going to kiss you, Callie.” He watched for her reaction and she didn’t know if she was supposed to give a verbal yes, or not. He must have seen something to encourage him. She thought he would kiss like before: sudden, deep, all his for the taking.

His lips brushed hers and before she could protest his leaving, he returned, caught her lower lip between his gentle teeth, scraped it lightly. Like the end of this morning’s kiss, but this was a beginning. A noise rose from her throat, in question, in desire, and with the fist that held her hair in his grip, he angled her head.

“God,” he said, a guttural sound, before his mouth covered hers, forcing her mouth open, stroking her tongue with his. He tasted of mint and chocolate and Dev; and she tried to welcome him though all she could do was accept as he devoured her. She’d been kissed before and hadn’t much liked it, hadn’t liked the invasion. Dev was different, demanding, yes, but focused on her. His large hand splayed across her back, between her shoulder blades, and pushed her flush against him so they had full-body contact. The flood of sensation, from his talented mouth—she had never felt so thoroughly kissed, his tongue demanding hers to dance, then withdrawing to explore her lips before delving in again—to the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

She actually went weak in the knees.

As she sank against him, he cupped the back of her head, holding her in that kiss, while the other arm wrapped around her waist, anchoring her to him. He slid his hand under her T-shirt and clasped her ribs, his palm and fingers warm against her skin.

His tongue released hers, and he retreated to nibble her lips. He kissed across her jawline and descended to her neck where he sucked at the sensitive skin there. Her throat vibrated, half-groan, half-purr, all pleasure. As he kissed across her collarbone, he said, "Callie, Callie. I want us to make love."

He pulled back sharply then, as if to give himself a shake, and she reached for him, hands on his shoulders, scared he would go away. She couldn't stand it, couldn't take being released by him now.

He eyed her while he raised his hands to rest upon hers. For a terrible moment, she feared he was going to remove her hold on him, return to that "don't touch" manner he sometimes projected. Instead, he caressed the backs of her hands, feather-soft strokes of his fingertips over her knuckles, between her knuckles and, most sensitively, between her fingers. She trembled in reaction, amazed that her hands could react to his touch so. A warmth gathered in her belly.

He did lift her hands off, but linked fingers with his and brought their arms down together, pulling her up against him again. Perhaps he too craved touch despite his... She bit her lip.

"What, Callie?"

"Earlier you said you weren't interested in sex."

He stiffened and she closed her eyes, wishing the thought hadn't flitted through her mind, wishing she could have lied or at least fobbed him off with a "nothing", though it was important to her that she be honest with Dev.

She rested her face against the crook of his neck and willed him not to push her away after her reminder. When she kissed him, he shuddered. They were soft, almost chaste kisses, not like his that had ravaged her neck.

He brought her arms behind her, clasped both wrists in one large hand, while with his other, he pressed a palm against the small of her back. Her belly felt him hard against her. Aroused.

That made her smile into his neck.

"Look at me," he demanded, so she tilted her head back to meet his gaze. "You like that, that you've made me hard, that you've made me want you?"

"Yes." She struggled a little, which resulted in her writhing against him, but he didn't release her arms. Lifting his free hand to her face, he held her gaze to his, palm on her cheek. With the pad of his thumb, he traced the bone just under her eye, traced her cheekbone, then ran that thumb over her lips.

"You're beautiful."

It made her breathe faster, these words, these intense caresses, this attention. He trailed fingers down her neck to the swell of her breast. He was watching her very carefully as he lightly palmed her breast and her sensitive nipple began to ache.

“Dev?” She wasn’t sure what she was asking.

“Hmmm?” His mouth dipped to her neck, teeth scraping the soft skin, then soothing it with a kiss. And again. His hand slipped under the hem of her T-shirt, and rose to catch her nipple between thumb and finger, rolling the nub. “Do you like that?” he murmured as he kissed her throat.

She arched against him and he swallowed her “yes”, his mouth taking hers in a punishing kiss.

Her knees gave out this time, but he caught her, finally releasing her arms, though not her mouth, as he lifted her and she wrapped herself around him. He brought her to the bed.

She tried to contain her disappointment as he set her down on the mattress. He yanked off her shirt, then his, her shorts then his, all in short order. It had been a revelation, this kind of foreplay, but now he was ready to fuck.

He crawled over her and for a moment she thought he was going to move up so he’d fuck her mouth, but he reached back and pulled her up so they were face to face again, her under him. He’d wanted to make love, she remembered, and that reassured her.

“You make me feel, Callie.” The words seemed almost to be dragged from him and she touched his face, roughened because he hadn’t shaved.

“I think you’re beautiful too, Dev.” She wanted to offer him something of her feelings, though that barely described her real emotions. Tentatively she ran a hand through his short hair, which was surprisingly soft to touch.

“Are you scared to touch me, Callie?”

“No.” The question caught her off guard, and it must have shown.

“You prefer that I touch you?” He skimmed a hand down her side and across her stomach. Her underside. It made her feel vulnerable and he seemed to notice, because he crossed his palm back and forth across her soft belly until she relaxed into the touch. “Tell me what you like,” he urged.

She didn’t know. He traced some ribs, but he didn’t release her gaze so she said, “I like you.”

He smiled then, so pleased, the smile wider than she’d observed before, like she was seeing a new Dev.

“I like everything you do. You make me feel so warm. Inside.”

His slightly bemused expression made her add, “Is that wrong to say?”

“No,” he said immediately. “Nothing is wrong to say.” He sat back and she feared he was retreating, giving up on them making love. Perhaps because he thought she didn’t like to touch him? That wasn’t it, wasn’t it at all. She was just so unsure, but she began to rise, to follow him.

He came back, pushing her down, lying atop her, that full-body contact she craved, though he took some of the weight with his elbows. He kissed her deeply, a kind of reassurance, then broke away and held her shoulders. "Stay here."

Again he sat up. Instead of backing away, he pulled up both her legs, ran palms over her thighs, front and back. Then calves were caressed before he wrapped his hands around her ankles to place her feet down near her butt, knees pointed up. She frowned at him and he smiled, resting hands on her knees. He pushed them apart, making her legs drop open.

She felt completely exposed and very, very wet.

"You, Callie, are going to tell me if at any time you feel *uncomfortable*, okay?"

Her chest rose and fell as he placed the heel of his palm on her pubis and rubbed lightly. Surprised, realizing she was completely ready, she arched up to push against his hand. "Dev, I want you inside me."



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