



Heaven Sent

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Chapter One

Gladwin, Michigan

“Jackass! Make up your mind!” Christine Fitzpatrick yelled as she sped around the idiot on the Harley. What a jerk. He’d been slowing down and speeding up, turning on his blinker, then turning it off. The man was a complete tool. She rolled her window back up to keep the cold air from whipping into her Focus.

Even if he hadn’t heard her, she was quite certain he saw her flip him the bird.

After seven miles of pitch-black forest on either side of her, Chris wanted nothing more than to get to Tom and Jess’s house. The darkness suffocated her. Even the iridescent glow of a deer’s eyes coming from the fields freaked her out.

She put on her blinker and turned right onto Pine Lane. Tom’s house was the only dwelling at the end of the dirt road, and those she considered family always made her feel safe and welcome.

She caught sight of the biker’s headlight in her rearview mirror a few seconds later.

The idiot behind her had made the same turn. Unless the biker was going to Thanksgiving at Tom’s, he had no business going down this road. Was he following her?

If the biker was angry at her for calling him a jackass or flipping him off, then so be it. Dave, Mike and Stephen, men she called her brothers, were going to be at Thanksgiving dinner. All three were her age and kept themselves in shape.

She certainly wasn’t ashamed to cower behind any of them.

When she pulled into the driveway and heard the familiar crunch of rock and dirt under her tires, she breathed a sigh of relief—until the biker pulled in right behind her. She put her car in park and turned off the engine, keeping her gaze locked on the rearview mirror.

Christine waited in her car as the man in denim and black got off his bike.

She honked her horn several times in rapid succession, bringing the biker’s gaze to her car. There was no way in hell she was leaving her Focus until one of her brothers came out of the house.

The biker removed his helmet and began to stretch his back muscles by leaning back and to the side. She couldn’t completely see his features in the darkness because the floodlight above Tom’s garage didn’t work. The sliver of moon did nothing to light the yard. All she could make out was the man had disheveled black hair and looked like a felon having a bad day. He had on a black leather jacket and baggy denim jeans, complete with big boots and a chain at his belt.

She heard the screen door slam shut, and she tore her gaze from the biker.

Mike was the first one out of the house. With one last glance in the rearview mirror, she opened the door and climbed out. She put her keys in her pocket.

Hopefully there wouldn’t be a brawl in the front yard just because she had called a stranger on a Harley a jackass.

Mike walked up to her and gave her a tight squeeze. He always smelled like spicy aftershave and cologne. “You have pies that need to be carried?”

His collared black shirt was unbuttoned a bit too far, and his khakis were pressed to

perfection. It had likely taken him longer to get ready than it had her. It always amazed her that it took a practiced hand and a wad of mousse to make his dirty blond hair look messy.

She normally just threw her curly auburn hair up in a sloppy bun. Debra Messing's mane had nothing on hers. Mousse couldn't hold this disaster in place.

She turned to look at her car, recalling she did have pies, but she had forgotten all about them during her small run-in with the biker. Hopefully Sir Jackass hadn't caused them to launch all over the backseat. "Um, yeah, I do. But I'm more concerned about that..."

Mike left her standing on the front lawn as he made his way over to the biker and shook his hand. "Hey, Gabe, how's she ridin'?"

Oh shit. Mike knows him? No one told her they were going to have another guest at dinner.

"I can't complain about the bike." He paused to look at Christine, holding his black helmet under his left arm, and then turned his attention back to Mike. "What I *can* complain about is the directions you gave me."

"Hell, they couldn't have been that bad. You got here, didn't you?" Mike ran a hand along the side of Gabe's bike. "*Nice.*"

"Just bought her yesterday." Gabe opened a compartment on the side of the bike and stowed his helmet. He slid off his gloves and placed them on top, then secured the latch. As Mike admired his bike, Gabe stood back, again rolling his shoulders and seeming to work out kinks in his back.

Silently cursing the darkness that kept Gabe shrouded in mystery, she edged closer for a better look.

The floodlight chose that second to flicker on, dousing everyone in a yellow glow, revealing the most striking man Chris had ever settled eyes on. She could have sworn she felt a ripple of energy pierce the air around her, but she couldn't seem to focus on anything other than the man before her.

Tall, dark and oh-my-*God* sexy, his black eyebrows slanted over eyes that seemed too light to be real. She took a few steps closer and found his eyes were a light blue. Against the dark tan of his skin and the charcoal color of his hair, his eyes practically glowed.

A few days growth of whiskers surrounded lips that were parted in a smirk.

A smirk? *Damn.* He'd caught her staring at him.

"The pies?" Mike prompted from beside her.

Crap. Chris took her eyes off of Gabe, which was difficult to say the least, and looked at Mike. "In the backseat."

"You made an apple pie, right?"

"I made one just for you," she said, walking over to the side of her car and opening the back door. Mike leaned in and picked one up. "The pumpkin pie is for Stephen." She took the pumpkin pie out of his hands while he picked up the other. "Thanks."

Mike shut the car door and led her over to Gabe. "Let me introduce you to my cousin. He was in town so we held a vote on whether we should invite him over for dinner or not. I lost."

Mike's humor was lost on her.

Gabe was his cousin? She had never heard her brothers make mention of a cousin

before. God, this was humiliating. Why couldn't they have told her about him earlier? She might have spared herself the embarrassment of acting like a total ass.

She took a deep breath and began saying her favorite mantra in her head.

It could be worse. It could be worse. It could be worse.

"Gabe, this is Christine. Chris for short. I'm sure I've mentioned her before. She's like a sister to me." Gabe held his hand out, and she slid her hand into his.

What was it about a man's hand that always grabbed her attention? The strength in the grip? The roughness of his skin in contrast to her soft palm? The warmth it provided?

She held his hand, giving it a firm shake, and tried to act as nonchalant as he did.

"This is Gabe. He's originally from Scotland. He's the type I warned you to stay away from," Mike said with a grin.

Gabe smiled. "You can call me Jackass for short."

She felt her face go up in flames. Apparently he *had* heard her. She could hear a slight burr in his voice that spoke of his Scottish homeland. Accents always turned her on. Especially a sexy, Scottish accent. "Well, you almost caused an accident. Twice."

"It's Mike's fault. He gave me crappy directions."

"Well, we already have something in common. I blame everything on Mike, too." She let go of his hand and turned to wink at Mike.

Mike grunted. "You blame things on men in general."

"Not true," Chris insisted. "How's dinner coming? I'd have been over earlier but I had a million things to do at the office."

"You went to work today?" Mike asked.

She shrugged. "I had things to take care of."

"Well, no more work for today. Dinner should be ready in a few minutes. We were waiting on you two," he said, ruffling her hair.

She smacked his hand away. "When did Tom fix the floodlight?"

Mike shrugged. "I wasn't aware that he had."

The flood light flickered off, and that strange electricity filled the air again. She caught Mike and Gabe exchanging a glance. That was ... disturbing. About as strange as Dave had been acting lately. Usually the energetic, smart-ass of her three brothers, he'd been acting differently for the past few months. Almost secretive in nature, as if there was something dark he chose to hide from them. She had decided to face him with it today and ask him what was bothering him so much.

Mike led them up the brick steps to the front door. She noticed Gabe taking in all of the details of the two-story brick home. There were two white hanging baskets on each of the windows upstairs that had wisteria hanging from them. Soon the baskets would need to be taken down due to the frigid Michigan winter.

Mike held open the front door for her, and she thanked him as she stepped inside.

The smell only a Thanksgiving dinner can provide hit them as they walked in the front door. Turkey, sweet potatoes, cranberry, stuffing and freshly baked bread permeated the house.

The smell of the food was accompanied by a wave of cinnamon. There were potpourri bowls and cinnamon sticks wrapped up in orange ribbon on the coffee table in the living room. Jess, Tom's wife, had a decorating and organizing talent that couldn't be rivaled. Holidays were her favorite time of the year, and she always decorated her house with a theme in mind.

Jess's house was always on the warm side, especially in the fall and winter. Last Christmas Chris had looked at the thermostat, and it had read ninety-eight degrees. She always felt the need to dress as if she were going to the Bahamas when she came to this house.

Chris walked in front of Mike and Gabe as they headed to the kitchen. Jess was busy running around the kitchen, and Stephen was lounging in one of the kitchen chairs. "Hi, guys."

Jess walked up to her and gave her a hug. "How are you, sweetie?" Jess's short blond hair was freshly highlighted and groomed to perfection. No doubt if Chris looked down at Jess's fingernails, they would be manicured.

She'd known Jess for nearly seven years. In all those years she'd never seen Jess in sweats or with her hair up in a ponytail. The woman had always looked like a cover model for *Good Housekeeping*.

"Good. Do you need any help?" Chris asked.

"No, ma'am, everything's great here." Jess went back to the stove and adjusted the temperature. "Go ahead and put those pies in the oven. It's just cooling down now, so it's perfect to warm them up."

Mike brought his pie over to the oven. "Everyone say hi to Gabe so we can get the hell out of the kitchen. It's too crowded in here."

Jess wiped her hands on the dish towel hanging from the stove and crossed the kitchen to give Gabe a hug. "Nice seeing you again. How was your trip?"

Gabe must be well over six feet tall. Jess was nearly five-ten, and he seemed to tower over her. Being only five-six, everyone in the house towered over Chris. As Chris watched the two, she found herself wondering if they had ever been close. It didn't seem like it. They seemed ... strangers.

"Hey, Chris, what gives?" Stephen asked, coming over to her side.

Chris turned her attention to Stephen while Jess and Gabe caught up. Why hadn't they ever spoken of Gabe before today?

She gave Stephen a hug with her left arm, as her right held the pie out.

"We've been waiting a half an hour for you to get here," he said.

Stephen was wearing a white T-shirt underneath a brown knit V-neck sweater that emphasized the hours he spent in the gym. He was the quiet, contemplative brother. Nothing seemed to ruffle his feathers.

"Bad drivers," she said under her breath. When she saw Gabe turn her way, she smiled and said, "Happy Thanksgiving, Stephen." She held the pie under his nose. "I made your favorite."

Stephen was the only one in the misfit family who actually liked pumpkin pie. Since Jess was so busy with the dinner, Chris had volunteered to make the desserts. She always took care to make sure she had everyone's favorite.

He bent down and took a deep breath as she held the pie in front of him. "It smells delicious. I forgive you." He kissed her on the forehead and took the pie. He motioned for Jess to move as he put the pie in the oven.

It had to be over a hundred degrees in the kitchen. Chris was already taking her white button-up sweater off, leaving on a brown T-shirt. She left the kitchen to hang her sweater in the hallway closet. She hadn't seen Tom or Dave yet. She'd head downstairs to look for the two. They were usually there watching a football game or playing pool.

“So, I hear you’re quite the cook.”

Not paying attention to where she was going, Chris turned and bumped into Gabe in the hallway. He had hung his motorcycle jacket over his forearm. Like Stephen, he wore a thick sweater. She was beginning to sweat just by looking at them.

“I bake,” she said lamely, taking his jacket from him and opening the closet to hang it up. Unlike Mike, Gabe didn’t smell like he’d bathed in cologne. Was that Irish Spring?

“You must be good. Stephen looks like he’ll bite anyone who goes near your pumpkin pie. I’ve never seen him do that.”

“He’s nocturnal. He’s just waking up, so this is breakfast to him.” She smiled at her own play on Stephen’s job. It was a fact that Tom, Jess, Mike and Stephen couldn’t be out in the sun for any length of time. Any tan they had came from a bottle and a prayer. That was how they all had grown close, and why Mike and Stephen had moved into Tom’s house.

Chris wasn’t allergic to sunlight, but she didn’t mind playing the night owl to see her family. They all worked at Tom’s business, which happened to be the headquarters for Dark Days, a group that had nearly twenty thousand members, all of whom were allergic to sunlight.

The business had gone worldwide seven years ago, forcing Tom to hire out for day workers. Chris put in her application right after graduating high school, and Tom had hired her to work the front desk.

Tom’s company made pamphlets on sun safety, nighttime activities and hot spots, and the current advances in medicine.

They also published a monthly magazine titled *Dark Days*, and set appointments for local chapter meetings as well as taking on applications for new members.

“You know about that?” Gabe asked.

Like it’s a secret. She caught herself before she rolled her eyes. “Of course I know about their condition. I’m here all the time.” Without warning, Tom came up behind her and lifted her off the floor.

“Hey, lightweight. Did you get that fax out before you left the office?” As skinny as Tom was, he didn’t seem to lack strength.

Noticing it was right down to business as usual, she sighed. “Yes, it went out.”

“Good.” Tom let her out of the bear hug and ruffled her hair, just as Mike had done earlier. “I taped that dancing show you like. The tape is on the table in the living room.”

“Great. I was working late last night and I missed it.”

“I know, and I felt bad about it. Anyway, it’s in the living room.”

“Awesome, thanks.” She pushed herself up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. Tom had quickly become the father figure she had always wanted, right from the start. He was kind, generous and always there if you needed him.

“Have you been being careful? Staying in lighted areas like I asked?”

Chris smiled. Tom was worried about her safety because the police hadn’t caught the person behind the strange murders plaguing the area. Bodies had been found with signs of struggle but no apparent fatal wound. All had died of blood loss. It was big news in a small, rural town.

“Yes, I’m being careful. I noticed you fixed the floodlight.”

A look of confusion crossed his face and he looked at Gabe. “I didn’t fix that light.”

“It came on, then a few minutes later it flickered back off.” She didn’t mention the

strange energy that she had felt.

“That’s strange. It might be a short. I’ll take a look at it.” He turned to Gabe and they exchanged hellos. With a backward glance cast her way, Gabe followed Tom back to the kitchen.

As Gabe walked away, she couldn’t help but check him out. Lord, the man was built. Through his sweater she could see the indentation that ran down his back, and the muscles that flanked it. He had a stockier build than her brothers. Where Stephen was tall and lean from working out, Gabe was thick with muscles. His arms could rival the size of her thighs.

Just before Gabe stepped into the kitchen behind Tom, he turned to look at her. His wicked grin made her wonder if he’d read her thoughts.

Embarrassed at being caught checking him out, she quickly turned toward the steps and flounced down to the basement.

She scanned the family room for Dave. The brown leather sofa was empty, save for a few big, fluffy beige pillows. The pool table and Ping Pong table sat unused. A seventy-two-inch flat-screen TV, with every DVD imaginable lining the shelves beside it, sat against the wall, and three recliners were scattered around the couch.

This was usually where Dave, the youngest of her brothers, could be found. He lived only fifteen minutes away, and he came over often to visit with Mike and Stephen. They were an odd bunch, but they had come together to form a unit stronger than any blood relations. She trusted these men with her life.

Not seeing any sign of Dave, she decided to go back upstairs and ask Jess if she needed any help setting the table when she heard Dave’s muffled voice coming from the computer room.

As she walked over to the room, she could make out Dave’s voice more clearly through the cracked door.

“I’ll do it after she leaves.” A pause. “Don’t worry, I’m not backing out. I just want to wait until she leaves. She’s not a part of this.” Another pause. “No. She’s not one of them. I don’t want to see her get hurt.”

Chris immediately backed away from the room. It was obvious this was about business, and she had no desire to interrupt. She didn’t know a lot about Dave’s job, other than he worked all day and most of the time into the night. He did something with building contracts and commercial business deals. Perhaps someone got hurt at one of his sites.

“I’ll make sure they’re all dead,” Dave whispered.

Caught off guard with what she had just heard, she paused mid-stride.

“Yes, dead as in cannot rise again.” Dave sighed. “You want to do this yourself, or do you want to shut the fuck up? I said I got it,” he snapped.

Putting a hand to her mouth she made herself flush with the wall, only a breath away from the door. What the hell had he said? She couldn’t have heard him right.

“Yes, he’s here. And for the record? He doesn’t want to see her hurt, either. Being the head of the family, he’s torn as it is.”

She debated on whether she should just leave quietly or keep eavesdropping. Frowning, she stayed where she was.

“No, I haven’t seen him yet. I heard him come in, though, so I know he’s here. You wait for my call before you send your men in.” She heard Dave take in a deep breath. “I

said wait until she's gone, goddamnit."

Dave must have turned away from the door. She could barely hear him, so she leaned toward the door to hear better, and in doing so accidentally kicked over a brown bag of recycled cans by her feet.

The clatter was deafening.

"Hold on."

Oh shit! He was coming!

Chris immediately launched herself from the wall and forced herself to laugh, calling out in a too-loud voice, "Dave? You down here?"

Dave came out of the computer room, and she hoped her smile didn't look as fake as it felt. He glanced at the scattered cans on the floor, which were right by the door to the computer room, then back to her. She started picking up the cans without mentioning how they came to be all over the floor.

"Hey, there you are. I had to come down and find the only sane one in the bunch." She finished righting the bag of cans and went to give him a hug. She felt her hands shake when she patted his back.

"That would be me."

When she pulled back she saw his big brown eyes were searching hers, and she felt the most idiotic need to start giggling. "Well, what are you doing down here away from all the nutcases? It's fun to point and make fun of them." She kept the smile on her face, though it was hard. She could feel her lips quiver. Glancing up at Dave's crooked, devil-may-care grin and his messy brown hair, she could almost believe she had heard him wrong.

Dave shrugged. "Business call."

Is that what it's called nowadays? "It's Thanksgiving. You shouldn't be making business calls."

"This is something I need to take care of today, so the call was unavoidable." He gave her a weak smile. "What time are you heading out of here tonight?"

"Um, I don't know yet," she said, wondering why he was asking her so early in the evening.

She was having such a hard time trying to think about what she had overheard, her brain was trying to shut down. This was Dave, for crying out loud. Dave! He had been known to get in a few fights at the local bar, and he hunted a bit, but he didn't kill people. She must have heard him wrong, that's all. She had merely heard him talking about an accident at one of his job sites and taken it out of context.

It could also be the reason he'd been so withdrawn the past few months. Hadn't she decided to confront him with it?

"Is everything okay down here?"

Chris turned toward the stairs and watched as Mike came down, followed by Gabe.

By the look of him, she could tell Gabe had some major issues. He looked as though he took everything too seriously, and though he might know what the concept of vacation was, he had never taken one.

"Just waiting to hear the dinner bell ring." She gave a simple laugh and looked back at Dave. For some reason she felt like an accomplice to a murder, and she probably looked it, too. She clasped her hands in front of her just to keep from fidgeting.

"Then wait no longer. Dinner is being set on the table as we speak." Mike cast a

glance behind her. "Chris, why don't you run up and help Jess? We'll be right behind you."

Uneasiness rippled along her spine. She had no idea why, but she didn't move to leave. Did they know anything about what Dave had mentioned on the phone?

She stayed standing in front of Dave.

Go upstairs...

Chris looked behind her. Had someone said something? That was weird. She thought she had heard someone tell her to go upstairs, but no one had said anything.

"What?" she asked aloud.

"Dinner's ready," Jess called from upstairs.

"Chris, go upstairs. We would like to speak to Dave privately." Gabe gave her a tight-lipped smile.

She almost left, but instead of doing as he asked, she folded her arms across her chest. She wasn't leaving.

Gabe gave her a quizzical glance, and she decided to ignore it. She had no idea what was going on, but it was obvious something was wrong. She glanced at Dave, who stood just behind her. His features gave nothing away as he stared at Mike.

All four of them stayed where they were. It felt like a stand-off at high noon, and she was in the middle of the gunfight. Gabe and Mike stared at Dave, and she was certain Dave was doing the same from behind her. Chris had no idea what was happening, but she was afraid to leave Dave.

Chris plastered a smile on her face and took Dave's arm in hers. She wasn't sure how smart that move was, but it was Dave, and whatever she might have *thought* she heard, he was like a brother to her. He wouldn't hurt her.

Gabe, on the other hand, she didn't know a thing about. A cousin she'd never heard mentioned before? Not likely.

"Whatever you have to say I'm sure you don't mind saying in front of me."

She could tell she'd surprised Mike by the look on his face. She wasn't normally so assertive.

Gabe didn't show any indication of having heard her.

"Chris, I'm only going to tell you this one more time. Get your ass upstairs. *Now.*"

Mike didn't take his gaze off of Dave as he gave her that order.

She kept her feet rooted to the floor. Mike had never spoken to her like that before. His tone confirmed her fears. Something was seriously wrong.

Dave gently took her arm from his. "Go upstairs."

She finally lost her smile. The façade of normality was completely gone. "What in the world is going on? I'm not going anywhere until one of you tells me." Mike and Dave had been friends for years. Why were they acting this way?

Mike ignored her and said to Dave, "The only reason you're still breathing is because you weren't going to hurt her. It shows you have some sort of decency. Still, you're a threat, and my kind doesn't like threats. Bottom line, little brother? You're not leaving this house alive."

Chris's eyes widened. *What the hell?*

Dave leaned forward. "How dare you speak to me of decency. Your kind doesn't like threats? What the hell do you think you are? You're a threat to humanity, and *my* kind can't allow your kind to live."

Chris had barely digested that bit of information before Dave pulled her against his chest.

She heard the distinct sound of a click at her right temple.

Chapter Two

Chris closed her eyes and immediately began her mantra.

It could be worse. It could be worse. It could be worse.

"Bad move," she heard Gabe say. "You have no idea who I am."

"I know exactly who you are," Dave said. "I know what you can do, asshole, I've seen it firsthand. But one thing you can't do is stop this bullet once I pull the trigger. I'm leaving, and Chris is going to come with me. If you want her alive you will move aside and let us pass."

Chris could feel Dave shaking, and it tripled her fear. She opened her eyes and tried to remain calm.

"Would he do it?" Gabe asked Mike.

"I don't know. The weasel's cornered, so he might."

"You're fucking right I'd do it!" Dave yelled. "One day you'll decide to make her into one of you, and I'd rather save her soul than worry about her mortal life."

"That whole soulless bullshit is just that. Bullshit." Mike took a step forward.

Dave tightened his grip on her. "I don't believe you. There was a time I trusted you to watch my back. Now I wouldn't trust you to wipe my ass."

She didn't move. She just kept her eyes trained on the opposite wall and listened to the exchange. Dave wouldn't hurt her, she knew better. She loved him just as much as she loved Mike. He was part of her family.

At least that's what she wanted to believe. His fingers digging into her skin, causing her pain, and the gun pointed at her head proved otherwise.

"Like you said earlier, Chris has nothing to do with this." Mike nodded his head.

"Yeah, before you ask, we heard you on the phone from upstairs. So if you want to play the role of the badass, that's fine with me. Just let her go first."

Mike took another step forward.

"One more move and I pull the trigger," Dave said in a deadpan voice.

Chris felt Dave's body go rigid. "Dave? Dave, you're scaring me."

"I'm not the one you should be frightened of."

"You're the one holding the gun," Gabe pointed out.

"Do you know what they are, Chris?" Dave leaned down, his cheek lightly brushing hers. "How is it that you haven't figured it out yet? You know how we always joke that we're the normal ones? Why do you think they all have night jobs? How often do you see any of them in the daylight hours?" Dave's breath was tickling her ear. She had her feelings under control, so she looked away from the wall and focused on Mike and Gabe, who were staring straight at her.

"Because they're allergic to sunlight, Dave. There's a medical explanation for it."

Dave laughed. "People who are allergic to the sunlight can be exposed to it for short periods of time."

She agreed. "I know. I've seen Mike outside a few times."

"Not in direct sunlight."

Oh, Christ. "Please don't say what I think you're gonna say. I really don't think I should laugh at a man holding a gun to my head."

“Laugh all you want, but it doesn’t change what they are. They wouldn’t hesitate to kill you if it was necessary.” Dave took a step to the side, bringing her with him.

“Like you’re doing right now?” she countered.

“Chris, I saw Mike. I saw him feeding off someone. He was taking her blood.”

Vampires?

If she was scared before, she was terrified now. She took a deep breath and kept her emotions under tight rein. “Dave, are you taking drugs? Because that’s something I can work with. We can get you cleaned up—”

There was a loud pop upstairs, followed by something that sounded like a crash, as if dishes had been broken. She heard two more shots, and Stephen yelling at someone to put the gun down. There was more yelling and a few more crashing sounds, followed by silence. Chris looked at Mike for reassurance. He didn’t say anything, only returned her look.

There was nothing reassuring in his gaze.

Gabe broke the silence. “Looks like your back-up just arrived and departed.”

Chris blinked a few times, failing in her endeavor to rationalize what in God’s name was going on.

Gabe took two steps toward them, and Dave didn’t retreat this time. “Put the gun down, Dave. Tell us who you’ve been talking to. We might be more lenient with you if you tell us who you’ve been working for, how long you’ve been working for them and what exactly they *think* they know. The Alliance may let you go if you can give us some information about your contacts. Have you heard of the Alliance?”

Dave started shaking his head, ignoring Gabe’s question. “I saw him. I saw Mike with that woman. I saw what you did to her. And there’s no way in hell I believe you’ll let me go. Just move the hell out of the way, and let us pass.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, so if you can put the gun down and refresh my memory I’m sure that will please us all.” Mike went to stand next to Gabe.

“So you can kill me?” Dave snapped.

Mike shook his head. “I’m not sure that I can.”

Dave snorted. “I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

Mike merely shrugged his shoulders. “Sure, physically I can shred your ass ten ways till Sunday. I just don’t know if I could do it.”

“I’ve no problem with it,” Gabe said.

Chris finally found her voice. “Well, if I have any say about anything, which I probably *do not*, I would ask that no one shred anyone’s ass at all.” She put her hand on Dave’s forearm. She felt the warmth and strength there, and she hoped her touch would reach him somehow.

“Please, can we just reason with each other here? I admit I don’t know what anyone is talking about, but surely, being that we’re as close as siblings, there has to be some way we can work this out. Because, for one, I’m really losing the battle to stay out of panic mode, and two, we aren’t getting anywhere with threats flying back and forth.”

No one said anything.

She slowly leaned her head against the top of Dave’s chest, relaxing against him as she tried to forget he was pointing a pistol at her head. She wanted him to know she trusted him. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep it together. She loved both men, and she didn’t want to see either hurt. What were they, the freakin’ mafia or

something? This was insane!

“Dave, please. What are you doing? Please put the gun down.” She took in a few steady breaths. “I love you, you know I do. I love Mike, too, and I know you two are as close as brothers, so what’s all this about? Will you please lower the gun? Let’s just—”

Dave started to lower the gun, and Chris nearly melted with relief.

He pointed the gun in Mike and Gabe’s direction.

“There will be more on the way. They won’t allow any survivors.” Dave kept his arm around Chris and gave her a slight squeeze before he turned her to face him. “Chris, I’m sorry. I would never have hurt you. But there were men coming who would have, and I had wanted to get you out of the house before they arrived.”

“What are you talking about? What happened upstairs? Why do I feel like I’m in a bad movie?”

Dave looked at Mike. “You can at least tell her the truth, Mike. It’s obvious she doesn’t believe a word I’m saying.”

“And what would you like me to tell her, Dave? That someone I once considered my brother went behind my back to learn how to become my assassin?” Mike shook his head, asking quietly, “Would you have tried to kill Jess?”

Chris turned to face Mike once again. Standing between the two men with the hope they wouldn’t physically go through her to get to each other was disconcerting to say the least. Why would Dave want to kill Jess? Why would he want to hurt any of them?

The look on Mike’s face could melt steel, yet Dave didn’t flinch away from it. “I hadn’t planned on it.”

“So you were going to kill all of us, and she was just going to be a spectator? Left behind to mourn us?”

Dave waited before he answered Mike. “I figured the others would take care of her.”

Mike moved so fast she didn’t see him. One minute her back was against Dave’s chest, the next Mike was plastered in front of her with his right hand wrapped around Dave’s throat. She was good and trapped between two explosive men, and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it.

“Jess loves you, just as if you were her own flesh and blood, and yet you have no qualms with letting some asshole come in here and kill her? What the fuck is wrong with you, man? What have any of us ever done to you, but accept you into our home and treat you like family? What have we ever done to you?”

“Mike, you’re choking him.” *And scaring the shit out of me.* “Let him go.”

When it was obvious he was going to do no such thing, she yelled his name. That seemed to reach him, and he finally let Dave breathe.

“Tell her. Tell her what you are!” Dave yelled to Mike in a raspy voice.

The muscle in Mike’s jaw worked furiously as he obviously considered what to do next. He looked down at her with a piercing stare for what seemed an eternity. She merely kept her gaze locked with his, telling him without words that whatever it was, she could handle it. He shrugged. His eyes were filled with an emotion she couldn’t quite pinpoint. “I’m a vampire.”

Did her heart just stop beating, or was that her imagination? Why, in a dark recess of her mind, did she feel as though she knew that already? Because of Dark Days? Because he had claimed to be allergic to sunlight? Or because the darkness she’d always felt

inside herself?

“You don’t have fangs,” she muttered. What else was there to say?

Mike opened his mouth. His canines suddenly lengthened.

He *did* have fangs.

“How is it I’ve never noticed that before?” she asked, backing away and bumping into Dave.

“Have I ever hurt you?” Mike asked quietly, taking a step toward her.

“Um, no,” she replied just as quietly. Then she quickly raised her hand up in the air between them as she remembered something, narrowly missing hitting his chin and bumping into Dave behind her. “Yes, you did! Last summer when we were playing flag football and you tackled me. I thought you had broken my arm.” She glanced around Mike to look at Gabe. She was rambling like a jackass, and she couldn’t help it. “Can you believe I had to go to the E.R. and have X-rays taken because his fat ass decided to tackle me? I could barely see in the dark, and there we were, outside playing football. It was a good thing nothing broke.”

She let out a nervous laugh and grew quiet, as did the rest of the room. She knew what Mike had meant. She just didn’t want to think about it. She wasn’t sure what to do next, or what to say. Vampires weren’t real, were they? They all just stood there, until Gabe broke the silence once again.

“Can I speak to Dave alone, please?”

Chris immediately tensed, and Gabe was quick to re-assure her. “He will not be harmed. I just want him to answer a few questions, and I need to make a few phone calls.”

Mike didn’t give her a chance to argue. He took her arm and led her up the stairs, none too gently. She was ashamed to admit she was a bit nervous around him now.

What with the teeth and all...

Mike’s a vampire.

Why was this just now sinking in? She had to admit to herself she had thought about it before. She had even looked up vampires on the internet. There really were people who had vampire “tendencies,” relating to anemia and such. Is that what they were? Humans with anemia?

Humans didn’t have wicked-looking fangs.

Jesus, were all her clients at Dark Days vampires? All of those people she had thought were allergic to the sun—did they also have fangs?

When they got to the dining room, she stopped by Mike’s side and looked around at everyone seated at the table. It was a bit too domesticated after what she had just witnessed, which was beginning to feel as though it had never happened.

Jess sipped a cup of coffee, looking none the worse for wear. Tom was outside the sliding glass doors smoking a cigar, and Stephen had the Cool Whip tub in front of him, along with a half-eaten pumpkin pie. They all—even Tom outside—watched her in silence.

She had always known none of them were blood relations to her or each other. Stephen wasn’t Tom and Jess’s son, neither was Mike. In fact, Tom and Jess didn’t look much older than Stephen and Mike.

So, they were all vampires? What the hell were they waiting for her to do? Ask about the weather? What had happened up here? There had been gunshots, screaming ... where

were the police?

“So, uh...” When words failed her, she pointed to her mouth. Every one of them nodded.

Her words came out like a tall, unbroken waterfall. Each word seemed to run into the other until even *she* couldn't understand what she was saying. “Cool. Well, thanks for dinner. Glad you like the pie, Stephen. Tell Tom I said bye, and thanks for the invite. Food smelled delish, Jess. Tell Gabe it was nice meeting him, and I would appreciate it if he didn't kill Dave. I'll see y'all later.”

Mike put a hand out to stop her. “Chris, you can't leave this house without one of us with you.”

“Oh. No problem. I'll just go upstairs.” Chris spun around and walked toward the staircase. She'd do damn near anything to get out of the room. Dear God, were they going to keep her here now that she knew their secret?

Would they keep her prisoner as Dracula had done to the professor? Would she wake up one night, locked in an upstairs room, and witness Mike scaling down the brick walls of the house?

She took the steps two at a time. “At least she's not the screaming type,” she heard Stephen say.

“Yet,” Tom added. She heard the sliding glass door close.

“She kept it together downstairs,” Mike said. “I have to admit, she's pretty good in a pinch. Maybe it just hits her later.”

She could hear all of them as she made her way upstairs.

Did they actually bite people with those teeth?

“She was even her typical smart-mouthed self. I was quite proud of her,” she heard Mike say as he continued talking about her. “What happened earlier and what did you do with the bodies?”

The bodies...

“A few men tried to come in here and shoot at us. I killed them,” Stephen said. “They're outside in the shed. We're waiting for Gabe to come dispose of them.”

She got to the door of the upstairs guest bedroom and closed it firmly behind her, shutting out the disturbing discussion that had been taking place downstairs.

They had dead bodies in the shed?

She leaned against the door and tried to pull herself together. She left the light switch off. The light from the quarter moon coming in from the open blinds was enough for her to see.

She tried making sense of everything she had heard, but it had all happened so quickly it felt like a dream. Dave had watched Mike kill a woman? Could that be true? Was Mike capable of such a thing?

Mike's a vampire. Of course he's capable! Isn't that what those sharp teeth were for? The better to eat you with...

Oh, God, she was losing her mind. Would they feed off of her?

They hadn't so far. But they did feed off of people. They had to, to stay alive, didn't they?

Holy crap, how old were they? Were they immortal? Chris took a deep breath and stumbled to the bed. She plopped down on her back and stared at the ceiling. As she lay on the hand-sewn quilt, she recalled the anger in Mike's eyes as he'd looked at Dave. She

couldn't really blame him for being mad, but the feral look in his eyes made her shiver even now. Apparently Dave had sent out men to kill him. She would never have thought Dave capable of such a horrid betrayal.

What were the men who'd attacked? Vampire killers? Did they go around and stake vampires? Did staking a vampire even work? She'd have to ask Mike later.

Wait. The hell she would! What was she thinking? She couldn't go up to a vampire and ask such a stupid question. But it was Mike. Just Mike. One of her favorite people in the world.

Why hadn't he trusted her enough to tell her what he really was?

Would it have made a difference?

Well, she'd certainly found out why Dave had been so secretive lately. He'd planned to kill their family.

Because they were vampires.

There was a knock on the door. Her heart stopped for a second, then pounded against her chest as she sat up in bed.

"Chris? May I come in?"

It was Mike. She stayed in bed, hoping he would think her asleep.

Only he wouldn't think that because she had just come upstairs a few minutes ago. He had to know she was afraid to answer the door. She waited silently.

It's just Mike. Go answer the door. He would never hurt you.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, Chris." She heard him tap on the door a few times, probably waiting to see if she would change her mind. She couldn't help the irregular beat of her heart. "You know I love you? Don't you?"

She swallowed down the lump in her throat as her eyes welled up. "I do," she whispered, knowing he wouldn't have heard her.

There were another few taps on the door, and she could picture him standing there, leaning his head against the frame and tapping a pattern on the wood.

"I would never hurt you."

She felt the tears well up until they spilled down her cheeks. She couldn't answer him. More than anything she wanted to open the door and wrap her arms around him, and tell him she loved him. She ached to feel comforted, for Mike to tell her everything would be all right. Common sense stopped her. He'd never hurt her, but did he hurt others?

"Mike. Let her be."

It was Gabe. Again, she tensed. Mike being a vampire was one thing. She could hold onto the truth that though he was a vampire, he had never hurt her.

Gabe on the other hand looked every bit as dangerous as the myth of the vampire entailed.

Gabe she didn't know worth a damn.

"Chris? I'll be downstairs if you need me," Mike said.

She listened to their footsteps as they went down the staircase.

She closed her eyes and turned to her side on the plush bed.

Her family was made up of vampires.

She tried letting that fact settle itself into her mind. They were all she had in this world. All she cared about. She loved them more than her own life. Did their being vampires change that? They had accepted her when no other family could.

She swallowed down her fear, recalling all of the times she had spent in their company. How much time Dave had spent in their company.

Why hadn't he told her what he had witnessed with Mike? Now that she looked back at the past few months, Dave had always been here when she had dropped by.

Had he been protecting her? Making sure she was never alone with them? Or had he been spying on them, looking for a way to take them out?

Mike had said he could physically shred Dave, so Dave had to have known he would have been no protection to her at all.

She folded her arms under her chin and lay on her stomach as she gazed out of the window.

Gabe was a vampire. Was he really their cousin? Probably not. He had mentioned something called the Alliance, and the fact that they would go easy on Dave if he cooperated.

What was the Alliance?

And who exactly was Gabe?

If Mike stood by his side he couldn't be all bad. He just couldn't. No matter if Mike was a vampire or not, he wasn't a bad person.

That settled it.

She knew what she would do.

Mike had always been there for her in the past, just as she would be there for him now.

Fangs or not.

She stretched and contemplated going downstairs. Glancing at the darkness just beyond the upstairs window, she caught a glimpse of the shed, and she decided that though she would be there for Mike, she would be there for him tomorrow.

When the sun came up.

Chapter Three

Chris woke to sunlight streaming in through the window. On any other day she would have stretched, smiled and lain there for five more minutes.

After dreams of vampires, flames and coffins, she saw the sunlight and almost dove off the bed in search of shadows.

As it was, it took her a few seconds to realize she wasn't a vampire.

She was merely in a house full of them.

She shook that thought off, climbed out of bed and stretched as she headed to the bathroom. Jess was a neat freak, and sure enough, sitting there on the countertop was a small basket with mouthwash, toothpaste, toothbrush, body wash—everything she would need to feel human in the morning. Even a few tampons, just in case.

Sitting on the oak chair by the bathroom door was a pair of jeans, a top and a towel.

She shrugged out of her own clothes, put them in the hamper and turned on the water. A hot shower would wake her up and hopefully help her put things in perspective. She waited until the water was steaming and climbed in.

Letting the liquid heat run down her scalp and back, she began to shampoo her hair.

She really didn't want to go downstairs. Thinking back on the way she acted she figured she had been in shock. Surely they would understand. Wouldn't they?

As she lathered the loofa, she thought of what she would say to Mike. The only thing that made sense was to apologize for her actions the night before and try to discern what it was Mike did as a vampire. What all of them did as vampires.

Had Dave been right? Were they killers?

She was still breathing.

She'd never felt threatened by any of them before. Far from it. In fact, other than the sun allergy, her family had always seemed decently normal. They celebrated holidays, had birthdays and cookouts. They were the all-American family. They even shot off fireworks on the Fourth of July.

She had nothing to worry about.

Twenty minutes later she stood at the bedroom door with her hand on the doorknob. After the way she'd acted it was going to be difficult to face everyone.

Surely they would understand her fears.

She turned the knob slowly and left the room. As she came down the staircase, she listened for sounds, such as the television or someone talking, but heard nothing. She glanced around the kitchen and living room, but no one was there.

When's the last time you saw them during daylight hours...?

She went to the top of the stairs that led down to the family room.

She paused at the landing, terrified to go down the steps. Did they change during the daytime? Would they attack her?

She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. She had known them for years. They wouldn't hurt her.

As Chris started down the steps, she tried to get all of the freaky images of her dreams out of her mind. It was so quiet downstairs, she was sure they were sleeping somewhere else.

In coffins?

Oh, that was just ridiculous. Wasn't it?

Coffins? Nah. Just because they were vampires didn't mean they slept in coffins. Or that they killed people for blood.

And it certainly didn't earn them the title of undead.

"You're finally up. I thought you'd sleep the day away."

At the sound of Gabe's voice, she tripped and fell down the rest of the steps to the basement floor.

"Ouch." That hurt.

He came over to help her up, but she managed to avoid his hands and scrambled to her feet by herself. She quickly backed away while holding onto her elbow, which stung from a long brush with the carpeted steps.

"Are you all right?"

Gabe was dressed in baggy denim jeans and a black T-shirt. He brushed his hand across his forehead to get his bangs out of his eyes. Apparently not satisfied when they dropped right back, he ran a hand through his hair. The ethereal glow of his light blue eyes made him look unnatural.

Then again, being a vampire was about as unnatural as it came.

She countered his question with her own, doing her best not to stare at his mouth. Fangs. He had fangs. "Where's Dave?"

"He's dead."

"What?" she shrieked.

"Dead asleep on the recliner over there."

She gave him a disgusted look. What a disturbing sense of humor he had, if she could even call it that.

She went over to Dave and checked him, just to make sure. She would have covered him with a blanket if it hadn't been a thousand degrees in the house.

Asleep, Dave was just as she remembered him. His features were relaxed, not pinched as they had been last night.

His dark brown hair was cut short, and he had a bit more than a five o'clock shadow. She touched his hair and ran her finger down his stubbly cheek. What had come over him last night? Even if Tom and the rest of them were vampires she could never harm any of them. They had never hurt her. How had Dave found a group of men who not only knew about vampires, but were willing to kill them?

"What will you do?" she asked Gabe without turning around.

"The Alliance will decide."

She wasn't even going to ask what the Alliance happened to be, since she was quite sure he wouldn't answer her, anyway. "And you will carry out whatever orders they give you?" she asked, turning to look at him.

The man was breathtaking. He stood by the couch, watching her with Dave, as if he was assessing what made her tick. She shouldn't be focusing on that yummy accent of his, or drooling over his handsome face. So much had happened the night before, and all she could do was stare at his mouth and wait for a glimpse of fangs.

He shrugged. "I always have. I see no need to stop doing so now. They are fair in their judgments."

She merely gaped at him. Was she standing here discussing the possibility of Dave's

death with his could-be executioner?

“What is this Alliance, anyway?” *So much for not asking.*

“You have no need to know. When and if you do have a need, I’ll tell you.”

She figured as much. “Well, here’s something *you* need to know. You get the order to kill Dave and you’ll have to kill me, too. I doubt I can stop you, but I’ll die trying.”

Gabe raised an eyebrow at her and sat on the couch in front of the flat screen TV. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” he said, pulling his laptop across his lap.

He was so nonchalant about everything, she found herself sitting on the couch with him. Certainly Mike thought Gabe was trustworthy, or he wouldn’t have invited Gabe into his house.

Did you have to invite a vampire into a house, or was that just myth?

As she sat there, Gabe scanned through his emails. She cast sideways glances at his profile every now and again. She couldn’t help it. She wondered how real vampires measured up to the myth. Could they fly? Levitate? Hypnotize people? Just the thought of all those possibilities intrigued her. How she accepted everything so easily bothered her. The lengths to which she would go to protect her family had no bounds. She held no claim on normality, either, so accepting them for what they were was all she could do.

She also needed to check her messages, so she went to the desk sitting in the corner of the room and retrieved her own laptop. “Where are the others?”

“Sleeping.”

What the hell had happened in the last twenty-four hours? Would anything go back to normal? Would her brothers become close once again and put all of this drama behind them? Could Mike and the rest of the family forgive Dave for what he had done? If Mike really killed someone, could she blame Dave for his actions?

She looked at Gabe and tried to imagine him all scary and sucking on someone’s neck. Ew. Did he really do that?

“Quit staring at me. You’re beginning to freak me out,” he said without taking his gaze from his laptop.

Her mouth dropped open as she flopped down on the couch. “*I’m freaking you out?*” Good God, how could he say that with a straight face?

He turned to look at her with his right eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, you’re freaking me out.”

* * * *

Gabe shook his head, ignored Chris’s look of shock, and brought his attention back to the hundreds of emails in his inbox.

He rarely had to deal with the unknowing human sap who’d just stumbled upon her first vampire. Normally he would have erased her memory, or at the very least, convinced her she had dreamt everything before he subjected himself to her animal-in-a-cage scrutiny.

But had he done that? No. Because these vamps didn’t want to hide the truth from her any longer. They’d had a long conversation last night, and no matter what he’d said or tried to convince them of, all four of the vamps had agreed—Chris needed to know the truth.

Having a human around who knew what you were and your weaknesses was not something he recommended. Which was why he was still up at this ungodly hour. He

kept having visions of her or Dave opening a window and letting in enough light to fry one of these vamps. They were young enough that a few moments in sunlight would cause them serious damage. It would be a few more decades before any of the vamps in this house became a daywalker.

He wasn't worried that Chris would do that, so much as Dave. His first impression of Chris had been good. When he had used his powers to turn on the floodlight, she had been staring at him in a way that could only be described as lust. Not that he didn't return that particular emotion. There was also something about her ... an energy that depicted her as something other than human. But she was neither vampire nor demon, so the best guess he could come up with was that she and Mike were as close as they seemed last night. Just a little bit of vampire blood would raise her energy levels.

Except she'd seemed genuinely surprised to find herself surrounded by vampires, and the vamps had all sworn Chris knew nothing about their true nature.

Did Chris and Mike share a secret?

Feeling her gaze on him, he took his attention from his emails to look at her. She was staring at him again with those intriguing light green eyes. "What?"

"Do you suck blood? Is that how you would kill Dave, by sucking him dry?" Her disgust on the subject was evident from the way her upper lip inched toward her nose.

"No, I'd probably just snap his neck," he answered honestly. He almost smiled at the look of utter repulsion on her face. It was the response he'd expect from a human who had no knowledge of his species, or what vampires were forced to do to keep their species under control. If only he could live in a world such as hers, where baking pies for holiday dinners took precedence over all else.

"Are you serious?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No."

"There you have it."

Pleased he had stunned her into silence, he turned back to his laptop and opened Sven's email.

Top of the morning to you, prick. As luck would have it, we are in the same state. Michigan's cold as the Highlands. You lovin' it? Anyway, Roger and I should be finished with this group of vamps in the next few days. Apparently they've been gathering for the last six months. You know, same old shit, different day. They want power, we kill them, all is well with the world.

Next stop is Virginia. Ambrose is expecting us there sometime next week, so get your shit done and we'll fly out together.

Sven

Gabe replied, saying he'd have his assignment done within forty-eight hours. With a little coercion, Dave had revealed what he knew on the vigilantes he had been working for. Of course, most men would answer questions if they had a razor-sharp knife hovering over their prick, held by a vampire who didn't give a damn what happened one way or the other.

He risked a glance toward Chris. Christ, she was still staring at him. He tried to ignore it, and he assumed by the way she attempted to make it look as though she were checking her messages, she did try not to stare at him.

Obviously, it was a losing battle.

"What now?" he asked.

"How old are you?"

He gritted his teeth and contemplated if he should lie or not. He decided not to.

"Eight-hundred and sixty-four years old."

"Holy shit."

"You've no idea."

"How old are Mike and Stephen?"

"Couple hundred years old."

He let her digest that bit of information before he dropped the big one on her. She really wasn't all that bad, considering the circumstances. The question was, what would she do when she found out what the next few days were going to be like?

"With a little incentive, Dave told me who he had been talking to. So it shouldn't take long to weed them out. A few days at the most." He watched her from the corner of his eye.

"Incentive? What does that mean?" She put her laptop on the coffee table and pulled a pillow over her lap. "So what? You're going to go around"—she made air quotes—"offing these people?"

"And you're coming with me."

He calmly waited until she finished laughing.

"You lie," she snapped.

"Never."

"I'm not going to be an accomplice to murder! I can't even believe I'm discussing this in a rational manner with you!"

Rational his ass. She was starting to screech. "I didn't say you had to help me. Trust me, sweetheart, I don't need help. What I need is for you to stay close to me until the threat to your life is gone."

"I'm not a vampire."

No shit. "Still, these people are out to get you, too. Apparently they don't tolerate vamps *or* those who hang with them."

"Oh."

She looked like she had just found out her puppy had died. He felt compelled to pacify her, knowing how much these vamps loved this woman. Again he found himself wondering if she was involved with Mike. They had seemed much closer than their brother and sister act, which was too bad. Redheads had always been his favorite.

"It'll only be a few days, I'm sure. Then you can go back to doing whatever it is you do."

"Why can't I just stay here?" she asked.

"Because your family can't go out during the daytime, and that would be a weakness the humans who are after you will take full advantage of." He leaned over and picked up his Pepsi.

"But aren't Tom and Jess on their list? Who is going to watch over them?"

"They asked me to watch over you, so that's what I'm going to do."

"How come you can go out in the daylight? 'Cause you're so old?"

He took a deep breath. "Yep."

"Where do you live?"

He took a drink from his Pepsi. "I'm staying at a motel."

“Not what I would have expected to hear,” she said, turning her attention back to her computer.

“A shadowy crypt in Highland Cemetery. Is that better?”

“Sure is. I bet you’d fit in quite nicely there.”

He shook his head, fighting the urge to smile. What a smart-ass.

They fell into a comfortable silence for a while as she emailed a few people, completely oblivious that all her clientele were vampires. He knew it would hit her sooner or later, if she hadn’t already considered the possibility.

She had her left leg folded under her, and her right leg plopped over it. Every now and then she would bounce the foot on her right leg in the most annoying manner, causing the entire couch to vibrate.

When she finished up typing an email she asked, “So, since you have the names of the men who Dave worked for, aren’t you going to go do what you have to do? Why wait?”

“You can’t even say it, can you?” he asked, contempt deepening his voice.

“You have the most irritating habit of cocking your right eyebrow. I feel the need to shave it off.”

How did people like her survive in this world? “Such a violent woman. I don’t know if I have the stomach for your sadistic ways.” He shut his laptop.

“Did you just smile?”

“Vampires don’t smile.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Careful.” He turned to her, raising his brow in the way he now knew irritated her. “I’ve been known to bite.”

* * * *

Chris burst out laughing; whether it was from nerves or sheer amusement, she didn’t know. There was something about Gabe that put her completely at ease, a complete change from the way he’d made her feel last night. Mike had the same quality, but she’d never considered him anything but a brother, a friend. Gabe not only put her at ease, he made her feel womanly at the same time. Flirting with Gabe could become addictive.

This time Gabe did more than just smile. He laughed along with her, exposing his eye teeth, which, truth be told, were quite a sight. They made him look dangerous.

How was it that she had never noticed anyone’s fangs before? Had they hid them from her? Could they do that?

Actually, the whole fang thing was kind of sexy. The black stubble covering the lower half of Gabe’s face looked yummy, too. She’d also bet her next paycheck he had a six-pack hidden under his T-shirt.

Chris cleared her throat and got up from the sofa. What the hell was wrong with her? He was a hired killer. He was someone who existed off of the blood of others, yet here she sat, chatting with him and wondering what he looked like naked.

Probably pretty damned tasty.

“Where are you off to?” he asked as she made her way up the stairs.

“I’m hungry. I was going to get something to eat.”

“Bring me down another Pepsi, will you?”

“Hmm, yet another surprise. I thought you’d ask for O positive, or AB negative.”

He smirked. "That'll come later. Besides, if I get hungry for blood, you're A positive. That's my favorite."

Stunned, she stopped at the top of the stairs. "How did you know?"

"I can smell it."

Ew. Chris felt as though she had passed over into the *Twilight Zone*, which was okay, as long as she didn't think about this situation too long or too hard. Step-by-step was all she had to focus on. Right now she was just getting a new acquaintance a Pepsi and grabbing a bite to eat.

When she got to the kitchen she opened the fridge, already knowing what she wanted. Turkey and gravy, with a bit of mashed potatoes, corn and cranberry slices. Everything she had missed last night.

She got out two plates and started piling them up. She was sure once Gabe saw her food he would want some of his own. She put one of them in the microwave and set the timer. She was reaching for a glass when a movement in the front yard caught her eye in the front kitchen window.

"What the hell?" she said out loud as she walked to the window.

There were five men walking across the grass, slow as you please, carrying weapons of various shapes and sizes.

"Is that a crossbow?" She was just about to scream for Gabe when he suddenly appeared beside her.

"Yep, that's a crossbow," Gabe said, sounding bored.

An ear-piercing scream sliced through the air, and Gabe quickly slapped his hand over her mouth.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

She moved his hand. "Was that me?"

"Are you *serious*?"

She flung her hand in his direction. "Well, shit, you just popped in like some ghost." When he'd materialized right beside her, the same energy that she'd felt when the floodlight came on had surrounded her. Electricity picked up the hairs on her neck, causing her to shiver.

He rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me someone of your intelligence believes in ghosts?"

She just gaped at him.

He snorted and left the kitchen, calling out, "If you're the type to cover your eyes during the scary part of a movie, I wouldn't advise you to stay upstairs. It's going to get messy. I have to let them in so no one sees me killing them."

"Wha—?" She couldn't get her mouth to shut. "What? What did you just say?" She heard him open the front door. Christ, was he going to let them in the house? Could he take on all five of them? How many men were in this group of mercenaries?

"Vampire!" someone screamed from the lawn. She watched Gabe run past the kitchen door, and five men stumble after him. He'd lured them into the house so he could kill them. In the *house*. As if there were tons of houses situated around them. Why did he have to bring them inside?

She heard a slew of disturbing noises that defied explanation, which lasted about one minute. Steel on steel, the sound of flesh connecting with flesh, grunts of pain ... and that strange electrical charge in the air. Then she heard Gabe comment, "Amateurs."

When the microwave went off it was nearly her undoing.

“Microwave’s beeping,” Gabe called out from the living room, where he was doing God knew what.

“I got it,” she yelled. She slapped a hand over her lips. Why did that just come out of her mouth, as nonchalant as you please?

“Good. ‘Cause I’m kind of busy.” He sounded mildly amused.

She spun around and clutched the edges of the sink, peering out of the kitchen window, seeing nothing but bushes and sunshine. Not a crossbow in sight.

So was this the kind of shit she had to deal with for the next few days? Were these men the last of the hunters? When would her heart stop beating so frantically?

Damn Dave. What the hell was he thinking to sic those lousy vampire hunters on them? She had a mind to go downstairs and beat the living crap out of him. If she could, she’d probably do it.

Going to the microwave, she took out the plate and replaced it with the other, setting the timer as she tried to control her shaking. It was impossible. Men had been killed in the dining room and here she was slicing butter to put on her mashed potatoes. Disgusting. She dropped the knife onto the counter and took a deep breath. Before she could let it out, the now-familiar pull of Gabe’s energy filled the kitchen.

When she turned, she caught Gabe staring at her from the doorway. He wasn’t even breathing hard. Did he actually kill those men? “What are you looking at?”

“You dye your hair?” he asked.

Where did that question come from? He’d just killed five men and here he was asking about her hair? What a jaded bastard. How long had he been doing this job that it didn’t seem to affect him at all that he’d just sent five men to their maker?

Remembering his words from earlier, she narrowed her eyes on him. “You don’t have a need to know. When and if you do, I’ll be sure to tell you.”

“Smart-ass.”

“Jackass.”

“No flirting before six p.m. in this house, you hear me?”

Gabe moved aside as Tom came into the kitchen and quickly pulled the shades. He was carrying a plate of what looked to have been leftovers to the kitchen sink.

“I wasn’t flirting,” they said simultaneously.

She snorted. “Like I would date a vampire.”

Gabe smirked. “If you only knew, sweetheart.”

She quickly gave him the motion “up yours” with her hand. “So, is that what you do? Wait until people attack and then off them?”

“No. Dave and I have unfinished business. I’m just waiting on the call that will tell me what business that entails, then we go after these men.”

“I see,” she said, clearly not understanding at all. Gabe had just sugar-coated the fact that he was waiting to hear if he would be given the order to kill Dave. Would Tom and the others allow Gabe to kill Dave if that was the verdict handed down? She certainly wouldn’t.

“And why the wait? Don’t you have all the evidence you need?”

“Dave is human, so the decision to eliminate him is a special case. The Alliance protects humans from our species, not the other way around. Still, he knows too much and we’re not sure what he’ll do if we allow him to live.”

The microwave went off, causing her to jump.

Pushing all thoughts aside she went to the countertop and picked up her plate. “Gabe, I made you a plate. It’s in the microwave.” She was about to take her plate and drink downstairs, but came to a stop at the kitchen door.

“Wait. Are there dead bodies out there or something?”

“I wouldn’t leave dead bodies lying around Tom’s house. I’m a bit more delicate than that.”

Yeah, right. What could he have done with five dead bodies in less than five minutes? “Blood-splattered walls?”

“If I didn’t know any better I would say you’re getting a kick out of this crime spree,” Tom said as he left the kitchen to go back downstairs.

“Well, at least Gabe is doing us a favor by taking a bite out of crime.” She laughed at her own joke as she left the kitchen behind Tom.

Both Gabe and Tom moaned.

It was official. She’d lost her mind. *Don’t think about it.* “I could go all day with those.”

“I’m sure you could,” Gabe said as he descended the stairs after her.

Chris saw Mike sitting on the sofa as she walked into the family room. He appeared haggard, not at all the same man who spent hours in the bathroom primping. The question in his eyes had her cringing. She wanted to see the usual Mike, the man who always had a smile on his face.

“Well, well, well, look who woke from the dead,” Chris said to Mike with a snort.

Tom put a hand to his forehead. “I can already feel the headache coming on.”

When Mike gave Gabe a questioning look, Gabe answered, “It’s vampire pun city and Chris is the mayor.”

“All right, all right. Put a stake in me, I’m done.” She burst out laughing, then tried to sober up when everyone groaned. “Come on, I have to do something to keep from getting thrown into a loony bin.” She turned to Mike. “Gabe just killed five men upstairs. They were carrying some vicious-looking weapons, too.”

“Is that what the scream was all about? You woke me out of a *dead* sleep.”

Chris smiled as she sat next to Mike. She was ashamed at the way she had behaved toward him last night. Seriously, though, who could blame her? She was glad the tone of the conversation was light. Her heart was still beating too fast, and her shaking hadn’t gone completely away.

She would have to talk to Mike later, when they had more privacy. It was important to her that they clear the air.

“She screamed before the fighting even began,” Gabe answered.

“Did those men scare you?” Tom asked gently.

“No. He did.” She pointed at Gabe, who merely shrugged his shoulders and plopped down on the couch to her right with his plate of food. “He just popped out of thin air like *I Dream of Jeannie* on crack or something. Scared the crap out of me.”

Mike laughed. “Yeah, I always wanted to be able to do that.”

“What? Do you have to be older to do it or something?” she asked.

“No. His father—”

“Can we not get into this right now?” Gabe asked Mike.

Chris could tell by the look on Gabe’s face that this was a conversation he didn’t want to have. Mike nodded at him, but Chris couldn’t help but prod a little. “Get into

what?"

"The hundred and one annoying questions you seem to like so much," Gabe snapped.

For some reason his response stung. She shrugged it off. "I'd as soon talk to you as not. Makes no difference to me," she said as she picked up her fork.

* * * *

A silence permeated the room as Gabe waited for the jury to reach a verdict. He could feel the tension he'd brought on by snapping at Chris. The members in this family sheltered her, as if the human would break down at any moment. Especially Mike.

When Chris began eating, Mike mouthed to Gabe, "You hurt her feelings."

When Gabe shrugged, Mike frowned.

Oh, Christ. Here comes the older brother bullshit.

Mike stood. "Gabe, would you mind coming upstairs for a moment? I want to show you something."

With a grunt, Gabe pushed his plate of food farther onto the coffee table. "Be right back."

"Okay," Chris said.

He didn't mention that he had been talking to the homemade stuffing. He'd been eating fast food for quite some time now, and the thought of his food getting cold annoyed the shit out of him.

Gabe followed Mike to the kitchen and leaned against the door frame with his right shoulder as he folded his arms across his chest. He really didn't have time for this. He was here on a mission, not to coddle the human involved in the mess. "What did you want to show me?"

"Watch yourself around my sister."

Blunt and to the point. Just the way Gabe liked things. He wasn't sure he appreciated Mike's tone, however. "She's not your sister."

"The hell she isn't. I'm closer to her than I ever was with my real relatives. She's been through a lot in the last few hours, and I would appreciate it if you would watch what you say when you're around her. This shit is new to her."

"I'm not here to make friends. I'm here because Tom called the Alliance. I found the problem, and the problem will be fixed shortly. I'm doing as Tom asked and taking care of all the loose ends while taking care of Chris, which, by the way, is not a part of my job description. I think by all accounts I'm doing more than enough as it is. The Alliance seems to think so, anyway."

Mike ran his hand through his hair. "Listen. I know we haven't known each other long. All I'm asking is that you take care with how you speak to her. She might seem to have a handle on things, but I assure you she does not. She always gets goofy and talkative when she's scared. It's just her way of dealing with things she'd rather not think about."

Gabe took the young man into consideration. He was young by Gabe's standards, but in reality Mike had been born in the eighteen hundreds, making him over two-hundred-years old.

Mike had been through hell right before he transitioned into a vampire. If anyone knew about pain, it was Michael. Gabe had nothing but respect for the vampire. But the subject of his father wasn't one Gabe enjoyed talking about. He'd do what he always did

in situations such as this.

End the conversation.

"I assure you I wouldn't say or do anything to purposely hurt her." He watched Mike nod. "At the same time, I'm not going to watch everything I say around her in fear of hurting her feelings."

"I understand."

Gabe could see by the look on his face Mike didn't. Still, Mike didn't push him. Smart man.

Gabe heard someone walk up the steps from the basement. A few seconds later, Chris came in with a plate half-filled with food. He moved farther into the kitchen to allow her room to pass.

"Is that all you're going to eat?" Mike asked her.

She put her plate in the sink and walked over to Mike, putting her arms around him and laying her head on his chest. "I'm just tired."

At that moment, she seemed like a lost young woman. Gabe had never felt the urge to assure someone things would turn out all right until this very second.

He couldn't fathom why he wanted Chris to come to him for comfort and reassurance. She'd known Mike for years, whereas they didn't know each other at all. Wanting her to come to him for comfort was ludicrous, and yet that's exactly what he wanted.

When Mike put his arms around Chris and squeezed her back, Gabe walked out of the room.

"What's wrong with him?" The guilt over what she had done the night before was surfacing again. She closed her eyes as she hugged Mike and wished she could take back her actions from last night.

"He has a lot on his mind." Mike placed a kiss on top of her head.

"Don't we all?" The thought of losing her family weighed heavily on her mind. She didn't want to be alone in this world again. She didn't have the strength for it.

"I'm sorry I lied to you."

She pulled away to look at him. He looked tired. His green eyes didn't hold their normal sparkle. "Don't be. That's your business, isn't it? I'm not angry at you." She had her own mess of secrets, so she couldn't blame Mike for wanting to keep his.

The sad fact was she wasn't worried about the things she should be worried about right now. For the last hour or so she hadn't been able to concentrate on anything but Gabe.

He was one hot SOB. When Gabe was in the room he *commanded* it. It was hard to miss him. Hell, it was impossible to miss him. She'd found herself wondering about his past, where he came from and how long he'd been doing this job. She should be contemplating her brothers' past and how they came to be vampires.

She cleared her throat. "So, you can date, like, normal people, right?"

"What?"

The look on Mike's face spoke volumes, none of which she wanted to read. "No, no. Not like you and me, ew. I was just..." It occurred to her the only conclusion he could make, and her face went up in flames. "Never mind."

She tried making a hasty retreat, but just as she had known from the second she made the blunder, he wasn't going to let it go.

He caught her wrist. "Gabe?"

"No, I was just curious, that's all," she replied, a little too quickly. In all the years she'd known Mike, she'd never had a serious relationship. She'd rarely dated. After only a few hours in Gabe's company it had occurred to her she wouldn't mind going on a date with him, just to see what he was like. How he would treat a woman. Her misplaced thoughts proved how rattled she really was. Why would she think about dating when everything was falling to pieces around her? Her libido certainly chose a fine time to spring into action.

Mike started laughing just as Stephen came walking in.

"What's so funny?" Stephen asked.

"Oh, shit, this is priceless."

"Shut up, Mike," Chris grumbled. It was bad enough that she'd made the slip in front of Mike, but to add Stephen into the mix? She'd never hear the end of it.

"What is it?" Stephen asked again.

"Nothing." She wanted to smash Mike's face in. He was forever embarrassing her. Why couldn't he just let the matter drop?

Tom came walking in, making the kitchen a bit crowded. The perfect excuse for her to leave.

"What's all the commotion about?" Tom asked.

"Chris has a crush," Mike answered, still laughing.

"Oh, I already knew that. Caught them flirting earlier." Tom grabbed a handful of peanuts from a glass container on the kitchen counter and winked at her.

Chris left the kitchen and started making her way down the hallway. If she stayed in their company they would force her to regress back to third grade mentality.

"Do you even know his last name, run-around Sue?" Mike called out after her.

She gasped, coming back to the kitchen with four angry strides. "What the hell is wrong with you people? Can you step out of the third-grade mindset for five minutes? Standing there with smirks on your faces. Give me a break, will you?"

She turned to leave again, having said what she wanted to say. Mike was still laughing, Stephen looked confused, and Tom looked smug. Vampires her ass.

As for Gabe, she could buy off on *his* being a vampire. He was moody, dark and downright frightening at times. These three stooges were anything but. Well, except for last night when Mike found out Dave had hired out to kill him. She supposed he could do scary when he wanted.

Stephen, who resembled a tanned California surfer, did not fit the description at all. He looked like a twenty-year-old about to go on spring break.

And Tom? He looked like an accountant whose idea of getting rowdy was drinking a beer with his co-workers on bowling night.

She cleared her throat and rolled her eyes as she came to a stop. Why would she want to know Gabe's last name? Who cared, anyway?

She had almost reached the steps when she turned back. Reluctantly she found herself asking, "Okay, I'm intrigued. What is it?"

Mike's lips twitched. "Do you really want to know?"

Chris gave him The Look.

Mike held up his hands in surrender. "MacPherson. Gabriel MacPherson."

She turned away before they caught her smile. What in the world was wrong with

her?

Third grade, indeed.

* * * *

Gabe waited as Dave contemplated the offer the Alliance was giving him. He was quickly losing his patience with the young man. Dave exuded a snotty arrogance that was nothing short of nauseating. How these vampires could consider Dave anything short of a pain in the ass was beyond him.

The private meeting that Gabe held in the computer room had been in session for only five minutes, and already he felt like knocking the shit out of Dave.

"A job?" Dave lowered his head and leveled his gaze at Gabe, clearly suspicious of the Alliance's motives.

Gabe nodded. "The Alliance is offering you a job or the penalty of death. Your choice."

Gabe couldn't imagine why the Alliance was offering this human a job. First they would have to turn him, which wouldn't go over well, since Dave wasn't exactly a fan of vampires, and secondly, he wouldn't be a daywalker for years. One stipulation to being an assassin in the Alliance was that you had to be a daywalker.

Dave sat back in his chair. "How long do I have to think about it?"

"David!" Chris screeched from behind the office door. "There's nothing to think about! Take the job."

Gabe was seriously considering getting ear plugs for the rest of his stay. "Chris, you do understand this is a private meeting?" he said loud enough so she could hear.

He heard Stephen say, "Get away from the door, Chris."

"Shut up, Stephen." She raised her voice, calling through the door, "A need-to-know basis?"

"Exactly." Gabe turned his attention back to Dave, thinking Chris would let the matter drop.

Instead she opened the door to the computer room and walked in.

Apparently she had no such intentions.

She bounced into the room as though they were reading the Sunday paper. She had traded her jeans and white T-shirt for a pair of plaid pajamas that were too long and too big for her.

She must have borrowed them from Mike.

Her auburn hair was thrown into a haphazard bun, and she wore fuzzy, beige slippers.

She was simply adorable.

Gabe straightened his back as he sat forward in his chair. *Where the hell did that thought come from? Adorable?* Chris was not his type at all. She was dramatic, loud and annoying—everything he detested in a woman.

"Dave, this is better than I thought you'd get. After what you did? I thought the least they would do to you is beat the crap out of you. That's what I wanted to do when I saw those crazy assholes earlier today."

Dave shook his head. "They want me to track these vigilante hunters for a living. Then what? Who's to say vampires won't pop out all over the place with no one to keep them in check?"

“Keep *us* in check?” Gabe considered sending the boy through the plaster in the far wall. The Alliance rarely went easy on anyone, let alone offered a job to a human.

“See what you’ve done now? You’ve got Gabe growling and looking seriously pissed off.” She shook her head and kneeled in front of Dave’s chair. “Admit it, Dave. You royally fucked up.”

Dave shook his head. “I saw Mike—”

“You keep saying that! You saw him what?”

“You don’t know what they’re capable of. Sure, they’re nice to us. But think about it this way—if you had a friend and he was a serial killer, but he would never harm you, what would you do? You know he’s going to keep on killing, but what the hell? He would never hurt you, and you love him. What would you do?”

Gabe watched as Chris sat there silently, contemplating on what she would say next. Her hand was on Dave’s lap, holding one of his hands.

She was the type of person who gave comfort. Who liked contact with others.

He wasn’t.

Not only was he not the type who gave comfort to others, he didn’t like the fact Chris spent so much of her energy on such an arrogant bastard.

Truth be told, he didn’t particularly like the way she acted around Mike, either. Which didn’t make sense, neither did it bear thinking on.

“Chris, get the hell out,” he snapped.

She turned and shot him a go-to-hell look before turning back to Dave. “Can we discuss this with Mike? Last night he said he didn’t recall what you were talking about. Perhaps it was someone else you saw?”

Dave grabbed her by her upper arms, standing them up as he did so, causing Chris to cry out.

Gabe shot to his feet but held himself back before he really hurt the young man. He fisted his hands at his side while adrenaline pumped through his body.

“Why do you keep coming up with excuses for him? He’s a vampire. He needs blood to survive. Where do you think he gets it? From a fucking doctor’s prescription?”

“Watch yourself,” Gabe warned him. “Chris?”

“I’m all right,” she assured him.

Despite her words, Gabe could see she was slightly shaken up by Dave’s actions.

“Here are your options, Dave,” she said. “One, you can call Mike in here, talk to him about what you saw and how he goes about his ... business. If you agree what he does is acceptable, then you take the job.”

Chris paused and glanced at Gabe. She tilted her head toward him and looked back at Dave. “Or two, Gabe here is going to snap your neck, and once he does there’s no more I can do for you.”

Chapter Four

“Not that it’s any of your fucking business—”

“Mike!” Chris scolded, folding her arms over her chest.

“What?” Mike snapped. “You’re both looking at me like I’m an animal. This isn’t something our kind like to talk about with humans because you don’t understand.”

Chris wrinkled her nose. “Will you stop flinging the word humans around like you’re not? It’s creepy.”

“He’s not, Chris. I think that’s the piece you’re missing. He’s *not* human,” Dave insisted.

“And I don’t go around killing people, either, you ignorant bastard.”

“Okay.” Chris ran her hands over her face. She wasn’t sure how to do this properly without hurting anyone’s feelings, and it was obvious Mike was getting pissy because he was uncomfortable and embarrassed.

That’s not what she had wanted to happen, and she felt responsible because she had been the one to suggest this meeting.

Mike was sitting in the computer chair, looking thoroughly agitated, so she went over and plopped in his lap, just like she’d done a thousand times before. She wanted him to know she didn’t think any different of him.

Was that entirely true?

She glanced at Gabe, who also had a decidedly agitated look on his face.

She tried to make light of the situation, so she settled with one of her famous puns.

“Keep your fangs to yourself,” she said, settling on his lap.

Mike laughed as he adjusted her weight on his lap, grunting loudly as he did so.

“Good one, sis. But I bet you don’t say that to Gabe.”

Ho-lee shit.

Chris felt the heat as her face went up in flames. *See what happens?* She tried to make someone else more comfortable and look what he did? He did his best to embarrass the shit out of her!

She pointedly ignored him, and the stunned look she received from Dave. She didn’t even dare to look at Gabe’s expression. Mike’s time would come. She’d definitely get him back for that one.

It could be worse. It could be worse. It could be worse.

She straightened herself in the chair as best she could while sitting on the rat-bastard’s lap. “So, what were you doing with that woman, Mike?” she asked, fidgeting with her beige slippers. She puckered her lips and added, “Other than handing her really bad pick-up lines.”

Gabe let out an uncharacteristic laugh.

“I honestly don’t recall—”

Dave sat forward in his chair. “It was two months ago, behind Pat’s Bar and Grill. I saw you at the bar, and just before I got to you, you left with a woman. I wouldn’t have followed you, but you went out the back door. I was curious why.” Dave curled his lip. “I certainly found out.”

She felt Mike take a deep breath. “Well, I hope you were taking notes, then, because

all we did was make-out a bit. Perhaps you learned something.”

Chris rolled her eyes. Third grade never had it so good. It was nearing two in the morning, and she was starting to get tired. Mike knew what was on the line here—Dave’s life. Passing petty barbs back and forth wasn’t going to help this situation.

“I saw you bite her,” Dave insisted.

“Did you watch me stuff her cold, dead body into some bushes?”

“No—”

“Then why? Why did you hire out with those men? Did you honestly think I was some psycho killer?” Mike sat up a bit, adjusting her weight again as he did so.

“I honestly didn’t know. I saw blood, and I panicked. I should have helped her, though in all honesty I was sure you had killed her.” Dave shook his head and looked away. “I’ve felt guilty ever since. I promised myself I would do all I could do to help anyone else, and that’s why I did what I did. People don’t deserve to be lessened to a goddamned meal.”

Chris turned around in Mike’s lap to face him. “I thought you said y’all just made out?”

“So I took a little sip.”

“Ew,” Chris said, making a face. The way he had said it, so blasé and natural, made her want to vomit.

“Oh, shuddup before I bite you.”

“Kinky bastard.”

“Damn right.”

“This is not something to joke about!” Dave yelled, coming to his feet.

Chris’s eyes widened and she instinctively leaned back into Mike. Dave’s whole body was tense and he looked like he could do some serious damage. “Dave, chill out a bit. I think you’re taking this way too seriously.”

“And you’re not taking it serious enough.”

Gabe rose from his chair and walked over to Dave, shoving him back in his seat.

“What you want to know is quite simple.”

Gabe went to the desk and leaned his left thigh on the edge, bracing his left elbow on his thigh and leaning forward. He looked like he was posing as a CEO for a spread in GQ magazine—a damn fine CEO at that.

She wouldn’t mind being his secretary, that was for sure.

“Vampires don’t go around killing people. In fact, that’s why we created the Alliance, to keep our kind in check. Every society needs rules with which to govern their people, and we are no different.”

Chris almost laughed at the “keep our kind in check” words Gabe was throwing back at Dave. At least he wasn’t growling this time.

Chris sensed this was going to take a while, so she folded her arms across her chest and leaned back into Mike.

This meeting was turning out to be very informative, considering she could stare at Gabe without anyone taking notice. He was speaking, after all, and she didn’t want to seem rude by not paying attention to what the man was saying.

Okay, scratch that. She was staring at his lips, his arms, the way his muscles moved when, as he proved a point to Dave, he spread his arms wide.

Just the size of his hands, and thoughts of what he could do with them, was enough

to hold her attention for hours.

If she had to pick a favorite part of him, it would have to be his eyes. Framed by locks of jet black hair, his light blue eyes made him appear ethereal.

She let out a quiet yawn and stretched her arms above her head.

"Every society also has both bad and good citizens, and again, we are no different. Some vampires kill merely to kill. Some vampires feed excessively, just as humans can become alcoholics. Some hunger for power, while others buy a house in the hills and try to keep to themselves. We're all different. The Alliance remains the only group in the world that happens to gather information to track down the rogue vampires and weed them out from the good, so that the good do not suffer from their actions."

He was making so much sense. Those in her family weren't the animals Dave thought they were. She was quite certain Dave would make the right choice, so she began to relax and close her eyes. "Do you mind?" she asked Mike.

"Make yourself comfortable." Mike said, wrapping his arms around her. She closed her eyes and let out another yawn.

"You don't hunger for blood when you're around humans?" she heard Dave ask.

"Sure we do," Mike answered.

His quiet admission crawled under her skin and gave her visuals she could have done without. "Relaxing time over," Chris said as she sat up on his lap, pushing away from his chest.

"Look at it this way," Mike said to her. "You're a gorgeous redhead, practically lying on me, right?"

"Not sure about the gorgeous part, but okay, what about it?"

"All men think about when they're around beautiful women is sex. If we aren't thinking about it, then we're not getting it, and if we're not getting it we're thinking about it. But do you see men attacking women at the store? In the mall? My point is that our hunger is a controllable urge."

"Women get raped," Dave pointed out.

"There are always a few bad apples, jackass. Is that what you think I am?"

The look on Mike's face stopped her heart. If he clenched his teeth any tighter he'd be paying the dentist a visit tomorrow.

"There are consequences for the actions of those who cannot or will not control their hunger." Gabe pushed himself from the desk and paced with the impatience of a caged lion. She caught Gabe's eye as he walked by her. His blue eyes seemed to miss nothing. He was a predator, she reminded herself. It was his business to catch everything.

She couldn't help but wonder what he would be like in bed.

The word animalistic came to mind.

Gabe cleared his throat. "So, if you agree to the job the Alliance wants to give you, then you would in turn be doing what those vigilantes were doing. Only you would have the correct information to judge someone, and not what someone thought they saw in a dark alley. Carrying out an order for death is not something one should take lightly."

Chris raised an eyebrow. Coming from a mercenary that sounded odd.

She suddenly wondered if he was attached to anyone.

What an odd thought in the middle of a very serious discussion. As tired as she was, she almost came right out and asked him. Instead she settled back into Mike. She'd find out if he was attached in the morning.

Crap, everyone would be asleep.

Well, she would find out soon enough. She just couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. "Hmm, you smell good."

"Old Spice," Mike said.

Chris smiled as she listened to Gabe drone on. His voice, accompanied with the rise and fall of Mike's chest were lulling her to sleep. Gabe began telling Dave the benefits he would have if he joined the Alliance.

Perhaps Dave should ask for a 401K.

When Gabe started speaking of the traveling Dave's job would entail, and the knowledge of various weapons he would be taught to use, her eyelids became heavier. The heat in the house added to her drowsiness.

"Where is she sleeping tonight?" she heard Gabe ask. She opened her eyes. Had she missed anything? Had Dave come to a decision?

"We're going to have to stay here for the remainder of the night, and in a few hours we will be leaving. I'm going to drop by the place the hunters are staying in the morning. I'll need to keep her with me," Gabe said.

A few naughty ideas came to mind as to where she should sleep for best protection, but she was sure her brothers wouldn't allow her those scenarios.

"Why wait until morning? Why don't we do this tonight?" Mike asked.

"First of all, there is no we. Secondly, because the men will expect me at night."

God, the way he had said that made him seem like a one-man army. Then again, he had taken on five men with little to no problem at all.

"Why can't we help?" Mike asked.

"I already told you, this is in the hands of the Alliance, a group by which you are not currently employed."

She crawled off Mike's lap. "There's another guest room right down the hall from the room I stayed in last night. You'll be close enough to watch over me." But far enough that she wouldn't have access to what she wanted to explore.

"You have a sleeping bag?" Gabe asked Mike.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because I'm sleeping in her room tonight."

* * * *

Gabe shut the door to the computer room firmly behind him, causing her to wonder if that was such a good idea. "Is it wise to leave them in there alone? We've been their buffer up until now. Who knows what they'll do to each other once we're gone?"

Gabe seemed unfazed. "It's not what they will do to each other, but what Mike will do to Dave. Dave can't touch him."

Point taken. "Well, Mike is the more level-headed of the two. I guess it's a good thing he's the one with the strength."

As they made their way up to the guest room she couldn't help but look into the dining room and contemplate what really went on between Gabe and the vigilantes. What had transpired between him and the fighters earlier, and what had he done with their bodies?

"Do you think anyone will come crashing into the house like they did earlier?"

"Let them try."

Had he always been so unbreakable? Was there anything he was afraid of?

"Shit. I forgot my laptop. I'll be right back," he said, brushing past her in the upstairs hallway.

"Can you grab mine, too?"

"Will do."

Grateful for a few minutes alone, she opened the door to the guest room and closed it behind her. She went straight to the bathroom and brushed her teeth with the trial-sized packets Jess had left her. Having taken a shower earlier, she opened the medicine cabinet and found a few small vials of perfume. Jess was prepared for all of her guests' needs.

Chris dabbed a few drops of a perfume called Seduction onto her collarbone, wrists and neck. The name of the perfume seemed more than appropriate.

Crap. She wondered if vampires had a heightened sense of smell. Gabe would know what she was doing if he came in and the room smelled like a whore house.

She grabbed a washcloth, wet it and started to rub off the perfume when she heard the door to the bedroom open.

Giving up on her endeavor, she pulled out her bun and started brushing her hair. She wet the brush a bit, knowing if she didn't her hair would look like that of a troll doll, wild and untamable.

Five minutes later she gazed into the mirror and figured that was the best it was going to get.

She opened the door to the bathroom and turned off the light. The warm glow of the small lamp on the dresser gave out more than enough light. Gabe was lying on top of a blue sleeping bag with his laptop, stretched out like a lion soaking up the sun. He glanced up when she walked over to pick up her laptop from the dresser.

"Mike's pissed off," he commented. He stood and picked up a mug off the dresser. He stalked toward her and handed her the mug.

"What's this?"

"Tom was downstairs making hot chocolate. I thought you'd like a cup so I made you one."

There was whipped cream on the top. It was a gesture she would have done for Mike or Stephen. A small way of letting them know she thought of them and cared for them. "How did you carry the laptops and the cups up here?" she asked as she watched him take a sip of his own hot chocolate.

"I've got skills."

Oh, she bet he did. "Thanks." She walked over to the bed. "So what is Mike pissed about?"

He settled back down on his makeshift bed. "My staying in this room with you."

"He's just looking out for his little sis." She slid the laptop on the bed and climbed up to settle herself on the plush mattress. She took a sip of the hot chocolate and set it down on the nightstand.

"Says the woman wearing his shirt."

She opened her laptop slowly, her brows coming together in confusion. "And what was I supposed to wear? I had to borrow something."

"Why didn't you borrow something from Jess? She's lent you everything else so far."

Was he jealous? God, she hoped so. He certainly sounded like it. "I don't know."

Mike handed me some pajamas and I took them. No biggie.”

“And the snuggling on his lap downstairs? No biggie there, either?”

She noted the tick in his jaw and the coldness in his voice. She turned on her computer and waited for it to boot. Oh yeah, he was jealous. She fought the urge to smile. She signed on to the internet and brought up her emails. “We’ve always been close.”

Which was true. Growing up she hadn’t had a mother fuss over her, or give her a hug when she so desperately needed one. She craved touch, and it wasn’t as though she only got close to Mike. She did the same with all her family members.

“I can’t help but wonder if he’s not as close as he’d like.”

She really shouldn’t let his anger make her happy, but damn, she couldn’t help it. It took everything she had not to smile.

Ignoring him, she shook her head and read a message from a man named Colin. Recently diagnosed with photosensitivity, he wanted to obtain more information on the disease.

She emailed back with her normal response.

First let me say I am sorry to hear of your diagnosis. Sensitivity to sunlight affects every aspect of life, and that is why Dark Days was created.

Second, if you have not done so already, check with your doctor to confirm what kind of photodermatoses you may have. There are several categories, and in some cases it may have been a new medication you have introduced into your life or another disease such as lupus that brought up a side effect such as light sensitivity.

This was where she copied and pasted the rest of her message, which was very general and explained a bit more about the company.

I’m going to mail you a packet, along with a membership form to be filled out at your convenience. If you are interested in only gaining knowledge on this disease, you can get free information from many sites on the internet or in books from your local library.

Our goal here at Dark Days is to introduce you to a network full of individuals such as yourself and give you access to those individuals through internet boards and instant messaging rooms. We also hold a yearly convention for our members. We believe there is strength in numbers, and together we can overcome our weaknesses and recognize our strengths.

Thank you for your interest in our organization. A free magazine will be sent to you along with your packet, which will be arriving in the next few weeks. If you are interested in keeping this publication, you must fill out the membership form and send it back with your payment.

Glancing at Gabe she wanted to add, *Then again, if you are a newly made vampire, and all you want to do is meet other vampires, you can’t pass this opportunity up.*

Sighing, she looked out of the window to the darkness that blanketed the backyard. She had nearly twenty other emails to get to.

Is that how many vampires were made daily? How did they know Dark Days was actually a publication for vampires? Word of mouth? Hell, she hadn’t even known. Why hadn’t Mike told her? Didn’t he trust her?

Was he ashamed?

“How’s a vampire made?”

Gabe looked up from his laptop. His black hair fell around his eyes. “A vampire

must drain the victim, or as you so bluntly put it, suck him dry. Then the individual must ingest some of the vampire's blood."

"That's it?"

He nodded. "That's it."

"Don't you find that ... gross?"

"No."

Yuk. "Guess it's all in how you're raised." She looked back at her laptop. "Have you ever ... you know."

"No, I've never sucked anyone dry before."

"But you have, like, bitten someone?"

He raised his right eyebrow. "Would that bother you?"

Psshht, yeah. It just wasn't something she wanted to think about. All this time Mike and Stephen had existed on the blood of others, and she hadn't even known it. Suspected maybe, but she'd pushed her suspicions aside.

She didn't answer him and went back to her emails instead.

After a few moments she looked at Gabe again, busy with his own work. Did he have a family? Were they also vampires? What did they think of his job? "Do you always fight?"

"It's what I do."

Well, la-di-da. Even vampires had to act macho.

His cell rang.

"Hello."

She could tell by the soft look that crossed over his features this call wasn't about business. It was the first time since she met him that he actually seemed ... human. Not a vampire out on a mission, but a man with a life outside of his job.

"Everything's fine. Nothing to worry about."

She tried to act busy with her laptop, but she was hanging on his every word. She'd bet anything the caller was female. Perhaps he was involved with someone.

"I'm going to meet up with Sven and Roger in a few days," he said.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him look up at her as she pretended to eye another email. Was there something he couldn't say with her in the room?

"Well, everything's fine, and we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. There's nothing to worry about."

She found herself grinding her teeth. She had to make herself stop. *So he had a girlfriend. So what? There are other men out there.*

Not many that came in the package he offered, but what could she do? He was going to be gone in a few days, and she had no doubt that she would have a hard time getting her life back together with everything she had learned. She would have to get together with Tom and ask him about Dark Days. Dave would be gone ... or dead.

Don't think about it.

"All right. Good night, Mom. I love you."

Someone could have punched her in the gut and it wouldn't have had the same effect as hearing him say that.

His mother.

When he hung up the phone, she couldn't help but ask, "You have a mother?"

He actually laughed. "And a father, if you can believe that."

Damn, that's right. Mike had mentioned him earlier. "Are they vampires, too?"

"My father is. My mother is not."

"Oh." How was that possible? "How is she still alive? Aren't you super, super old?"

He sighed, looking up at her again. God, he was gorgeous. Even when he was annoyed with her, which was ninety percent of the time.

"She's not a vampire, but she is immortal." When she gave him a questioning look, he shook his head. "Very long story. Best told over a few beers."

She smiled. For all of his supernatural attributes, he seemed pretty normal right now. Must be the call from his mother that had her seeing him in a different light. "Are they back in Scotland?"

"Yes."

"What is she worried about?"

He shrugged. "Normal mother crap. She wants to make certain I'm being careful."

"You've been in the Alliance for how long, and she still worries about you?" It was kind of sweet, actually, and told her a lot about him and his family.

"Tell it to her."

She was asking too many questions, and that might annoy him as it did earlier that day. She was enjoying their light banter, and though she didn't want it to stop, she didn't want to crowd him, either. From what she knew about him, he appeared to be a private man.

She took another sip of her hot chocolate and proceeded to spend a half hour answering emails and filling out change of address slips for their publication mailing lists. It would seem with the amount of address slips vampires sent in, they had a tendency to move around a lot.

When she finished she slid off the bed to put her laptop away. Gabe was still busy on his, so she remained quiet.

She went to the oak chair by the bathroom and looked at what Jess had put down for her. Black slacks and a pretty light blue sweater. Jess had even laid out black knee highs with black pumps, knowing Chris couldn't wear her boots with this outfit.

Chris turned to go back to bed when Gabe stood and stretched. His black T-shirt rose up and revealed a trace of raven hair just above his belt, running from his navel and disappearing below his low-rise jeans.

She'd say later she was tired and didn't know what she was doing when she walked up to him and put her right hand on his whiskered cheek and brought her lips to his. Her left arm went around his neck to keep him there.

She practically wrapped herself around him.

The first thing she noticed was his hesitation. He didn't pull away, nor did he return her kiss. In fact, when she opened her eyes she saw the confusion in his. There was a reason she had never been so bold before.

"What are you doing?" he asked against her lips.

If she had been a balloon she would have deflated. Still, she wanted him, and she wanted him to want her. There was something magnetic about him. It was primal. Dangerous.

It beckoned to her, allowing her to shed her inhibitions and embrace the darker side of her desire.

"I'm waiting for your cooperation," she whispered as she nibbled his lower lip.

Either he liked his lower lip nibbled, or he liked her proposition. Whatever it was, it sent him into action, and she found herself pinned against the wall of the upstairs bedroom in the most delicious kind of attack.

He hiked her right leg up over his hip, and his hand went running down her thigh. He was pressed so firmly against her she could feel every muscle in his body. She ran her hands down his back, enjoying the feel of his muscles move under her touch, and brought him even closer.

She trailed her hands down his back to his butt, pulling at him and grinding her hips into his as he ran his tongue across hers.

There was a startled gasp at the doorway. "Oh! I'm so sorry!"

Gabe let go of her faster than a lighting strike, while all Chris could do was stare at Jess, who was holding a small basket filled with soaps and shampoos as she stood in the open doorway.

Crap, hadn't Jess thought to knock? Then again, she hadn't known Chris was going to assault her house guest. Hell, Chris herself hadn't known she was going to attack him.

"Uh..." was all Chris could mutter.

"I'll just leave this here. Sorry." Jess put the basket on the floor by the door and quickly pulled it shut behind her.

That was awkward. The moment was totally lost.

She waited for a few seconds to see what Gabe would do. Her earlier inhibitions came back to her like a ton of bricks. What had she been thinking? Gabe was so far out of her league they weren't even playing on the same planet. He was gorgeous beyond compare with a body meant for pleasure.

She was a size eight on a good day, a size holy shit on a bad. Her red hair was frizzy and unmanageable, to the point John Freda had called and told her miracles only happen on *Thirty-Fourth Street*.

She started to say something, but kept her mouth shut when Gabe started to speak.

From the look on his face it was apparent her chances with him were zilch. His words confirmed it.

"Fate. Do you believe in it?"

"Not really." Her heart felt heavy in her chest.

"I do. And I think we just avoided a huge mistake."

She stood there for a few seconds, letting his words sink in, then walked back to the bed and climbed in between the cold sheets.

She told herself a mirage of things, attempting to make herself realize what had happened—or hadn't happened, for that matter—had been a good thing. It was for the best.

He was a vampire. He was going to leave. She had only known him for a day and a night, for God's sake. He was ... oh, who was she kidding? He was hot. Sensual. A good man—vampire—whatever. He was kind. Patient, though he didn't always want to be. A great kisser—and that she'd learned in a few short hours. What other attributes did he have that she hadn't seen yet?

And yet she was a mistake.

She always had been. Her parents obviously thought so. Her foster parents had been no different, since she had been bounced around so many times.

She couldn't remember how often she had stayed up at night as a child, wondering

what was wrong with her, just so she could fix it and make everyone love her. She had been willing to change anything and everything about herself. All she had lacked was the knowledge of what it was about her that no one liked.

And still she sat, so many years later, at age twenty-four, wondering what was wrong with her so she could fix it.

Would she ever learn?

Chapter Five

Gabe blended into the shrubbery surrounding the two-story Victorian home. Without making a sound he edged along the brick wall toward a nearby room, heading toward the sound of conversation.

He was glad he had left Chris at Tom's house, knowing full well he wouldn't have felt comfortable leaving her with his motorcycle, and there would have been no way in hell to shut the woman up when she found out what he had in mind for these men.

He told Sven forty-eight hours, and Lord knew he had to eliminate the men in the house, close this case and leave as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Chris wouldn't be just a fun romp in bed. He respected her family too much to screw with her and leave.

He respected her too much to do it.

Her unexpected sexual assault last night had been thoroughly enjoyable. Just thinking about her soft lips and the feel of her small hands on his body made him hard again.

It had been a good thing when Jess had interrupted them. If she hadn't barged into the room he would have taken what Chris had offered, which would have left them both in a sticky situation. He was leaving—without her. For some reason, he didn't see Chris as the type that fucked around.

He couldn't help but wonder why she had been all over him. He hadn't complained, though he'd spent a miserable few hours lying on the floor wondering what she tasted like, what she would feel like lying next to him, skin-to-skin.

As they settled in for sleep he had heard her softly crying, and it bothered him just enough to make it difficult to leave her.

Nonetheless, he'd left the moment she had fallen asleep. He needed to get this case settled and put some miles between them. It was the first time in his long career as an Alliance member that he had contemplated staying behind for a while. All he ever did was work.

"They should have been back by now," he heard someone say as he crouched down by a lighted window. It was nearing six in the morning. The sun would rise any minute. He had parked his bike nearly a mile away and had materialized himself to their house.

House, his ass. Fortress was more like it. The place must have at least twenty rooms. There were four garages, two pole barns, and a small pond in the back of the house.

He'd counted four vamps patrolling the grounds, which was set about half a mile away from the main road.

There were countless vamps inside, and he could sense a few demons as well. Demons could engage a vampire and win most of the time.

This was not good news.

He quickly made the decision to gather as much information as he could, then flash himself off the property. He couldn't take on the entire mansion by himself, and he had no other fighters to call in. He hadn't expected this many vamps.

"I'm guessing Gabriel had something to do with this."

Interesting. The man knew his name.

Gabe heard someone dial a number, his hearing picking up the beeps as the numbers were pressed.

He heard a man answer on the other end. The sound of his voice rang with a familiar tone, but Gabe was unable to place it with only one word spoken.

“None of the men made it through. They haven’t returned yet. I think they’re dead. If we’re unable to take out Gabriel, how else will we get the rest of the vampires to come here? Is there anything you know?”

There was a pause on the line. Gabe waited to hear the voice on the other end. Instead of replying, the person on the other end hung up.

Damn.

“Goddamned bloodsucker,” the man who had made the call muttered.

A vampire?

Gabe gritted his teeth. That must have been where they had obtained information on him. A vampire who knew his name and that he was staying at Tom’s. It certainly narrowed the field of suspects down quite a bit—right down to vampires he thought he could trust. But what other vampires did they want to draw out, other than himself?

“Brent, I want you to get your ass to that house and get back here with news on what’s going on, since that bastard doesn’t want to enlighten me. Try and find out what happened to Dave and why he doesn’t want that vampire whore hurt. She might be the key to ending this fight once and for all.”

“You don’t want me to send one of the vampires?”

“No.”

Gabe realized they had daywalkers. Another bad sign. The way this man was talking, Gabe had an uprising on his hands, definitely not a simple mission.

“Do I bring Dave back with me?” the man named Brent asked.

“Your decision.”

“Do I kill her?” Brent asked.

Gabe heard a chair slide against the hardwood floor followed by cursing. “Can’t you make one fucking decision? Kill her, don’t kill her, I don’t give a damn. Make the call once you get there. Just make sure you find out what happened to Dave and the others.”

Gabe materialized himself back to his bike. He unclipped his cell and called Sven.

He was going to need help with this one, and he figured that was exactly what these men wanted. More Alliance members they could take down. He didn’t exactly have a choice. He couldn’t take out this many vampires and demons on his own.

Sven answered on the second ring. “Your dime.”

“That small vigilante group is turning out to be a bit more than I can handle on my own.”

“How much more?”

Gabe was thankful Sven could be relied on when it really mattered. “About forty vamps and a half dozen demons thrown in the mix. They’re staying in a decent-sized house, and they keep a four vampire patrol on the grounds. I’m sure they are the vampires responsible for the killings in the surrounding area. It didn’t take me long to find them, thanks to a human in the house I’m staying at, but I’m thinking they wanted me to find them.”

“Are you in Alger?”

Surprised, Gabe responded, “I am.”

“You’ve just described the group Roger and I are working on. I take it our cases are tied together.”

Thankful to have Sven and Roger already on the case, Gabe replied, “Looks like it.”

“We’ll be there tonight. Tom’s house?”

“You need directions?”

“That’s what MapQuest is for.”

* * * *

“You are not going to work today.”

Chris shook her head at Mike. “And what? I’m supposed to stay here until God knows when, with my thumb stuck up my ass? I need out of this house. I can’t even keep normal hours any longer. I mean, shit, it’s five thirty in the morning, and I’m starting to get tired.”

“You just went to sleep around two in the morning.” Mike yawned. “Of course you’re going to be tired. Besides, it’s Saturday. You don’t have to work today.”

Two in the morning her ass. She hadn’t slept until just before five, and soon after she had awakened to Gabe sneaking out of the room and leaving the house without her.

She was supposed to have gone with him, but after the incident they had in the bedroom, he’d made his message quite clear. He didn’t want her around.

She needed to get out of this house, or her mood was never going to get better. “I have things I need to get done at the office. Listen, they aren’t after me. Will you stop worrying? I have my cell with me, so if I run into any trouble I’ll call.”

“By the time you figure out you’re in trouble it’s usually too late,” Stephen said from the couch.

Jess came to stand by Mike. “One more night? It’ll make us all feel better knowing where you’re at.”

“I’m sorry.” Chris headed upstairs, wishing she could explain to them that she needed some space. This was the only time she was going to be able to get out without too much trouble. Only Gabe could roam around in the sun, and thankfully, it was going to be a bright, sunny day. None of them would be able to follow her once she walked out of the house.

“No, I’m sorry.”

She was halfway up the stairs when she heard Mike say that, which she had half expected, anyway, so she was more than ready to bolt. She didn’t even turn around to look at him, she just started running up the steps.

What she wasn’t ready for was how fast he was. Damn. He tackled her just as she set foot in the hallway. They fell in a heap on the hallway floor, his massive bulk causing the air to swoosh out of her lungs. He pinned her down by putting his hands on her upper arms.

“Don’t you remember what happened the last time you tackled me? Let me go!” She would have waited until they were all asleep, but she wasn’t sure when Gabe was going to return. Lord knew he would stop her in a heartbeat.

Mike’s face was only inches from hers. He failed to hide his fangs, which quickly brought her back to the desperate nature of the situation. “This isn’t a game.”

“I know.” The fact of the matter was she *had* to leave. It was better to stay away from Gabe and the emotions he brought out in her. She’d had enough people in her life

tell her she wasn't good enough for them.

There was no way she was going to get out of the house now. She would have to wait and hope Gabe didn't get back until everyone was asleep. "Okay, Mike. I'll stay."

She felt guilty when he pulled her to her feet and winked at her, obviously trusting her word. "I'll feel better knowing you're around."

Unbeknownst to him, the second he turned his back she would be gone. Hopefully Gabe wouldn't pop in anytime soon. She turned to glance at the front door. If she didn't leave before he came back, she'd be stuck here all day with him.

Last night that thought would have appealed to her.

It certainly didn't appeal today.

She smiled at Mike and went back downstairs with him. She had no doubt that within the hour an opportunity to leave would present itself.

She was fully prepared to fly when it did.

* * * *

"She what?" Gabe yelled into his cell phone. He was just getting on his bike when Mike had called.

Mike cleared his throat, the worry in his voice evident when he repeated, "She took off."

"Are you telling me you couldn't stop her? You're a *vampire*. She's a human woman." Gabe had to calm himself. He had to. Of everyone here, he would think Mike the least incompetent of the bunch.

"I didn't know she was going to take off. She's never lied to me or done anything like this before. It was uncharacteristic and I wasn't prepared for it."

Gabe was barely listening. He hung up and called another number.

"Hello?"

"Hey, dad, listen, I need a favor." His father was a legend to the vampire community. He was the first vampire, a fallen angel who had been punished to live this life until Judgment Day. Among vampires, he was feared and respected.

To Gabe, he was plain old dad.

"What is it?"

"I'm in Michigan, working on Tom's case. Do you remember my mentioning him and the situation his family has been put in?" Gabe placed his right hand behind his neck and looked up at the sky. Why did shit always go wrong? Couldn't he have one damn day without something going wrong?

"I do."

"There was a human woman there, by the name of Christine—" Gabe paused as he realized he didn't know her last name. "I don't know her last name. Anyway, long story short, Chris was supposed to stay in Tom's house until everything was settled with the hunters, but she went against my orders and took off this morning. I need to find her quickly because her life is in danger."

There was silence on the phone. "Dad?"

"What is it you want me to do, exactly?" his father asked in a calm voice.

Gabe took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His father had powers he could only imagine, and he hoped those powers would benefit him now. "Can't you locate her whereabouts for me?"

“From Scotland?” Gabe held the phone away from his ear at his dad’s exasperated shout.

He ran a hand over his face. “Yes, from Scotland.”

“I don’t know her. I can’t locate someone I don’t know or have never met. And overseas, hell, that makes it even harder.”

Gabe brought the phone back to his ear. He’d just have to go out looking.

Like his father, Gabe contained powers beyond that of a vampire. He also had powers that no one knew about but him—not even his father. *Especially* not his father. Gabe would be damned if he used those powers now. He’d kept them a secret for centuries. That was the last complication he needed at the moment.

“Okay. I’ll call you later. Tell everyone I love them.”

“Will do. Do you need Sven and Roger? I can send them your way within the hour. They’re tracking a group of vamps in that area who have been congregating for the past six months. No one knows why they have been meeting.”

“I just spoke with Sven. Our cases are linked. We’ll be meeting tonight.”

“Hopefully they can help you with this young lady.”

“I’ll have found her by then.” One way or the other. He couldn’t face the possibility of her being hurt on his watch.

“All right. Talk to you later.”

Gabe closed his cell and clipped it back on his belt. Christ, he had only been gone for a few hours. How the hell had this happened?

Brent.

He’d have to call Mike and warn him about Brent’s planned intrusion. He couldn’t follow Brent and track Chris at the same time.

He couldn’t believe Mike’s call had upset him enough to sidetrack him from following Brent. The hunter was long gone by now and probably well on his way to Tom’s house. He’d allowed Brent to slip past him. The thought of Chris in danger shouldn’t have such an impact on him. She was under his protection, yes, but a threat to her safety shouldn’t cause him to lose his control.

He was going to have to distance himself from her. He needed to make her understand there would be nothing between them.

At least he had the reassurances of her safety knowing she wasn’t at Tom’s house where Brent was headed. That was one less thing to worry about.

He dialed Mike’s number as he flipped his kickstand up with his left boot. Mike’s cell rang and rang.

Mike didn’t pick up.

* * * *

Chris had driven around for an hour, and yet she couldn’t think about anything other than Gabe’s kisses, or Mike’s fangs, or Dave’s new job with the Alliance.

Mike was going to ream her ass good for taking off on him. Still, she found herself pulling up to Tom’s house.

She hadn’t gone home, and she hadn’t gone to work. Nothing seemed the same, and she couldn’t focus on where she had wanted to go in the first place. She kept seeing normal people out and about, doing normal things. Gassing up their cars or walking their dogs. She’d wanted to lean out of her car window and scream at everyone that vampires

were real.

At six thirty in the morning, on a quiet dirt road in Michigan, none of it seemed real. She turned the key and took it out of the ignition. As she got out of the car and headed to the front door, a thousand scenarios went through her head.

Mike not speaking to her.

Mike yelling at her.

Mike choking her out.

None of which particularly appealed to her.

By the time she reached the porch, she was primed and ready to bolt. She took a deep breath and tried to keep her hands from shaking.

Just as she put her hand on the knob to the front door, it opened.

Here it goes.

But instead of seeing Mike, someone she didn't know was standing in the doorway staring back at her.

A man about six feet tall with dirty blond hair stood in the doorway with a look of shock on his face.

They both stood immobile for about five seconds.

She opened her mouth to scream. At the same time he took a knife off his belt, leaving her without a voice as he lunged after her, the scream lodged in her throat, right along with her heart.

She quickly jumped to the right, knocking over Jess's potted plant, causing the pot to shatter. He narrowly missed stabbing her in the shoulder.

He advanced before she had fully recovered from his first attack, swinging the knife toward her chest.

She lunged to the left and kicked her right leg out, trying to make contact with his groin, only he moved too quickly and she ineffectively kicked him in the thigh.

It didn't slow him down a bit, and she blanched as he swung the knife toward her throat. She threw herself backward, and he missed again, giving herself a chance to drop to the ground at his feet where she wrapped her arms around both his legs and pulled with everything she had.

He lost his balance and fell onto his back.

He began swinging his knife around frantically, and it was only a matter of time before it would connect with her flesh. That realization sparked something inside of her. She had to kill this man, or he was going to kill her. Suddenly her body seemed infused with fire and energy. Adrenaline had kicked in, her flight or fight response choosing to battle it out. She had no choice.

He swung the knife and she dodged him again, which made him hit the side of the house with his hand, hard enough that the knife fell to the ground, and he grunted in pain.

She lunged for the knife and heard someone call out her name. She couldn't be completely sure who, because her heart was beating loudly in her ears, and the man's grunts were shutting every other noise out. Only he and his knife existed, and right now the knife was all she cared about.

He caught the back of her shirt and pulled her back toward him. Her shirt went up to the edge of her bra, and the bare skin on her stomach and elbows scraped against the cement and shards of broken porcelain from the pot, causing her to cry out. It hurt so much she couldn't think as she turned around and brought a leg up to break his hold on

her. She kicked him square in the face.

She could have sworn she heard a crunch just before he screamed.

She felt warm, sticky blood trickle down her stomach from where he had dragged her across the cement.

The kick had him holding his jaw, giving her the perfect opportunity to lunge for the knife once more.

This time she got it.

He let go of his jaw with a bellow of rage and grabbed a fist full of her hair just as she swung around and stabbed him in the first place she saw.

The hollow of his throat.

Blood went everywhere.

* * * *

“Chris? Chris? Look at me, Chris.”

She tensed at the forceful sound of her name. She didn’t want to defend herself again. She didn’t want to fight.

Looking around she saw the pool table and TV and realized she was downstairs at Tom’s. How had she come to be here?

“I have some peroxide and a few Band-Aids. That’s all,” she heard Jess say.

“Chris? Look at me.”

She focused on Mike kneeling in front of her. “I’m fine,” she heard herself say. It felt as though she were someone else, watching the scene unfold.

“She’s talking,” Stephen said.

“What happened?” She looked up to see Gabe running down the steps. She almost cried in relief, but stifled the urge when she recalled his rejection from the night before.

“Chris? Can you talk to me?” Mike asked again. Gabe was now in front of her, nearly launching Mike to the side.

“I’m fine, Mike. I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine. Will you stop saying my name for five minutes? I’m fine.”

“Then why are you shaking so badly?” he asked.

Cause I just killed someone! She wanted to scream.

“What happened?” Gabe asked again, lifting the edge of her shirt up where most of the bleeding was coming from.

She slapped his hands away. “I’m fine.”

“It’s clean upstairs.” Gabe pressed his hand to her forehead. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“The blood is gone?” Jess asked from the stairs.

“Yes.” He tried to get at her wounds again. “So is the body.”

She slapped his hands away for the second time. “I’m fine.”

He backed away, letting her have her way. “Chris, what happened?”

She didn’t answer him. She couldn’t quit fidgeting, and she couldn’t think of anything to say other than “I’m fine.” Blood saturated her shirt, and it was beginning to run down her legs and to the chair.

“Mike?” Gabe’s gaze never wavered from her face.

“Someone attacked her on the porch with a knife. Little over six feet, blond hair, and he had a six-inch dagger.”

She saw the muscle in Gabe's jaw twitch. "See what happens when you leave? What if you had been attacked when no one knew where you were? There would have been no one to help you."

"None of us got there in time," Stephen said from somewhere behind her.

"I'm sorry?" It took Gabe a moment to process that information. He wouldn't take his gaze from hers. "You killed him?"

"I'm fine," she whispered.

Gabe took her hands in his. She didn't know why and she didn't pull away.

"She's in shock," Gabe said.

"I saw the end of the fight from the kitchen window," Mike said. "She kicked him in the face and broke his jaw. While he was down, she lunged for the knife, and when he recovered, he sat up and wrapped his hand in her hair. That's when she stabbed him in the neck. It all happened in less than three seconds."

Chris was still staring into Gabe's eyes. She could swear, as Mike had told him what happened, his eyes had gone completely white. No pupils, no color—just white.

"I pulled the man away from her, and he died choking on his own blood." Mike bent down in front of her again, next to Gabe, and moved some hair off of her face. For the first time she realized he had been burned. The skin on his face and neck were red.

"She wouldn't take her eyes off of him, and we had to fight to get her inside."

The room became silent.

Chris leaned forward, only a few inches from Gabe's face. To her, no one else in the room existed in that moment. "Your eyes are white. You don't have any pupils, did you know that?"

Her voice was nothing more than a whisper in the silence of the room. No one was moving. His eyes ... they had changed. So much like her own. It fascinated her so much that she nearly forgot to hide her own reaction.

"I would suspect they are."

He also spoke softly, though he looked like he wanted to kill her.

"Are you mad at me? Is that why you look scary right now?" Which was an understatement. He looked truly frightening. For the first time since she met him she was seeing he wasn't human. That he was, in fact, a vampire.

"That's part of it."

She leaned back. "Why are you mad at me? You're the one who hurt me."

"I know."

She flinched and put a hand over her eyes. She couldn't get her first attacker's face out of her mind. Or the gurgling sound he had made as he was dying.

"Chris? Can I clean these scrapes and cuts you have?"

"Yes." She flinched again, her body jerking involuntarily.

It had been instinct. What else could she have done? He had been trying to kill her.

She wondered if the man had children. Did he just celebrate Thanksgiving with his family as she had tried to do with hers?

Was someone going to miss him now that he was gone?

She brought her hand down from her eyes. Someone was trying to remove her shirt. It was Jess. Chris pulled her shirt up, but wouldn't allow Jess to take it off. She heard Mike tell Dave to get the fuck out of the room—that this was all his fault. Everyone was arguing, their voices blending until she couldn't tell who was saying what.

She ignored everyone but the man in front of her.

Gabe had a bowl of water and a washcloth. He began to dab the cloth on her stomach. "Tell me if it hurts."

Chris glanced at Jess, who was so orderly and proper she felt the need to explain herself. She wanted Jess to know she wasn't a bad person. She hadn't stabbed the man in the neck to be sadistic. "I didn't have a choice. I had to kill him."

"We know. Oh, honey, we know that." Jess knelt down and put her arm around Chris's back, careful not to get in Gabe's way. "What you have to understand is that it was you or him. He chose to be here, and he chose to attack you. You did nothing wrong."

How could Jess say that when she had witnessed the man choking on his own blood?

Gabe hit a particularly sensitive spot, and she jumped from the burning sensation.

"Sorry."

She looked down at him. He was on one knee and thoroughly concentrated on his task. She wondered how he could see with no pupils. His eyes were still all white. It was more than a bit disturbing. And somehow familiar...

Gabe was the reason she came back. Just seeing him made her feel better. Safer.

How could someone have that effect on her, when she had known him for such a short period of time?

Chris had learned long ago not to lean on anyone or to rely on the people around her. Especially someone she had just met. It had taken her years to trust the family she had now. When she was younger, she'd come to the conclusion no one could hurt you if you didn't let them into your heart.

How could Gabe have become so important to her? How did she allow this to happen? When?

Chris watched Gabe squeeze the washcloth after dipping it into the bowl of warm water that was now a dark pink.

She gagged.

"Jess, can you please bring me fresh water?" Gabe handed her the washcloth when she bent down to pick up the bowl. "Mike, pass me the peroxide and the—"

Gabe quit speaking and stared at her stomach. The room became quiet. Too quiet. She looked down and immediately wished she hadn't.

Her head snapped back up. Good Lord, she was a mess. She tried focusing on the opposite wall. "Don't worry. I've always healed fast."

Why she felt the need to assure them, she'd no idea.

Stephen came to stand behind Gabe and looked at her wounds. "Shit. I'd say so."

What the hell were they looking at? *Oh, God.* She pulled her shirt down and tried to get up. Gabe forced her back in the chair. She chanced a look at Stephen, who looked appalled.

Had her body been healing that fast? Fast enough to garner suspicion?

When Jess walked into the room Gabe took the bowl and new washcloth from her and thanked her. Chris wouldn't let him lift her shirt again.

"If you all don't mind, I'm going to take her into the bathroom. This will be much easier to do by the faucet." Gabe offered her his hand.

Chris took it and stood up. Already the pain was lessening. She needed to get out of the room and away from the curious stares. Had her eyes not changed? No one had

mentioned her eyes.

When they walked in the bathroom Gabe shut the door behind them. He helped her onto the countertop.

Out in the main room, with everyone around, she had been comfortable with Gabe so close. Now, in the confines of the bathroom, she felt vulnerable. Embarrassed.

"If you would rather Mike do this, just say so."

She quickly shook her head at the sudden venom in his voice. "No, you're fine. I'm sorry. You just..." Look insanely dangerous? Like a vampire? What was she supposed to say? Open herself up for him to hurt her as she had done last night?

"Have you ever fed off of Mike?"

Sweet Jesus! Where had that come from? What was he thinking? The very thought disgusted her. "Never. Hello! I don't drink blood."

"It was just a question. I noticed you were healing fast—"

"I told you before, Mike and I are only friends." She tried not to snap at him, but she didn't want to be having this conversation.

Gabe waited as she reluctantly lifted her shirt. Obviously everyone had noticed her body healing itself. Would they now know her secret?

"Can't you just remove your shirt so it doesn't get in the way? I'm not going to attack you, Chris, I just want to clean the dirt off of you so you don't get an infection."

Reluctantly she nodded, and he helped her remove her shirt. His eyes were getting some of their color back, so he wasn't looking as intimidating as he had earlier.

As he started cleaning her with the warm water, she concentrated on the blue and white towels on the towel rack. "What happened to your eyes? Does that happen to all vampires?"

"Yes."

When it became apparent he wasn't going to elaborate she pushed a little. "I've never seen Mike or Stephen look like that." *Mine don't look like that. If I'm not a vampire, what am I?*

"That would be a good thing."

She was going to knock him out. She unclenched her teeth long enough to mutter, "Now why would that be?"

He expelled a long breath. "Because it usually means the vampire is in a highly distressed state, or a highly emotional state."

"You were distressed over me?"

He shook his head. "I was angry at you."

Her shoulders slumped back down. There was no winning with him.

Gabe picked up the peroxide again. "Don't pull a stunt like that again."

She put her hand on his and stopped his actions. "You don't like me very much, do you?"

He kept his attention on her cuts. He didn't answer right away, and she began cursing herself for being so damn stupid again. She opened herself up to be let down, which was not something she was used to doing.

"Actually, I do like you. Therein lies the problem." He brought his gaze to hers and put a hand under her chin so she would keep his gaze. "There will never be an *us*, Chris. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she managed to say past the lump in her throat. She willed her eyes

not to well up with tears, but after the events of the day she wasn't strong enough. She removed her hand from his, and he let go of her chin.

He finished up with her cuts by adding a few unneeded Band-Aids. Both ignored her tears, which began falling unchecked. She didn't give a damn. This would be the last time someone told her she wasn't good enough.

She made a promise to herself that she would never again allow someone to get close enough to hurt her.

She didn't need anyone other than her current family, and she damn sure didn't need the man standing before her.

Chapter Six

“What did you make of it?” Gabe asked Mike and Stephen, referring to Chris’s unnatural healing. They were standing in the kitchen, huddled together by the sink. The blinds were closed on the kitchen window. Mike was still red from going out on the porch to help Chris.

Mike answered first. “It made no sense.”

“Surely if she was something other than human, we would know. We would be able to sense it,” Stephen said.

“All I know is that no human can heal that fast.” Gabe looked at Mike. “Are you two more than friends? She denied feeding off of you.”

Mike shook his head. “I love her more than anything, but I am not *in* love with her. We’ve never been intimate.”

Gabe turned his gaze to Stephen. “Not my type. She’s too mouthy.”

Gabe shook his head. He was more than pleased with their answers, and he was loath to ask his next question. “Has she ever dated one of your vampire friends? Any of her clients?”

Mike made a face. “Hell, no. If she had dated a vampire she’d have known what we were, and she wouldn’t have made such a fuss the other day.”

True.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to let the matter rest for the time being.” He didn’t want to move on. He wanted to know how Chris could have healed like that. Unfortunately, Mike and Stephen didn’t know, or they chose not to tell him. It was very possible she’d been with another vampire, but then why would she have acted so shocked when she’d found out the truth the other night? “On to other business. We’re up against forty or so vamps and a handful of demons. Sven and Roger have been on that case and they’ll be here tonight. It seems our cases are tied together.”

They nodded. He felt bad about the news he was about to dump on them, but they had to be aware. Damn he hoped he was wrong. “I believe Tom is involved in this vigilante group.”

Mike raised his eyebrows. “Tom?”

Gabe nodded. “Do you remember when Dave was on the phone, the first night I was here? He said something about the head of the family not wanting her to get hurt, referring to Chris.”

Mike and Stephen exchanged a look.

“Who is the head of this family?”

Stephen met his gaze. “Tom.”

“Today, when I was at the hunters’ house, I overheard them talking about a vampire. This vampire knew my name, knew I was in town, and knew where I was staying.”

Stephen whistled.

“Tom was the one who called the Alliance. It makes no sense,” Mike argued.

“And if you want to challenge the Alliance and kill those in charge, how do you go about doing it?”

Again, Stephen was the one who spoke up. “By getting them in one place.”

“If I’m right, and Tom is involved, then he’s trying to build a force that will replace the Alliance. It’s not a question of how far he’ll go. He already has a headquarters, complete with those who will do his bidding. He involved human mercenaries, which makes little to no sense, unless he hired them to be the expendable part of his force. If they die it isn’t a big deal to him.”

“What about Dave?” Stephen asked.

“I don’t know how or where he fits in.”

“Bullshit,” Mike snapped.

It was becoming obvious Mike was going to be a hard sell. He didn’t have to believe it, but he had to know it was a possibility. “Do you know why you and Chris get along so well? You two are a lot alike. You don’t think those closest to you are capable of any wrong doing. Now”—Gabe held up his hand as Mike started to speak—“When Sven and Roger arrive you are to say nothing of my suspicion about Tom. I’ll do that. I don’t need Tom overhearing. We’ll talk about needing to feed tonight, and we’ll have Tom and Jess go separately so Roger can trail them. Understand?”

“Jess is not involved.”

Damn, Mike was stubborn. “Do you understand?” Gabe waited until both men nodded.

“You said Dave wasn’t exactly forthcoming with you. What will you be doing about him?” Stephen asked.

“I’m going to keep an eye on him, and I expect both of you to do the same.” Gabe looked at Mike. “Do not go to Tom, Mike. Doing so will be going against a direct order of the Alliance. You don’t show your opponent your cards. You wait until the final play of the cards before you reveal what you have. Dave and Chris are to be kept in the dark as well.”

This time he didn’t wait for either to agree as he took his cell off his belt and called Sven.

* * * *

“When’s the last time you went out?”

Chris yawned and stretched her legs, realizing from the kink in her back she had slept on the couch. Voices coming from the computer room woke her up.

“Four days and I’m burned and exhausted. I need to go out.”

Was that Mike she heard? Where were they going?

“We’ll have to split up,” she heard Stephen say.

Chris sat up on the couch. Everyone seemed to be in the computer room. Except Dave. He was sitting on the La-Z-Boy directly across from her. She tried focusing her eyes on him. God, she was tired.

“I can’t stay with Chris,” Gabe said. “I’m going after the hunters again. I need to try and get more information. Sven and Roger should be here sometime tonight. I need more for us to go on.”

She stiffened. What? Now she was becoming a liability? Just some burden no one wanted to deal with? Of course she expected that kind of attitude from Gabe, but the others? Would they begin to pull away from her as well?

She pulled up her shirt and noted how smooth and unblemished her skin was. The cuts and bruises were gone. She took off a Band-Aid. There was nothing but healthy skin

underneath. She quickly pulled her shirt down. She didn't want to think about it.

Dave stared at her from across the room. It was obvious he was wondering what had happened to her wounds.

She pointedly ignored him.

"Hey," she called out. "Wherever it is you're all going, I'm going, too."

Silence.

Someone coughed.

She waited as no one said anything.

Why wouldn't they answer her? Why couldn't she go with them? Did they no longer trust her now that they realized part of her secret?

Would she ever overcome her past?

Mike called out, "We're going to the club, Chris."

So? Why couldn't she go to the club with them? Wasn't she supposed to stay with the pack, so to speak? Why—

Then it dawned on her. "Oh."

No way did she want to go. "Looks like I'll hold down the fort." She used her index finger and made that she was gagging herself. Dave actually laughed.

"Real cute," Gabe said as he walked out of the computer room, catching her unladylike gesture. "But you staying here by yourself? That's just not going to happen."

"Well, she can't come with us." Stephen was dressed in jeans and an AC/DC T-shirt. When his gaze settled on her, she looked away.

"She's certainly not coming with me," Gabe snapped at Stephen.

She settled back down on the couch and put her right arm over her eyes. Whatever. Feeling like an outcast was nothing new to her. She was not going to let this get to her.

"We don't have to go anywhere," Mike said. She felt the couch depress. "We'll just feed off her." He began tickling her side.

"That's not funny." She smacked his hands away and lay on her other side, away from him. What a fucked up thing to joke about.

"Oh, come on," Mike teased, smacking her bottom. She didn't move.

"She can stay with me."

She twisted around to look at Dave.

"No," Mike and Gabe said.

It was as if a light went off in her head when she looked at Dave, and suddenly she was seeing red.

The man who attacked her had come from *inside* the house, a fact she had unknowingly left out. This morning Mike had said he saw the man attack her on the porch, but he had made no mention of a man ever having been in the house. Perhaps Dave knew something. He *had* to know something.

Should she blurt out what she had just figured out, or stay behind with Dave and question him?

She didn't want Dave hurt, but at the same time she didn't want to withhold any information that could help them protect themselves.

She'd question Dave first, before she fed him on a platter to Gabe. It wasn't as though that bastard had any feelings whatsoever, anyway. He'd probably kill Dave on the spot. Dave might not have known anything about the intruder—but then again, he was one of the only people who had been awake in the house. He would have seen this man.

“Sure. Dave and I will stay here.” Then she could talk to him and decide on the best course of action.

“I said no.”

She gave Gabe a dirty look. “Well, then, why don’t we all go as one big, happy family? That way everyone knows where everyone else is at.” And Dave could tell her what the hell that man had been doing in the house.

No one had been hurt. Well, except for her and the corpse.

What had been the man’s purpose? Why had he left the house without trying to kill everyone inside? Had Dave stopped him? If so, it was a good thing she wasn’t divulging the information right on the spot.

She kept her gaze on Dave. When he looked away, she realized he did know something he wasn’t telling them.

Dave stood and thrust his hands in his jeans’ pockets. “I refuse to go on your sucking spree.”

Mike grunted. “You can stay here. I give a shit if they come after you or not.”

Stephen stepped forward. “Let’s take them with us.”

Gabe shrugged his shoulders. “It’s just not a good idea, but it’s your decision. I’ll meet you at the club later.”

Gabe slid into his black leather jacket and left the basement.

There will never be an us, Chris.

She swallowed down her pride and watched Gabe leave. The only people she needed were still in this room with her, as they always would be. Soon, Gabe would be walking out the door for good, and she’d never see him again.

Why did that thought make her want to cry? Why did it hurt so bad? It wasn’t as though they had shared secrets or passion. She’d only known him a few days.

What was it about Gabe that pulled her to him?

He was different, just like she was. Just like her family, who she had cleaved to all these years. Somewhere deep down she’d always known they were different, and it hadn’t been just the sun allergy. They had an energy that surrounded them, and from the first moment she had met them she’d felt it.

“Chris? Are you all right?”

She glanced at Mike. She realized she’d had her attention trained on the stairs, the way Gabe had just left. “Of course.”

“He’s not the type to settle,” Stephen warned her.

Instead of denying her attraction to him she only replied, “I know.” She avoided looking at Tom and Jess. For some reason they were being unusually quiet. It was odd that Tom had nothing to say about her obvious attraction to Gabe. And Jess? Not once since all of this had gone down had they shared a conversation.

Dave threw his hands up in the air. “He’s a fucking vampire, Chris. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Dave, will you shut the hell up about vampires for five minutes? It’s like you have a fixation on the subject. I thought you had taken a job with the Alliance, anyway.”

“What choice was I given?”

“Keep talking that way and I’m sure Gabe will have no choice but to kill you,” she snapped. Immediately she wished she could take it back.

Dave sneered. “And that’s the type of man you’d take to your bed.”

Angry, she replied, "You're damned right."

Mike held up a hand. "Enough! Just get ready and get in the car. I'm hungry and I'm going out."

"That's disgusting," Dave said as he left the room.

Unbeknownst to them, Dave's sentiment would set the tone for the rest of the night.

* * * *

This had to be *the* most uncomfortable night of her life. Dave didn't look as though he was faring any better. In fact, he looked sick to his stomach. None of her puns could make this situation more tolerable.

Since it was Saturday night, they had decided to go to one of the more popular clubs in the area. As Mike had put it, "loud music and easy women."

She drummed her fingers on the sticky table. Jess and Tom had gone somewhere else. They hadn't wanted to work the same club at the same time. Everyone had agreed and they'd split up. This whole process made her wonder how Tom and Jess dealt with this aspect of their nature. They couldn't feed off each other, so did that mean they became intimate with those they took blood from? When Mike talked about taking blood earlier he'd always mentioned a woman. Was it a sensual experience? Didn't the humans know they had just been bit by a vampire?

She sighed. No one was saying anything. She would have to get rid of Mike and Stephen if she was going to question Dave.

The easiest way to do that would be to annoy the shit out of them—her specialty.

She leaned back in the rickety black chair and focused on Mike. The DJ was playing a fast country song as loud as sin, and the dance floor was full of two-stepping, swing-dancing fools. She yelled over the music, "So, is it always women, or have you ever got it from a dude?"

She thought Dave was going to fall out of his chair.

Mike just shook his head and made a face. That confirmed that. It had to be sexual in nature, or intimate at the very least.

She took a sip of her beer as she eyed Stephen. "Is it cool to live forever?"

Well, at least this time Stephen raised an eyebrow. That was more than her last question got. She was getting warmer.

"Which decade was cooler, the fifties or the sixties? I bet it was the sixties."

Stephen picked up his beer. "Do you have an off switch?"

"When were you two born?" According to Gabe they were a couple hundred years old. It was hard to imagine. She'd always been under the assumption they were close in age. Christ, they were older than dirt.

"Can't we discuss this in a more private setting?" Mike asked.

She made a noise and got up from the table. "Who would have thought vampires were so boring?" She turned to Dave. "You want to come with me to the bar?"

"Anything to get the fuck out of here."

She shook her head and led the way. When they reached the bar, she ordered first. "Can I get a Miller Lite?"

The bartender looked at her table and gave a slight nod. "Who died?"

Chris stuttered. "W-What?"

"Your table. You all look like someone just died." He gave her a smile and held out

her beer.

Dave snorted. "If you only knew."

She elbowed him. "Yeah. They suck the life right out of the party."

Dave ordered a beer as well. He nudged her in the arm. "That was not funny."

"I thought it was." She waited until the bartender had served him and Dave paid, then she motioned for him to sit at the end of the bar. She chose the stool that sat against the wall.

Deciding the best way to address the question was to come right out with it, she blurted out, "Are you still in touch with those hunters?"

Dave took a swig of beer, glancing around the dance floor. "I knew you were going to ask me that."

"How about you just answer the question?"

"I saw him. He came in and tried to take me back. I told him no and he asked me a few questions, which I didn't answer. That was that."

Chris put her hand on his arm. The nights were getting cooler, and he was wearing a wrinkled, long-sleeved, blue cotton shirt. His hair needed a trim, and he could have run a shaver over his face, but he was still handsome.

She was having a problem believing him. "Dave, I can't see Mike or Stephen hurt. I just can't. It's not something I can deal with." Dave had no idea what it was like to ache for a simple hug or a tender touch. He was normal, completely human. She was ... something. Perhaps there wasn't a name for what she was.

Dave quit pulling at the label on his beer. He looked her straight in the eye. "I promise you, I had nothing to do with Brent coming to the house this morning. The last thing I ever want to see is you hurt again."

She couldn't speak for a moment. Her attacker's name was Brent. She tried stashing that bit of information in her mind and moving on, but she was unable to do so. Knowing his name made it so much more personal. "Did he have a family?"

Dave eyed a blonde walking by. "Who? Brent? Naw. He was one can short of a six-pack. He didn't have anyone."

Jesus. She tried getting the man's face out of her mind without much luck. "What are we going to do?"

As though he were deliberately trying to ignore her, he kept his attention on the rest of the bar, not bothering to look at her. "Get through this one day at a time."

She squeezed his arm. "I don't want to lose you."

"Now, why would I let that happen?"

"If Gabe thinks you've done anything wrong, he'll kill you."

Dave finally turned away from the dance floor to face her. "Do you have feelings for him?"

Knowing how Dave felt about vampires, she didn't want to have this conversation. "No, not really."

"What the hell does that mean?"

She shrugged. If she knew the answer to that she wouldn't be so confused.

"What happened to you back at the house? How did you heal so quickly?"

She downed the rest of her beer. He hadn't dealt well with Mike's secret. How would he deal with hers? "Like you said, let's just get through this one day at a time."

Dave didn't look happy, but he agreed with her and they left the bar.

“What the hell is wrong with the two of you?” Mike asked as they sat down at the table.

“Nothing,” she muttered.

“Everything,” Dave snapped.

Twenty minutes later they were making progress. Both Stephen and Mike were macking on some women, and it looked as though things were golden.

Dave was at the bar, trying to ignore the mission they were on, and by the looks of him and the tight grip he had on his drink, he was failing miserably.

She sat at the table by herself, thinking about what Dave had said. Could she trust him? Her family seemed to be coming apart, and she wasn’t sure who or what to believe anymore. There was something else going on. She could feel it, like a sixth sense. She’d ask Mike, but knew deep down that he wouldn’t be forthcoming with her.

A few men had come over to her table and asked her to dance, but she had politely sent them away. It dawned on her that she’d always kept herself an arm’s-length away from men. Before she committed to anyone she had to learn the truth about herself. It was that very reason she found herself attracted to Gabe. He was used to the strange things in life. Why hadn’t she ever wanted Mike or Stephen? No chemistry? With Gabe she’d felt an instant attraction, and yet Gabe felt nothing.

She glanced over at Mike. He leaned against the bar as he talked to a pretty brunette. Is that what Gabe did? Just go around and neck with random women all the time? He probably enjoyed his freaky, fanged bachelor life. What man wouldn’t? Different women all the time, salivating at the chance to jump in their lap while they sucked—

“How’s it going?”

She looked up as Gabe sat down at the table.

“Psshht,” she mumbled, getting out of her seat and walking to the bar.

* * * *

Mike sat next to Gabe at the table. “Is it finished?”

“Is it ever?”

Mike grunted. “What went wrong?” The look Gabe gave him had Mike rephrasing his question. “Okay, what didn’t go wrong?”

“My bike started right up.” Gabe shook his head and took another swig of beer. “I followed Tom and Jess because Sven and Roger haven’t shown up yet. The two didn’t meet up with any other vampires. Even so, I still think it’s Tom.”

Gabe set his beer down and looked across the bar, trying to get a glimpse of Chris. He couldn’t see her in the busy club, and that bothered him. He sent her a mental nudge to come back to the table.

He knew she could more than handle herself if she needed to, from what they had witnessed of her healing ability, but having her next to him calmed his nerves in regards to her safety. And it disturbed the shit out of him that he felt that way.

“What is it you’re not telling me?”

Gabe knew he shouldn’t tell Mike, because the young vampire loved Chris as if she were his real sister. He found himself telling him anyway, hoping another set of eyes on Chris could help. “After one of the hunters called the vampire a goddamned bloodsucker, he mentioned a woman. They called her the Vampire Whore. The hunter said he wanted her dead as well. I’m sure you realize who he was referring to.”

“What the *hell* was that?” Chris slammed her empty beer bottle on the table. “Did you just yell at me in my head? That was every shade of creepy and I don’t like it.”

Gabe barely glanced at her. “Stay at this table.”

Her mouth fell open. “Did you just ... did he...?”

“Yes, it’s an order. Now sit down and stay put.” Gabe kept his focus on Mike. Chris was wearing a red strappy shirt that revealed everything but her social security number. Every time Gabe caught a glimpse of her he grew hard.

He ignored her sputtering and took out his cell phone to call his father. He had to speak over the music. When his father answered he told him about the hunters. It was protocol to inform him of the new developments in the case. As the leader of the Alliance, his father had the final say on anything that went down.

“Do you need me?” his father asked after Gabe was finished bringing him up to speed.

Gabe thought about that for a full minute before answering. He didn’t always agree with his father, and his father knew it. Hell, he didn’t believe half of the shit his father spewed, but he respected him. The time of needing him had been over long ago. “No. Sven and Roger are coming in. I can’t watch Chris and do everything else that needs to get done, so they will be staying at Tom’s house with me.”

“Sounds good. Call me if you need anything.”

Gabe thanked him and closed his cell. He glanced at Chris who didn’t look pleased at all. In fact, she wouldn’t even look at him.

“Are you ready to leave?”

“What about Dave and Stephen?” She looked around the bar. “Where is Dave, anyway?”

“Dave’s on the dance floor doing his best to get drunk, and Stephen is busy at the moment.”

She made a face. “Blech, whatever. Sure, let’s get Dave and go.”

“Dave is getting a ride with Mike and Stephen.”

Chris snorted. “Oh, yeah, that’s a great idea. I wonder who thought that one up.” She pushed away from the table and stood.

He narrowed his eyes on her back as she pushed through the crowd toward the door. “Mike, take my bike to the house. I’m going to take her car. Did you and Stephen arrive separately?”

“No, we came in Chris’s car. Dave took his car. He can’t drive, anyway, so Stephen can drive him home and I’ll take your bike.”

“I’m taking Chris to my motel room. I don’t trust her in the same house as Tom. Not until I find out what’s going on.”

Mike didn’t answer him.

“I’ll see you at the house.” Gabe shook his head at Mike and quickly caught up with Chris.

He took her by the arm. “I don’t know what crawled up your ass, but you need to remove it, because I won’t deal with the whole PMS bullshit.”

She yanked her arm free and kept walking. Gabe had to resist the urge to choke her.

She turned on him just before they reached the door. “Do you know what your problem is?”

“He’s a vampire, that’s his problem,” Dave called out from the dance floor. He was

standing only a few feet away from them, drinking a beer and dancing with a tall blonde. The dumb asshole was so drunk he didn't realize he'd just announced to half the bar that Gabe was a vampire. At least most of the people around him laughed, obviously thinking the stupid bastard was speaking nonsense.

"Not so, Dave. His problem is he thinks he's God's gift. He thinks we should all be kissing his ass because the Big Bad Alliance guy is here to protect us. He's got this whole God-complex about him that seriously grates on my nerves. Isn't that right?"

"Let's go." He tried taking her by the arm again, but she maneuvered out of his grip.

"See. There you go again! Ordering me around as if you have the right to do so."

"This episode has nothing to do with the way I talk to you, or the way I treat you. It's about what we are *not* doing, isn't it? You've been acting erratically toward me ever since last night."

Her face grew red. "That has nothing to do with it."

He leaned down to her eye level. "It has everything to do with it."

She shook her head. "That was a fleeting moment. You're old enough to know a few things about hormones, aren't you? You interested me for all of five minutes. That's passed, so get over yourself."

Having said that, she turned and left the bar.

Gabe watched her strut out of the club, furious at himself for giving into his childishness. He should never have said such things to her. He had responsibilities and she was one of them. For the moment. When he knew she and her family were safe, he would be on his way to his next assignment. He never knew where the Alliance would need him. He could be in Hong Kong one day and Alabama the next.

He had no room for her. Nor would she want to leave her precious brothers to trail after him. Her family meant more to her than the very air she breathed.

She would have to give up her job, her life and her loved ones to be with him.

No. He would leave things the way they were.

He would take her anger, because if he gave into his urges, he wouldn't be leaving behind some seriously pissed-off human. Chris wore her emotions like a safety blanket. He would be leaving behind a brokenhearted lover, and that was something he refused to do.

He would take her anger ten-fold before he did that to her.

Chapter Seven

Chris handed Gabe the keys to her car as they came up to the passenger side door in the parking lot at the club. He pressed the unlock key and tried to help her inside.

She slapped his hands away and lowered herself into the seat.

"Funny, you weren't slapping my hands away last night."

She gritted her teeth as he slammed the door. She looked straight out of the windshield as he made his way to the driver's side, trying not to think about the intimacy they had shared the night before. Too bad she could vividly recall the feel of his muscles dancing under her hands.

She should have thrown back a few shots along with her beers. She'd have been good and drunk by now, and Gabe wouldn't have such an effect on her.

He opened up the door and slid in beside her. She was going to make every effort to ignore him. He didn't exist. He wasn't even in the same car.

Gabe who?

"Listen, the circumstances regarding this case have become a bit more complicated. I'm going to be here for longer than I had anticipated, so can we at least try and make this situation bearable?"

Fucking great.

"Hello?" He glanced her way before pulling out of the parking lot.

She didn't say a word.

"Ah, the silent treatment. Such an ancient weapon. My mom gives it to my dad all the time. He hates it. But you know what? Doesn't bother me any. In fact, a silent woman is a good woman."

The bastard was baiting her. She remained silent. There wasn't anything she wanted to say to him, anyway, other than cursing him to hell, which would serve no purpose other than to make her feel better.

"Ah, blessed silence. This is truly a gift. Thank you, Chris."

She was certain her jaw was going to snap from the pressure she was exerting to keep it shut. He was so irritating.

"I'm sure you're calling me every name in the book, aren't you? Even making up a few new ones, eh?"

She wouldn't look at him. She looked out of the passenger-side window instead and pretended to be interested in the scenery.

"Oh, come on. I can't be that bad."

She almost smiled. He didn't like the silent treatment, even though he had claimed to enjoy it. Like father, like son.

"Fine," he snapped. He whipped the car onto the main road.

Grinding his teeth and gripping the steering wheel hard enough to snap it in half, he didn't say anything else until they were about halfway home. When he slowed down by the edge of a state park, black and void of other people, and pulled over, her heart flip-flopped. *What was he up to? What did he have in mind?*

He looked as though he were scanning the woods for something. Maybe a place to dump her body.

Had she pissed him off that much?

“Stay in the car. Do not get out no matter what you see.”

“Why?” she asked, but he was already out of the car. A sword materialized in his hands as he walked in front of the car’s headlights.

“Oh shit,” she muttered. She quickly locked the doors, not sure if she wanted to know what was in that crazy mind of his.

When he didn’t come directly to her side of the car, but started walking to the edge of the woods, she rolled down her window. Just as she was about to call out his name, and ask what in God’s name he was doing, something came at him from the shadows.

It was a man, but it wasn’t. It had the features of a man, but the creature was too large and grotesque to be human.

It stood a few feet taller than Gabe, and it had fangs that made Gabe’s look like a kid’s plastic Halloween set. What looked like black tar dripped from the creature’s mouth, and the fangs hung over the bottom lip.

She snatched up her cell. She started to dial Mike’s number, afraid this beast was going to make a meal out of Gabe. Before she pressed send, Gabe’s sword swung on a high arch and cut through the neck of the creature.

It dropped at his feet, twitching.

Gabe raised his right hand. The body and severed head vanished. His sword disappeared as he walked over to the driver’s side of the vehicle. He pulled on the handle. Before she could hit the unlock button, the locks clicked, and Gabe opened the door.

She stared at the keys dangling from the ignition. What had just happened? How had he unlocked the door?

He buckled up and turned on the engine without saying a word. She wanted to bolt from the car, never look back. Gabe had always scared her a bit, and now, after seeing his little foray with the creature from hell, she was terrified. Witnessing his powers first hand was an eye opener for sure.

But she wasn’t sure she wanted to be outside where more creatures might be, either. Since when did monsters exist? Jesus, what next? The boogiemani?

She tried calming her nerves as she gripped her seat belt. Had she just argued with this man? What an idiot she was.

She looked around the surrounding woods. “What was that? How did you know that—”

“It was a Nephilim. They are the children that come from the mating of a human and a demon. I could sense it when we drew close to its habitat.”

“Its habitat? Is that what’s killing the people in this area?”

“No. A Nephilim would tear into a person’s throat and not leave much behind. Either way, not killing them when the chance presents itself puts humans at risk. It’s irresponsible.”

“And these things live in the woods?” She shivered. She’d gone camping in the woods just last summer.

He didn’t answer her. He remained quiet for the rest of the ride home. He didn’t speak as they reached Tom’s house, nor acknowledge her as they went inside.

Somehow she felt as though she had lost the battle. She’d started the silent treatment, though she hadn’t expected it to affect her so much when he did the same to her.

Watching him during his fight made her realize this wasn’t a game. This was his job,

one he excelled at, and he was going to be leaving as soon as he his job was finished.

A fresh wave of anger suffused her. She stormed to the kitchen and grabbed a small bag of chips out of the pantry. Just because he was on a job still didn't give him the right to speak to her the way he had at the bar. He'd been acting like a prick.

She heard Mike, Stephen and Dave come in the front door just as Gabe walked into the kitchen.

The man standing before her had nothing in common with the man who had kissed her so passionately. This man was an arrogant pig. He ordered her around, kept himself at a distance and he...

He didn't want her.

He'd hit the nail on the head at the bar. There would never be anything between them, no matter what kind of chemistry they shared. She wasn't worthy of the effort it might cost him.

He was just one more person telling her she wasn't good enough. Hell, she should be used to it by now. People had made sure she'd known she was different all her life. Did it matter he was also different?

And the thought of him feeding tonight. It made her chest hurt.

"Chris, I need to speak with you."

She turned away from Gabe. She wasn't going to open herself up to him only to get hurt once more.

She left the kitchen and made her way downstairs. Gabe followed her.

Mike, Stephen and Dave were already in the basement. Stephen was setting up the pool table.

Gabe grabbed her elbow as she was about to settle down on the couch. "Gather your things and get ready to go."

She straightened and met his glacial glare. So he was still pissed. Good. So was she. "I'm not a dog, so you can take that tone and shove it up your—"

"Chris," Mike snapped. "Not him and not now."

She slowly turned and faced Mike. He was un-fucking-believable. Just whose side was he on? "Let me ask you something, Mike. When was it you attached your lips to his ass? All of a sudden you keep telling me to watch what I say around him. Why? He's treating me like a slave, ordering me around all the time. I'm damned sick and tired of it."

She turned back to look at Gabe. He looked like he did the night she met him. Bored. Angry. As if he never had a day of fun in his life.

"Get your things so we can leave."

"Why? What's the point of leaving? Shouldn't we all stick together until this crap is over?"

Gabe's expression didn't change. "Do you feel I am incapable of protecting you?"

Taken by surprise, she muttered, "No."

"Do I report to you?"

Before she could answer him, he answered for her.

"The answer is no, I do not. So go and pack your shit while keeping your mouth shut for once. Can you do that?"

She had the urge to slap him right across his smug face. The cold light in his eyes told her that would be the worst kind of mistake. On the verge of tears, and unwilling to let him see he affected her that much, she walked around him and headed toward the

stairs.

Dave followed her to the main floor. “Thanks for leaving me to ride in the car with Stephen.” He was slurring his words, but he managed to sound just as bitter as if he weren’t drunk. “The nasty bastard almost made me hurl, talking about the taste of blood and things like that on the ride. Fucking prick.”

She shook her head at him and took the stairs leading up to the second story two at a time. Why were they leaving? Something had happened, and no one was telling her what it was. She was safest in this house, wasn’t she? The only reason they would want her gone was to protect her ... but protect her from whom?

“Did you know they can smell your blood type? Isn’t—”

“Yes, Dave, I already knew that.” Jesus, did she have to listen to him whine about this now? She felt like shoving him down the stairs just to shut him the fuck up.

“—that the most disgusting thing you have ever heard? Although, and I will deny this should it ever come up—”

“Dave, will you shut the hell up?” She opened the door to the guest room.

“—but I would like to live for a long time. I don’t like the thought of death.” He leaned against the dresser and knocked over a vase of pink roses. Water splashed onto the dresser and dripped onto the floor.

She picked them up and put it back, shoving him away from the dresser. “Who does?” she snapped.

“Have you thought about it?”

Chris stopped her searching and pinched the bridge of her nose as she stood in the center of the room. This shit was migraine inducing. “Thought about what, Dave?”

“Becoming a vampire?”

She turned to look at him. Was he serious? “You’re drunk. Go lie down.”

“Would you do it?”

“Dave, I don’t have time for this,” she growled. Not when every nerve in her body had sprung to life from her confrontation with Gabe. He infuriated her. One minute she could think only of his tenderness and protectiveness as she fought her attraction to him. The next, she was thinking of ways to kill his arrogant self. Her hands were shaking as she searched for a bag.

“Just answer the question.” He fell onto the bed.

“I have too much shit wrong with me as it is. I highly doubt adding vampirism to my problems would be a good thing.” She picked up a backpack that was set on top of a box in the closet.

“There’s something wrong with you?”

She didn’t answer him, only started to put the small bottles of shampoos and conditioners into the backpack. If Dave didn’t notice anything wrong with her, then he was blind, or he had forgotten her miraculous healing abilities in his drunken state. Everyone else knew she was different. A freak.

“So you wouldn’t let Gabe make you a vampire?”

As if he would. “He doesn’t even like me.”

Dave started laughing—howling as if she’d said the funniest thing he’d heard in years. “Yes, he does.”

“No, Dave, he doesn’t.”

“I’d bet you. Just ask Mike or Stephen. They were talking about it in the car.” He

fumbled with one of the pillows on the bed, then tossed it to the floor.

She put the backpack down and gave him her full attention. She hated herself for asking, but she couldn't help herself from doing it. "What were they saying?"

"Oh, I don't remember all of it. Something about the way he acts around you."

Like he wants to kill me? Yeah, love at first bite.

"How does he act?" she prodded.

Dave moved to lay on his right side, facing her. His eyelids drooped, as though he were struggling to stay awake. "He looks at you when you're not paying attention. He was worried about you when you were hurt. Hell, he was worried about you when you were at the club."

She walked over to Dave and adjusted the remaining pillows, making sure he was comfortable. His words had pacified something in her, calming the storm Gabe's words had started. She calmed almost instantly.

"Dave, you know Mike and Stephen care for you, don't you?"

Dave shifted, looking away from her. "Listen, I know I made a mistake. But I don't like this vampire business."

She wanted to believe what he had just told her about Gabe, but number one, he was drunk, and number two, she had witnessed Gabe's actions first hand. He was merely doing his job, and he couldn't care for her less.

"Is that all they said?"

Dave's eyes were closed.

Back to being agitated, she packed a bit more in her backpack. She had no clothes to pack, and Jess wasn't yet home. She turned off the light as she left the room, leaving Dave softly snoring in bed.

When she walked back into the basement, there were two new men in the computer room.

A tall blond with an open face and warm smile looked out the open door at her as she passed. He wore faded jeans with rips in the knees and a dark blue T-shirt that had white writing upside down, reading, "If you can read this I fell off my barstool."

The other man had on a dark gray suit and had intense eyes. He reminded her of Gabe, only he seemed more uptight and unfriendly—if that was even possible. He looked like a hit man in a bad B movie.

She ignored the blond man's waves and went to stand next to Mike as he waited for Stephen to make a shot at the pool table. "Who are the new guys and why is the blond one waving at me like a goofball?"

"His name is Sven, and I wouldn't call him a goofball to his face. Rumor has it he was once a powerful Viking who challenged Ambrose himself."

"Who's Ambrose? What makes him so special?"

"He was the first." At her blank look he shook his head. "He's Gabe's father. Story goes that he was a warrior angel who nearly started a rebellion in Heaven. He was cast down as the first vampire."

Wow. That was interesting. She remembered last night when Gabe spoke of his mother. "So Gabe's dad is an angel?"

Mike shook his head. "Not anymore. I guess you could call him a fallen angel, but I doubt he'd appreciate it. That would be the same as calling him a demon." Mike walked over to the pool table to take his shot.

She waited until he was finished. "And the other man?"

He put both hands on his pool stick and looked in the direction of the computer room. "The man with the dark hair is Roger. He's been with Ambrose nearly as long as Sven has. Just be nice and respectful to them. Please."

"Or what? They'll suck me dry?"

"What a saucy wench. I take it you're Chris?" Sven walked up to her, closely followed by Roger and Gabe. What had he just called her?

"Saucy wench?" She raised her eyebrow. "I take it you're the ancient, bloodsucking Viking."

His smile was irritating. "That would be me."

Chris grunted. Well, at least he was decent. And humorous. That was two over on Gabe.

"Have you known Gabe long?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Hell, I was there at his birth."

She smiled. Now this was something she could work with. She could feel Mike tense at the mischievous look on her face. "So, you could tell me if they dropped him on his head or not. I personally vote for yes. It would certainly explain a lot."

Sven clapped her on the back as he laughed, causing her to stumble forward. "More than once, dear lady, I can assure you."

Oh, she liked Sven. A bit heavy-handed, but likeable.

"Let's go," Gabe said. She couldn't tell if he was irritated or not. He had that permanently bored look on his face, as if being in her company seriously put him out. He hadn't introduced her to his friends, co-workers, cohorts—whatever the hell they were.

"Why don't I just go with Sven? He seems to like my company just fine."

"That's because he's only known you for a minute."

She gasped. "Why you rotten bastard—"

"Chris..." Mike warned.

She clamped her mouth shut and adjusted the backpack onto her other shoulder, glaring at Mike. She would deal with Gabe for the next few days because she had to. She really didn't want to tangle with another one of those hunters again. The first encounter had been a lucky strike, and she was certain that kind of luck only came once in a lifetime.

"Dave's upstairs asleep in the guestroom. Can you check in on him later?"

Mike nodded, and she gave him a hug. She went to Stephen and hugged him. "Be careful," she said to him. "Please watch out for Dave."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Stephen promised. "You stay close to Gabe."

A smart-ass comment loomed on her tongue, and she managed to keep it there.

She walked up the stairs behind Gabe. This week had to be the worst of her life, and she had done nothing to deserve it. Then again, what had she done to deserve what she had been given in life?

It was her, wasn't it? The only people to ever take her in and treat her like a human hadn't been humans after all.

She made her way out the door and into the front yard. It was nearing four in the morning. Not even the birds were dumb enough to be out this early. Or late, in her case.

As they walked out into the darkness the chill of the air bit into her. She had on a red silky shirt, jeans and a small, lightweight jacket.

“Where are we going? To your motel?” She came to Gabe’s bike and stared at it. Did he really expect her to get on it? To snuggle up behind him? To hold on to him? Why couldn’t they take her car? Besides never having been on a bike, she was going to freeze her ass off.

He handed her a helmet.

Apparently he did expect her to get on it.

“To my place.” He shrugged out of his jacket.

“And we’re taking this?” He held his jacket out. She shook her head. “I can’t take that. You’ll be cold.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

He helped her slide it on, and she was immediately wrapped in his warmth and musky scent. He zipped it up, making her feel like a two-year-old getting ready to go to school. He also made her feel secure.

He put the helmet on her, his hand brushing her cheek as he snapped the chinstrap on the helmet. A sudden urge to step into his arms came over her. She wanted him to tell her everything would be all right. That he would protect her because he wanted to, not because it was his job.

She shook it off. When he was finished he straddled the bike and started it. He raised his voice so she could hear him over the engine. “Get on.”

She took a deep breath as she brought her right leg over the seat and settled down. She had never been on a motorcycle before, and she certainly didn’t want to start now. She had a vision of him dumping her on the concrete just for fun.

This was turning out to be the worst night of her life. She spoke over the noise of the engine. “Why are we leaving?”

“Sven and I thought it best.”

There was something he wasn’t telling her. There wasn’t one person in Tom’s house who would hurt her. She would have more protection if she stayed with her family, so why was he taking her away?

She felt as though she were being watched. She turned in the seat to look back at Tom’s house. Mike was looking out at them from the kitchen window.

How very odd these past few days had been. She had come over for a nice Thanksgiving dinner, learned the people she loved most were vampires, and she had stabbed someone to death.

She waved good-bye to Mike and prayed she would see him again. She shivered through the warmth in Gabe’s jacket, realizing her life was literally in Gabe’s hands now.

Chapter Eight

“Wow. We got here without anything crazy happening.” She followed Gabe as they walked through the parking lot to the motel lobby.

On the freezing ride to his motel she had decided to play a bit nicer with Gabe. Especially since she had no foreseeable escape from him now. She would endeavor to keep the sarcasm to a minimum, but it would be difficult.

The image of him fighting that deranged beast filtered through her mind and reminded her who Gabe was. What he did. He was working. He was there to keep her safe. It would benefit them both if she worked with him and not against him.

“We aren’t there yet.”

“Oh, I forgot. Someone could jump out of the bushes and nail our asses in a motel parking lot.” She kept her voice light, a smile plastered to her face.

“You’re learning.”

Was he serious? She looked at the bushes and the shadows all around her, quickening her pace and walking directly behind Gabe. Not even three inches separated them now.

He turned and raised an eyebrow.

“What?” She accidentally stepped on his heel. “Oops, sorry.”

He opened the door to the lobby and she walked in. As they made their way into the lighted lobby she let herself relax a bit. She waited as Gabe handed the motel clerk his driver’s license and told him his room number.

The motel was not part of a major chain. The owners had been running this particular complex since nineteen sixty-two, according to the golden plaque hanging on the wall behind the desk. Glancing around the lobby she could understand why they were still in business.

They had a stainless steel industrial coffeepot on a small table, surrounded by white Styrofoam cups and condiments. A rack of pamphlets on local attractions stood by a small table. At the other end of the lobby they had a stone fireplace and beautiful leather furniture with cherry wood accessories surrounding it. There was a nice fire that beckoned patrons to sit down with any one of the books they had lining two bookshelves that were built into the wall.

“Are you ready?”

She turned her attention back to Gabe. In his black T-shirt and stylishly torn jeans he looked more like a construction worker than a vampire mercenary. Until you looked into the light blue depths of his eyes. It made it easy to believe he was the son of an angel. He was breathtaking. “Yes.”

She followed him out of the lobby and into the darkness, and once again she felt drawn to Gabe’s protection as though he were a magnet. This time she put her hand on the small of his back while looking behind them so she wouldn’t trip over him.

When they came to the door to his hotel room, he shook his head and put the card in the slot. She glanced around behind her, seriously afraid someone was going to jump them.

“*Will you relax?* You’re making me nervous.”

She remained plastered to his back. "Sorry."

He opened the door and walked in.

She dropped her hand as she stepped in and began to look around. She heard him shut and lock the door behind her.

Everything was clean and orderly. There were a few magazines on the coffee table in front of the plush brown couch. She wondered how long he had been here before he had arrived at Tom's.

She picked up one of the magazines. It had a picture of a dirt bike rider on the front. "How long have you been riding motorcycles?"

"Since their invention."

Good grief. She put the magazine down, shrugged out of his leather jacket and draped it over the back of the couch. As she sat down, her cell phone bit into her waist. She adjusted the clip. "How long have you been here?"

"Few weeks."

Okay. Please don't elaborate. Conversations with Gabe felt like an interview gone bad. Next on E! we'll give you tips on how to converse with a hot vampire! Learn how to sex up your relationship with the undead! We'll also give you the top ten reasons why sucking blood is the hot new trend for fall!

She laughed out loud, bringing Gabe's attention from the coffeepot to her. He gave her a once-over, clearly thinking she had lost her mind.

She had.

"You want some coffee?"

"Right before I go to bed?"

"Is there a bad time for coffee?"

Good point. "Sure, I'll take a cup."

She watched as he poured the water into the coffeemaker and measured the coffee into the filter. His shoulders were large, tapering down to a tight waist, awesome ass—

"So, what's on your mind now? Another annoying question?" He shut the lid on the coffeemaker and came into the living room.

"Nothing," she lied quickly. She moved over so he could sit on the couch. She had to remind herself he wanted nothing to do with her.

"I apologize for the way I acted at the club." He tapped his fingers on his knees. "I had a few things on my mind that were bothering me, and I took it out on you."

Had a man just apologized? Not just any man, but *this* man? Momentarily stunned, she could only nod. "Um ... I'm sorry, too. I know you're just trying to help."

They fell into an uncomfortable silence. He was so different than anyone she had ever met. She couldn't imagine the type of life he led. Other single men her age usually wanted to go out, get drunk and get laid. Then again, he wasn't anywhere close to being her age.

"I don't want you to feel unwelcome here, so anything of mine please consider yours."

Boy, oh boy, she could take that statement and do all sorts of nasty things to it.

Damn her, even his forearms had muscles. Corded, strong, rippling muscles. Close enough that if she shifted slightly they'd brush her own arm.

He. Doesn't. Want. You.

After another few moments of awkward silence he got up to get their coffee.

“How do you take yours?”

“One sugar, please.”

This was torture, watching the muscles play in his back. With no one to catch her checking him out, she felt quite at ease letting her eyes wander.

Her hormones were out of control. She shouldn't have had anything to drink at the bar. Surely that was why she was reacting to his presence like this. Never had she wanted someone so badly, and he wasn't even human.

Go figure.

He walked back in the living room and handed her the cup of coffee. “You can take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch.”

Take you in the bed. “Thank you.” She took the warm cup from his hands.

Wasn't he supposed to be thinking such thoughts? Weren't men supposed to be the horn dogs? What did she have to do to get him interested?

Don't open yourself up to get hurt again!

She wouldn't be opening up her heart; it would be something else entirely.

Now that she thought about it, he probably got it all the time. She recalled how Mike and Stephen were earlier tonight. They had no problem with the ladies. Hell, Gabe would be no different.

A surge of white hot jealousy rushed through her as she thought about how easy it would be for him. Who was she to be jealous, anyway? It wasn't as though they were a couple. Damn it all.

Yeah, she needed to get to bed before she mauled him. She needed to sleep off the alcohol.

He turned on the TV. “There's nothing but corny infomercials on at this hour.”

“I'm sorry; what did you say?”

He put his right arm on the back of the couch and slid down to prop his feet up on the coffee table. Her right hand twitched with the desire to feel the hard muscles under his shirt. This man didn't have an ounce of fat on him. She could practically see the outline of his six-pack under his back T-shirt.

“Are you usually alone like this?” She set her coffee cup down on the coffee table. Conversation might keep her mind from wandering down Lustful Lane. “I mean, when you're on a job or whatever you call it.”

“There are usually two of us, though I prefer to be alone. Hell, you met Sven and Roger earlier. Sven acts like he's on crack and Roger's just there. I don't think I've ever seen that man laugh.”

“Why would anyone prefer to be alone? When there's another person in the room you can feel their energy. I hate being alone.” She took off her heels and folded her feet under her as she sat Indian-style. “I'd even prefer the company of someone I didn't care for.”

He switched off the TV and turned to her. The sudden action had her eyeing him warily. Had he taken her last statement personally?

“Did you know your biological parents at all? Do you remember anything about them?”

Where had that come from? She shook her head, picked up the *Off-Road Magazine* and began flipping through it. “I was four when they gave me up for adoption.”

“Chris?”

She flipped a page and saw a biker jumping a dirt ramp. His bike was twenty feet in the air, and the rider had lifted his legs from the bike and held them straight out behind him.

"Can you do this?" She held the page out and looked at him.

He smiled. "I never tried."

"So you're insinuating that had you attempted this stunt, you could pull it off?"

He scooted over to her and turned a few pages. "No doubt about it." He pointed to a bike on the page he had turned to. "I have two of these back home. My dad and I have a few trails we made in the woods."

"So your dad rides, too?" She tried not to notice his thigh, which was just under the hand she was using to hold the magazine. Not touching, but close enough to feel the heat of his body.

"Sure does. We tried to get Mom to do it, but she's not into adrenaline rushes like we are." He let go of the page and leaned back, resting his arm on the back of the couch again. He didn't move away from her. His arm brushed the back of her neck.

"I have to say I agree with her. I didn't like riding on your bike at all. Whenever we turned a corner, I thought we were going to lean too far to the side and slide down the road." She closed the magazine. "And it was freezing."

"You'd like a dirt bike. Harleys are great transportation, but dirt biking is a sport. It's a rush to go tearing down a dirt path, catching air on a decent bump in the trail.

She shrugged in answer and laid the magazine back on the table. All she had to do was lean back and she would be in Gabe's arms. The scent of his musky cologne enticed her to do just that.

"Nope. Not my cup of tea." She kept her back straight and tried not to look uncomfortable.

"So, what do you do for fun?"

He lifted a strand of her hair, sending tingles down her spine. What was the question? "Fun?"

He laughed. "Yes. Fun. What do you do when you're not working?"

Funny, she had always thought he was the one who didn't have enough fun in his life. "I ... um ... spend time with my family." She began to relax when Gabe let go of her hair. "You saw what they have downstairs. We usually play pool or watch movies."

"Is that what you like to do or what they like to do?"

She leaned to the side so she could look at him. "I just told you. I like spending time with them. I like baking for them. I—"

"You do everything in your power to make them like you. That's not what I was asking. I asked what *you* liked to do on your free time."

She pushed herself off the couch. "And I just told you what I like to do. I'm sorry if being around my family is my number one priority. I can see it's not with you, or you wouldn't be used to living in motels."

She heard Gabe sigh.

"Good night." She picked up her coffee cup and returned it to the kitchen. As she headed for the bathroom, she asked, "Do you need anything from your room?"

"I'll just pop in if I need anything." He pulled off his shirt and settled down onto the sofa.

Get the hell out of here. He was ripped. The back of the couch restricted her view of

his chest, but she had seen enough. She reminded herself there could be nothing between them. Ever. He had told her that himself.

She shut the bedroom door and rested her forehead against the solid wood.

Not to mention he thought she had to buy everyone's love with baked goods. She enjoyed going to Tom's and hanging out in the basement. She liked watching football and eating junk food. What was not to like?

It was sad that the one man who truly turned her head was a vampire mercenary who wanted nothing to do with her.

Life sucked.

And so did the man lying half-naked on the couch.

She so wasn't going there.

Instead she went to the double bed and pulled back the blankets. She stopped before climbing in. She smelled like that dingy club they had been at. Smoke and alcohol.

She opened the door and went back into the main room to get her backpack. It was lying on the floor next to the couch. Next to the shirtless hunk of a man she shouldn't ache for because she hadn't known him very long, and he expressed no interest in her whatsoever.

She snatched her backpack up without looking in his direction. When she was back in the bedroom with the door shut, she let out a pent-up breath. She didn't feel like answering any more of his questions pertaining to her family, past or present. She knew exactly why he had asked her about her biological parents. He, along with everyone else in the house, had witnessed one of her strange abilities—healing fast. It wasn't normal.

She pulled out the shampoo and conditioner from the backpack and headed for the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later she was clean and tired. The only problem was she hadn't packed any pajamas. Jess hadn't been back in the house when she had packed. She had nothing with her that was her own. Not that she had anything of value, anyway.

Not that *she* was anything of value.

She stood in the middle of the room and felt like crying, hating the feeling she didn't belong, that she would forever be out of place. It brought up too many familiar emotions she had as a child. The uncomfortable first day at a prospective adoptive parent's home. She'd always wanted to blend in with the floor on those days. She never knew what the people had expected of her. The first few months with any family had been hard. She'd never felt at home.

This was the first real opportunity she'd had to reflect on everything that had transpired in the last few days.

In a few short hours they were going to be heading out so Gabe could eliminate the hunters, or whatever it was he planned to do. She needed to get some sleep. The last thing she needed to worry about was her lack of sleepwear. She'd witnessed Gabe kill a wicked-looking creature a few hours ago. Not having pj's was the least of her worries.

She started to climb in bed, intent on getting at least a few hours of sleep.

"Chris?"

She pulled the towel tighter around her and went to open the door. She peeked around it. "Yes?"

He handed her a black T-shirt. She stared at it a few seconds before she realized what he was offering her. How had he known exactly what she needed? She was too tired to

ask. "Thank you."

"Like I said earlier, anything you see just consider it yours for the taking."

What she saw was a tall, dark and gorgeous man standing before her with his shirt off. That's what she wanted. Not a damned black T-shirt. Instead of saying all of that, she just nodded her head. He walked away and she shut the door.

She resisted the urge to go out in the living room and use him like a jungle gym. She had to get her hormones under control before she made a complete ass out of herself. Again.

Christ, the man didn't even want her.

Not that she could blame him. There was something wrong with her. There always had been.

With his heightened senses he'd probably known from the beginning.

Hell, if humans had been sensing it all her life, it would only figure a vampire would pick up on it sooner or later. Had Mike and the others felt it?

She'd always wanted to know what made her different.

Perhaps Gabe could tell her.

The question was, did she want to know?

Chapter Nine

Gabe couldn't sleep. First of all, he knew Chris was wearing one of his T-shirts. Second of all, the couch was uncomfortable as all hell. And lastly, Chris was wearing one of his T-shirts.

Damn.

"Just go in the room and take her." Lucifer's voice broke into his thoughts and crawled under his skin.

Gabe rolled his eyes, unperturbed with Luc's sudden presence. He stayed where he was, on his back with his right arm thrown over his face. "I'm not going to do that."

"I would."

"I know what you would do. I have a bit more respect for the woman than that. By the way, I hate when you just pop in uninvited. If my father knew you visited me, he would have a coronary."

"Your father is incapable of having a heart attack. I should know. I've tried giving him one a few times."

Gabe sighed. "Never mind."

"You want to know who the vampire is? I can tell you."

Gabe almost bit. *Almost*. He already owed debts to Lucifer that would have to be paid one way or another. He couldn't afford to owe any more to him. "I wouldn't indebt myself to you again to gain that information. I'm almost positive I know who it is, anyway. I just have to prove it." What he really wanted to ask was how Chris could be the way she was. He wasn't about to ask, either. Lucifer's presence solidified what he thought Chris was. In fact, Gabe was now certain of it. He was surprised that the vamps she called family didn't know, although the energy that surrounded her was minimal, which added another strange facet to the mystery.

"If you are wrong?"

"Then I start from square one. Wouldn't be the first time, won't be the last."

"That's a shame."

"No, it's called common sense." Gabe sat up on the couch and pulled a hand over his face.

Lucifer laughed. "I'm surprised you allowed Dave to live."

"He's more use to us alive than dead. I haven't decided how to use him yet, though. He's still against the whole vampire thing, as he puts it." Gabe gave Lucifer a once-over. Wearing faded, baggy jeans and a University of Michigan sweatshirt, he looked like a college frat boy. He had to give him credit, he always looked after his own. "You're here for Chris?"

"Yes and no. I know you're taking good care of her. How is Ambrose?"

"Ask him yourself."

Lucifer growled at him. "He wouldn't answer me if I did."

"Then you're shit out of luck, aren't you?" Gabe snapped.

"One day you will take that tone with me and wish you hadn't." Lucifer vanished.

Good. Gabe wasn't in the mood for his company. He wasn't in the mood for anyone's company unless she had long red hair, was sarcastic as hell and wore something

from Victoria's Secret.

"Who was that man that was sitting next to you?"

Gabe cursed under his breath and turned around slowly. "What are you doing?"

"Who was that?" she persisted.

"Who?" He tried feigning innocence, but she only glared at him. His T-shirt rested against her thighs, and he had trouble keeping his gaze on her face.

"The man that was just here. You know who I'm talking about. Who was that? One of your old vampire friends? I could hear him in the bedroom. His voice isn't exactly soft and melodic."

"I wouldn't call him a friend, but yes, he is an old acquaintance." For once in his life, Gabe had no idea what to say. He couldn't very well tell her that their visitor was Satan.

"Well, hopefully none of them will pop in the room I'm currently occupying. I think I'd have a problem with that." She turned around and shut the bedroom door.

He lay back down, looking out of the slits in the blinds, noting the rays of sunlight that were just lighting the sky.

So, Chris enjoyed being with her family. Nothing else. Of course she had to pick the one thing he couldn't give her.

It was getting more and more difficult to keep her an arm's length away. The more he was around her, the more agitated he became. When he saw her standing by a couch, he wanted to bend her over it. When he saw her with Mike, he had visions of smashing the man's face in.

Underneath her sassy exterior, he could feel the desperation that lurked in her soul. He couldn't help but wonder what her upbringing was like. If his assumption on her nature was true, then it would have been a hell of a thing to go through for a young woman. Who had been there to help guide her through it?

No wonder she had latched onto Mike and his family. Her predicament brought out every protective instinct he had, and yet when they were together he felt like throttling her half the time. The other half, when she was open about her feelings for him, he wanted to take their relationship a step further.

Christ, what relationship?

He had to get this job done and get the fuck out of Michigan.

He wished he were just a normal man, which was another first in his long life. He had never before wanted normalcy. He wouldn't even know what to do with himself if he were a normal human.

Then again, that was a lie. The first thing he would do was presently lying on his bed.

In his T-shirt.

Damn.

* * * *

Chris woke in a sauna. An inferno. What the hell *was* it with vampires?

She tiptoed out of the bedroom to the thermostat, which was just by the front door. It was set on ninety. *Ninety.*

She turned it all the way down to fifty and went back to her room. The sheets and cover from her bed were all over the place. Apparently she had been kicking them off in the middle of the day. No wonder.

Gabe was still sleeping, and though she didn't want to wake him, she really wanted some coffee. She left her room again and made her way to the kitchen as quietly as possible. They had left the coffeepot on all night, so she had to wait a few moments before putting more water in the pot. With her luck it would crack.

She decided to brush her teeth and wash her face while she was waiting for the coffeepot to cool down. Once she was finished, she walked back into the kitchen and started the coffee.

While the coffee was brewing, she opened up the small fridge to see what she could eat. She was starving.

He must have stocked his room when he had arrived. Salad fixings, eggs, chocolate and milk were in the fridge. She found butter and jelly in the door. She took those out and searched the cupboards for some bread. When she found it, she turned around and sneaked another peek at Gabe asleep on the couch.

Bare-chested.

Sexy and ripped.

Hot damn.

She still had the craziest urge to open the front door and yell out that vampires existed and one was living in this very room.

A very sexy vampire. One who rode dirt bikes in the wooded trails of Scotland and belonged to a group of mercenary vampires called the Alliance.

She rolled her eyes at her own thoughts and opened the bread. As she was placing the bread in the toaster, her cell rang.

She had no idea where it was. She tried following the ringtone, which was "Sexy Back" by Justin Timberlake. It was somewhere in the living room, but it was so quiet she could barely hear it. Crap. She was doing her best not to wake him up, but whoever was calling was not taking the hint. Why hadn't her voice mail picked up yet?

It sounded like the music was coming from the couch. Shit. Gabe was on the couch.

He was lying on her phone, looking as good as any man she had ever set eyes on. She was surprised he hadn't woken up yet. With her phone working as a virtual alarm clock just under the cushions of the couch, the music seemed adequate enough to wake the dead.

She wasn't going to go for it. Really she wasn't, but it could be Mike or someone with important news. A situation could have come up that needed immediate attention. Life-saving information could be on the other end of that line.

She couldn't let one hot vampire get in the way. This was important shit. This was her duty to mankind.

This was lips, on a breathtakingly handsome, whiskered face. Bare skin that was just asking to be touched.

Goddamn it all, she had to taste him again.

She hadn't realized she had climbed on top of him until his arms came around her and held her there, but she was damn glad she had. At least her subconscious was in control if nothing else she possessed was.

Why did she lose her self-control when she was around him? She tried not to contemplate that as she buried her face in his neck and allowed her body to melt into his.

His hands traveled down her back to pull her—er, his—T-shirt up over her backside. He ran his hands down over the small of her back and cupped her ass. She hadn't put on

any panties last night, so it was bare skin he met.

Oh God...

She moaned, leaving his neck to trail kisses on his hard chest, working her way to something even harder. She was going to have this vampire begging by the time—

Her cell started ringing again.

Gabe quit his movements and flashed the phone out from between the cushions of the couch. He held it up. “Is this what you were looking for?”

She looked up at him, her hair falling in her face as she realized she was only a few short inches from a touchdown. “Fate?” she squeaked.

“Freaky, isn’t it?”

She answered the phone while lying on top of him. She wasn’t going to move. Not when she was sure the best sex of her life was lying under her. And as much as he was trying to deny it, he was just as affected as she was. Just now his voice had been erotically deep and practically breathless.

Not to mention he was hard as a brick.

“What?” she growled when she flipped open her phone.

“Damn, what the hell is wrong with you? Answer your damned phone. I was worried. What, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something? I’m calling to ask how it’s going.”

It was Mike. “It was definitely going somewhere until you called, that’s for sure.” Gabe shook his head, and she frowned when he pried her off of him. And he definitely had to pry.

“What does that mean?” Mike asked.

“Nothing,” she barked. “What time is it, anyway?”

“Six in the evening.”

“Are you serious?” She looked at the cable box on the TV as Gabe worked his way out from beneath her. Five after six. “Damn, I didn’t know I had slept that long.”

“Is he making you feel comfortable there?”

Was he ever. “He could be doing a better job, but yes, he’s behaving like a perfect gentleman.” *Damn it all.*

“Good.”

No, it wasn’t good from her perspective. All last night she’d dreamt of him, and this happened to be one of the positions she’d dreamt about. *Think of something else.* “How is Dave?”

“Being a smart-ass. He’s seriously pissed you’re with Gabe all by yourself.”

“Put him on the phone.” While she waited for Dave to pick up the phone, she went to make the toast she had started. Gabe had disappeared into the bedroom.

“Chris?”

Dave sounded tired. “Hey, Dave, don’t worry. He only nibbles. No biting yet.”

“That’s not funny in the least.”

“Lighten up, Dave.”

“I’m trying.”

Well, that was a vast improvement. “Are you okay? You sound like shit.”

“I have a bad hangover.”

“I bet you do. Well, now that you know I’m still in one piece, give the phone back to Mike.”

“Well, I love you, too.”

She heard shuffling, then Mike was back on the phone. “What are you guys up to tonight?” he asked.

“No idea. Gabe hasn’t mentioned anything to me. We were supposed to go out during the day and get those hunters or look for information or something, but I guess he overslept. Do you need to talk to him?”

“Yeah, put him on the phone.”

She heard the shower turn on. She smiled. “Hold on, I’ll get him for you.”

She tried keeping the shit-eating grin off her face without much luck, and barged into the bathroom. Just as she had hoped, there was Gabe, naked as the day he was born.

“Mike wants to talk to you.”

“Shit, Chris!”

Shock didn’t begin to describe the look on his face. She merely handed him the phone and leaned against the door frame, looking him up and down. Dear God, he was huge.

Yes, sir, class had officially begun. He was the mold with which all men should be cast. His shoulders were rounded with muscles, his pecs were flawless, and his abs were defined to the point it caused her to drool. And it only got better from there.

Hello, Mr. Johnson, let me show you to your table.

He was rock hard, and as she looked up to meet his gaze, she finally knew she affected him. Good.

“Your sister’s an imp.”

She licked her lips.

There was a knock at the front door. Without thinking she turned to answer it. Gabe put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

“Oh,” she mouthed. Duh. She forgot she was in peril. All she had been thinking about was Gabe’s booty. Well, that wasn’t *all* she’d been thinking about.

He shoved her into the bathroom, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went to answer the door.

Why couldn’t she concentrate on important things like imminent death at the hands of crazy men out to destroy rogue vampires? Instead, she was thinking up ways to see Gabe naked. Again.

She left the bathroom and went to the door of the bedroom and pressed her ear to it.

“No, thank you.”

She heard the front door close. Gabe opened the door and walked into the bedroom.

“Housekeeping. She wanted to know if we needed anything.”

He started talking to Mike again as he walked to the bathroom.

She was so tempted to pull that towel off him she had to slap her own hand away. Coffee, coffee, coffee.

She went into the kitchen again to get her cup, only to find a strange man leaning against the countertop. He was wearing a fluffy blue bathrobe and tiger-print slippers that did nothing to ease her anxiety. Fear took hold of her, and Gabe’s name was set to roll off her lips when the man spoke.

“Good morning, Chris.”

She recognized the voice instantly.

“You’re that asshole vampire from last night.” Refusing to be scared, she motioned

for him to move aside so she could get into the small kitchen. "Do you make it a habit to pop in whenever you please?"

He looked offended as he allowed her access. "I am not a vampire."

"Yeah, right. No offense, buddy, but normal people don't just pop in and out of people's abodes like you just did."

"Again, I am not a vampire. Notice the teeth?"

She leaned forward and peered at his opened mouth. Nope. No fangs there. Okaaaay. "Then what are you?"

"He was just leaving." Gabe came out of the bedroom. He had thrown on white boxer briefs and a black T-shirt, apparently forgoing his shower for the moment. From the look on his face, he was less than pleased with their guest. He handed her her cell phone.

Holy sweet Jesus, she could look at him forever. Weren't some relationships based solely on sex? Sure, he might be leaving soon, but what was wrong with a little action before he left?

She tore her gaze from the muscles in his thighs. "Hey, how does he hide his fangs?"

The vampire started laughing.

"Leave."

Had Gabe mentioned his name last night? "What's your name?"

He brought his light green eyes to hers. "Lucifer. Satan, if that's your preference. I go by both. I won't answer to the Devil, however. That name lacks power and respect, and it sounds ignorant by itself."

She nodded her head and held out her hand. She'd heard some great stories in her time, but this one topped the cake. "Well, the name's Mary. Nice to meet you. You can also call me The Virgin. I'll go by either."

Lucifer shook her hand. "Why are you chasing Gabe around?" He kissed the back of her hand. "I, on the other hand, would let you catch me."

"Enough." Gabe stepped up beside her and glared at his friend. "You need to leave."

"He always was a deadbeat," Lucifer whispered to her.

"Tell me about it," she whispered back. She went to the cupboard and got Lucifer a cup. "Want some coffee?"

He got a strange look on his face. "No one has offered me a beverage before."

"Okay. Well, there's always a first." She rolled her eyes. "Actually, you can drop the Satan act. It's getting old."

"Do you think it would work to lure unsuspecting women into bed?"

He was by far the most interesting person she'd met in quite a while. Then again, she didn't get out much. "Sure. The kind of women that go after bad boys."

Lucifer took the offered cup and poured himself some coffee. Chris sat down at the kitchen table; Lucifer sat opposite her. She figured Gabe was finished with trying to kick out the vampire, because he merely filled his coffee cup and sat down next to her.

"Toast?"

"No, thanks," Gabe said. Lucifer shook his head.

She got up to butter the toast she had been working on before the cell rang. As she made it she couldn't help but think about last week. Things had been so normal then. No vampires. No hunters.

Now she was sipping coffee with two vampires. Both were uncommonly good-

looking. The newcomer had short, brown hair and unnatural green eyes. He was leaner than Gabe, and had an air of authority about him. Definitely a head-turner. She wondered what his real name was.

“So, what’s with the robe?” she asked.

“I just woke up and thought I would pay you two a visit. Actually, I have some information for Gabe.”

Gabe looked about as interested as a gay man in a strip joint.

“It’s Tom.”

“What’s Tom?” she asked.

Gabe didn’t say anything.

“I wasn’t going to tell you, but I like your woman. And you’d figure it out soon enough.” Lucifer turned and winked at her.

“The only reason she is being nice to you is because she doesn’t believe you’re really Satan.”

“Why are we talking about Tom?” A ripple of unease sliced through her. “And are you really Satan? No way.”

“We are speaking about Tom because he’s the vampire who’s been working with the vigilante group. And yes, way,” Lucifer said.

“You think Tom is involved with them?” That was complete, utter bullshit. Tom wouldn’t hurt a fly. Dave was the one who’d been working with those men. Why would Tom work with men who wanted to kill vampires?

Gabe nodded. “I know he’s involved.”

That was ludicrous. “Then why hasn’t Tom killed everyone in the house himself? What’s his motive?”

“His motive is to eliminate the Alliance. What better way to get the members together so he can kill three heads of the Alliance in one attempt? It’s a play on power. The Alliance would have to re-group, and they would be vulnerable. Tom called in a problem to the Alliance—vampire hunters and Dave. Tom’s been telling Dave he was made a vampire against his will, and the others in the house are killers. He’s likely been working Dave for months.”

“Dave has been anything but forthcoming with you.” Lucifer looked at her apologetically.

Chris walked back to the table and sat down. “Tom did what? I don’t understand. He wants to get rid of the Alliance for what? I thought the Alliance is there to help?”

“When I went to eliminate the men who threatened your life and those of your friends, I found out they had another informant besides Dave. The other informant was a vampire. Lucifer here says it’s Tom. He was the one I had already been leaning toward.”

Chris looked at Lucifer. “Are you sure?”

“What do you think?”

It couldn’t be Tom. Tom was generous. He’d given her everything decent in her life. He had always been there for her when she needed him. “What could Tom gain by killing us? Would that have gotten more of the Alliance here?” She put down her cup. “I know. I’ll call Dave.”

“The hell you will.”

“Let her.” Lucifer sat back and took a sip of coffee.

“If you’re right, then Tom would kill her if she got in the way of his plans.”

Now that was insane. Tom would never hurt her.

"He would try." Lucifer smiled. "That's when you come in and save the day."

Gabe shook his head. "Why are you helping us?"

"I told you already. I like Mary here."

"Oh, my God. Mike! If you are right, which I really doubt, I have to call him and warn him." She truly didn't believe Tom could be behind any of this, but she'd have thought the same thing about Dave before the night he'd pulled a gun on her. Tom was a vampire, and she had no knowledge of the politics concerning their nature.

"Please refrain from the use of profanity," Lucifer asked.

Gabe got up from the table and snatched the phone from her. "Let me handle this. You could put him in a bad situation if you spill this information over the phone. I have already warned him and Stephen to watch out for Tom."

"But we have to warn him! What if Tom already knows we know?" She tried snatching the phone back, but he kept it out of her reach.

"I just told you I informed Mike and Stephen to keep an eye out for Tom, so they are already aware of the situation. Besides, how could Tom possibly know?"

"You can get into my mind. You and Lucifer can pop in and out, who knows what Tom can do?"

Gabe shook his head. "I'm different. Lucifer is definitely different. Tom doesn't have the power to get in your mind, trust me."

"Other than being older, you're no different than Tom. You're both vampires." Why did nothing make sense to her?

"Gabe made a pact with me, and daddy dearest knows nothing about it. I gave him a few powers he wasn't born with."

She glanced at Lucifer. She couldn't believe him. She wouldn't. Her life had always been strange, made stranger each and every minute, but this was going too far. First she had to come to terms with her family being vampires, then Dave's insistence that all vampires were evil, and now Satan? Bullshit.

"Enough," Gabe warned.

"Wait a damn minute. You are not the Devil." If she had ever pictured the Devil, he certainly hadn't looked like a *Playgirl* centerfold in a fluffy blue robe and fuzzy slippers.

"No, I am not. I told you, I don't answer to that name. It's weak."

Lucifer kept a straight face. Was he demented, or was he telling the truth? She couldn't decide. She felt like slamming her head into a wall. "Okay, whatever. I'm going back to Tom's, and I'm going to straighten this out." She started out of the kitchen.

If Gabe was right about Tom, then the Alliance would never offer him a job. They would kill him for trying to take down the heads of the Alliance.

"In my T-shirt?"

She looked down. Crap. She felt her face grow hot. She'd been parading around in front of that demented vampire in a barely-there T-shirt.

"I think I'll get dressed. Then we can go."

"Do you mind if I accompany you?" Lucifer asked.

"No."

"Yes," Gabe said at the same time.

She made her way into the bedroom. *Satan, her ass*. She started dressing in what she had worn yesterday. One thing was for sure. Her life couldn't get any stranger. Vampires,

hunters, informants, and a bloodsucker who thought he was Satan.

What else could possibly happen tonight?

* * * *

“Okay, how are we going to get there? We aren’t all going to fit on your bike, and no offense, riding on that thing scares me.”

Gabe had on his leather jacket and jeans. Lucifer had popped back in wearing a black suit, complete with a red tie. His appearance and the energy that surrounded him made her wonder if he was telling the truth. He had a very formidable aura about him.

They walked down the sidewalk toward the parking lot. There was a quarter of the moon out, and the parking lot lights lit up the motel complex in a strange yellowish glow.

Gabe put his hand on her lower back, pulling her closer. “I’ve been riding bikes longer than you’ve been alive. Did you honestly think I was going to dump us?”

“Question better left unanswered.” When they arrived at the parking lot all three came to a stop. “I guess Lucifer can just pop over to Tom’s house.”

Lucifer put a hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him. “If you could own a vehicle, any vehicle, what would it be?”

She answered without hesitation. “A Hummer. Not the H2 or H3, but the original gas-guzzling Hummer.”

He looked amused. “What color?”

She laughed. What the hell was wrong with this vampire? He was one off-beat dude. “Definitely black.”

“Tinted windows?”

“Of course,” she said. “Oh, and some chrome rims.”

“Turn around.”

His eyes were a brilliant shade of green. She figured they changed color like Gabe’s did. Did that mean he was in a highly emotional state? What exactly did that make her? She gave him a little smile, then turned to the parking lot. Her mouth fell open. “Oh. My. God.”

“Please,” Lucifer snapped. “He didn’t give you the Hummer. I did.”

“What? What is this? Where did it come from?” She went up to the black Hummer that hadn’t been there two seconds before and ran a hand along the side of it. It was so shiny she could see her reflection in it. Energy clung to it as if it had been infused with magic.

“Look at the plate.”

She walked to the back of the Hummer. M VIRGIN.

“Sweet!” she laughed. She opened the doors and peered inside. “How did you do that?”

“This is insane.” Gabe hadn’t moved anywhere near the Hummer. He was looking at it as though it would jump up and bite him.

“You know what? Forget how you did it. I don’t care. You seriously rock. I don’t know how you did it, but you rock. Lucifer gets shotgun.” Chris climbed into the driver’s seat. “Man,” she said, buckling up. “I might have to quit running around after Gabe and seriously consider dating you.”

She took the keys Lucifer handed her and started the truck. She turned on the radio and looked for a rock station. Was this beautiful piece of machinery really hers to keep?

They'd have to pry it out of her cold, dead hands.

Mine.

Gabe got in the backseat and leaned forward. "You do understand he really is the Devil, right? He is not a vampire by any stretch of the imagination. He's evil. He's the Devil."

"No, he's not the Devil." She winked at Lucifer. "He's Satan, remember? Now, buckle up and let's see how fast this baby will take us to Tom's house."

Lucifer buckled. "Actually the Hummer wasn't built for speed; it was built for power. If you want speed, we can talk Lamborghini."

* * * *

Chris followed Gabe and Lucifer into Tom's house. It was nearing seven thirty at night and the place looked empty.

As she walked down the hallway, she saw the dining room table lying on its side. Pieces of china littered the floor, and pictures had been knocked off the wall. There was blood on the floor.

They were too late.

She ran downstairs. "Mike! Stephen! Dave, where are you?" She went into the computer room, and when she found it empty, she went into a panic. They should never have left the house.

Then it dawned on her. That's why Gabe had taken her to his motel. He was protecting her from Tom.

But who had been here to protect her brothers?

"No one is here." Lucifer walked elegantly down the steps.

Her heart pounded in her chest. While she had been lusting after Gabe, her family had been fighting for their lives. It must have just happened. She'd been talking to Mike only a couple of hours ago. "Where are they? Are they okay?" She turned around and surveyed the empty room again. "This is my fault. I shouldn't have left."

"Chris, calm down. None of this is your fault, and you have no idea what has transpired. Gabe is on the phone with Sven, so he will find out."

She met Lucifer at the bottom of the stairs. "Did Tom really sell his own family out for a little bit of power?" Did family mean anything to anyone anymore?

How could Tom hurt this family?

"He did, and it's not just a little bit of power. Without the Alliance, the vampires would have the opportunity to do whatever they choose to do." He walked past her, into the main room.

"Maybe he made a mistake. On Thanksgiving some men came here with guns, and Tom helped to kill them. Do you think he changed his mind? That he never meant—"

"No. The timing hadn't been right, so he did what he had to do at the time to convince Gabe of his allegiance. There's money and power involved. He doesn't give a shit about anyone but himself. He had to wait until Sven and Roger arrived before he made an attempt to kill anyone."

"I see." She really didn't. Was it true? Was he really Satan? "How do you know all of this?"

Lucifer turned to face her. "You know the answer to that if you are willing to believe it." He looked over her head. She could tell by the look on his face that someone was

standing behind her. She was afraid to turn around and see who it was.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said to the entity behind her. He looked back at her. “It’s always something, isn’t it? Enjoy the Hummer.”

He vanished.

She stared at the place he had been standing for several seconds, then she turned to look behind her. There was nothing there. All the energy of the room had dissipated into nothing.

A chill ran down her spine. Could he really be Satan?

All of a sudden the eerie silence of the basement freaked her out. She practically ran back up the stairs. Now graced with the knowledge that vampires and demons could literally pop in and out whenever they chose, she felt as though she were trapped in a scary movie.

She found Gabe in the kitchen on the phone, leaning against the kitchen counter with his back to the window.

“We’ll be there within the hour.”

Chris started to say something, but Gabe held his hand up for silence.

“Keep Mike out of the room. We don’t need any complications from him. We’ll be there soon.” Gabe shut his phone.

“Let me guess. You know where Tom is?”

He cocked his head at her, refusing to answer her.

That was a bad sign. “What are you going to do when we get there?”

“Whatever it takes.”

“What does that mean?” Her heart sank, knowing full well whatever he had in mind couldn’t be good.

He held open the door for her. “As you like to say, that’s a question better left unanswered.”

Chapter Ten

Gabe tried to keep his attention on the road as he listened to Chris sniffing. She was trying so hard to keep her crying a secret, he was loath to bring it up. The family she had held in such high regard was falling apart before her eyes. Gabe couldn't understand the pain she was experiencing. In all his years, those closest to him had stayed loyal.

Chris had remained strong through everything she had learned tonight, though Gabe was certain the closer they got to their destination, the more she felt Tom's betrayal. Not to mention what Gabe would be forced to do to Tom if the Alliance found him guilty—which in all likelihood they would.

He couldn't sit and ignore her pain any longer.

He reached over and took her hand in his, giving it a tight squeeze. "Do you need to talk about it?"

She sniffed. "No."

He felt such an overwhelming need to comfort and protect her. Anger at Tom for every lousy thing he had done coiled tight in his stomach. The bastard would pay for hurting her. She'd done everything in her power to gain the love and trust of her family, and Tom was there to prove just how fickle and disgusting people could be.

"Everything will work out," he said, trying to reassure her. He knew damn well it wouldn't work out the way she hoped. Her life would be changed forever.

She absently ran her thumb over his fingers. That simple action broke a barrier between them. He tightened his grip. He would help her through this. Too many people had disappeared in her life. She didn't deserve this pain.

He kept his attention on the road, surprised at the turn this case had taken. He'd never mended fences for people when he had finished with a case. He'd never felt the need.

Chris needed someone concrete in her life.

She had Mike and Stephen.

Hell, even Dave would be gone soon. It wouldn't be long before the Alliance called him in for training.

"When did you know what you were?"

Her question took him off guard. "What do you mean?"

"When did you know you were a vampire? Did someone tell you? Explain it to you?"

Her question ran so much deeper than she wanted to admit. She was asking about herself. He fleetingly wondered if he should enlighten her as to what she was, but until he was completely sure he couldn't go there. The truth could set her over the edge in her current condition. He had no choice but to wait until he was certain.

"I was born to it. My father is a vampire and my mother is completely human, making me the only half-vampire in this world. They told me when I was about twelve, when changes in my body began taking place. All of my vampiric tendencies came during puberty. You see, vampires do not reproduce. Lucifer had a hand in creating me. It's a long story."

He turned to her, glimpsing a second of shock that shadowed her face. She would

have noticed changes during her puberty as well.

“Like your eyes changing color?”

“Yes. When I became angry or highly emotional, my eyes started changing to white. That started when I was thirteen.”

“White? Yes, I remember your eyes going white. How was your father able to have children?”

“Lucifer used me as bait. He made it possible.”

“Used you as bait?”

He didn’t want to get into it, but found himself saying, “Lucifer wanted my father on his side, to join his demonic ranks. Suffice to say, it didn’t work. As I said, it’s a long story.”

“Best told over a couple of beers?”

He smiled. “Exactly.”

“How is it that you can talk to me in my head, but the other vampires can’t?”

That was a mixture of the powers he inherited from his dad, and the powers he had bartered for from Luc. “Inherited powers,” was all he would say.

“You can hear what I’m thinking?”

“No. I can make you hear me if we’re in close proximity, but you can’t get into my mind nor can I hear your thoughts.”

He waited for another question, but none were forthcoming. He knew she feared that she might give too much away in her quest for answers.

The address Sven had given them took them to a small ranch-style house. The word quaint came to mind. Not exactly the house he’d imagined Dave living in.

“This is Dave’s house,” Chris said when he turned into the drive.

“I know.” Mike stood on the front porch smoking a cigarette. “I didn’t know Mike smoked.”

“He only smokes when he’s upset.” She turned to him, still holding his hand. “Why are we at Dave’s house?”

“This is where Tom was found.”

“And Dave?”

“He’s here as well.” The insinuation was not lost on Chris. She fell silent, the knowledge of Dave’s betrayal sinking in.

Gabe turned off the Hummer and gave her hand a slight squeeze before he let go and got out of the Hummer. He knew she had more questions, but they would have to wait.

“Whose Hummer?” Mike asked as they walked up to the porch.

“Mine. Just a present from some old vampire Gabe knows.”

“Some vampire gave you a Hummer?”

Mike’s look spoke volumes. Chris rolled her eyes. “Oh, will you give me a break? He’s just some demented vampire who liked my bubbly personality.”

Gabe didn’t correct her. If she truly wanted to deceive herself about Lucifer, so be it. He did notice she didn’t mention the *vampire’s* name. “Everyone inside?”

“You know, it’s seriously pissing me off you had Sven kick me out. I think I deserve the right to beat the living shit out of Tom.”

Gabe shook his head at the younger man. “This is in the hands of the Alliance now.”

“I think this should be a local disturbance. I don’t believe the Alliance should have any pull in this matter.”

“Tom tried having you killed so the Alliance would come and investigate. Then he was going to try and kill us. He wants power, Mike. People like that don’t change.” He gave Mike a hard look. “Stay outside.”

He went to the front door, pausing before he opened it. He turned around to find Chris hot on his heels. He shook his head. “Not this time, half-pint.”

“Half-pint?” She tried stopping him. “But Gabe—”

“I’m sorry, Chris.”

He walked into the house and locked the door behind him. Knowing her, she would just barge in.

He found everyone sitting in the living room. The first thing he noticed was that Jess and Stephen were missing. He’d have to talk to Sven about that later so they could find their whereabouts. Everyone needed to be accounted for.

He didn’t wait for anyone to speak. He was tired of this bullshit. He’d let these vamps strike one too many times without retaliating. His patience had worn thin.

“Okay, Tom. What’s the deal here? You’re the one that called the Alliance for help with finding a kink in the armor, fully knowing you were that kink. Why didn’t you just kill them and be done with it? Three questions need to be answered. Number one, why did you wait to try and kill Mike and Stephen? Just to get the Alliance here? Two, who were you going to get to kill the vampires the Alliance sent in, and how long have you been working with Jeremy’s hunters?”

Gabe took a perch on the armrest of the couch. Tom sat in a chair by the window. Dave sat between Sven and Roger on the other couch.

“Do you honestly expect me to sit here and answer your questions? At what—”

Gabe interrupted Tom, unable to listen to his crap without killing him. “Where’s Jess and Stephen?” he asked Sven.

“They weren’t at the house when the fighting broke out. We don’t know where they are.”

Stephen must be trailing Jess. The love shared between Jess and Tom was no secret. He looked back at Tom. The man was a worm. He’d been willing to kill those close to him to achieve a bit of power. “Did you honestly believe you would overthrow the Alliance?”

“One of these days that vanity of yours will be your downfall.”

Gabe nodded. “You’re probably right, Tom. Just as your inadequate quest for power was yours. Standing on the outside looking in, your life looked pretty comfortable. You were surrounded by people who loved you. Are you just one of those people who will never have enough?”

“I doubt someone like you could ever understand,” Tom said, sitting on the edge of the couch. “You had your father, who gave you everything you wanted.”

Gabe shook his head. If only Tom knew. His father had done just the opposite. Gabe had had to work for everything he’d ever acquired. He’d never escape being the son of the legendary Ambrose, but he had tried his best. In the end he had been forced to accept it. “I feel sorry for you, Tom. In the end it’s always those closest to you that you hurt. At this very moment there’s a young woman outside, and before tonight, she believed you hung the stars in the sky. Now she doesn’t know what to think of you. All she wanted was your love.”

Gabe got up from the couch. He couldn’t look at Tom one more minute, or listen to

any more of his bullshit. "Now, what I'm being forced to do is going to break that young woman's heart." He turned to Sven for the verdict.

Sven didn't have to be prodded. "Guilty."

"Roger?" Gabe asked.

"Guilty."

"You're a little too late," Tom said, nodding toward the door.

Gabe turned back to him in confusion. What the hell was he talking about?

Then he felt it. Danger. Vampires. Approaching the house.

Chris.

Seconds later they heard gunshots coming from the front yard.

Sven, Gabe and Roger bounded for the door. Twenty vampires came rushing in just before they reached it. Tom had used his humans for the sake of throwing the Alliance off his trail, and now he was releasing the best of his men to start the rebellion.

Sven and Roger flanked Gabe. Sven took out his daggers from his belt. Gabe and Roger didn't use weapons.

Three vampires engaged Gabe. All three had swords, and they meant to sever his head from his body. He ducked the first swing from the tallest of the bunch, rushed him and snatched his sword, using it to deflect the blade's momentum of the other two. The sword sank into the vampire at his left. He made quick work of the injured vamp.

He moved to stand behind another vamp so quickly, the vamp became confused as to where he had gone. Using the power he had gained from Luc in a limited capacity was something he did while in Sven and Roger's company. He was ten times faster than the average vampire.

Gabe sliced the vamp's head from his shoulders. He swung around to engage the last attacker.

As Gabe brought his elbow down to connect with the remaining vampire's throat, two more attacked. One of the blades slashed through his upper arm. Gabe spun to the left, away from the attacker. He picked up a dagger that had fallen to the ground and used it on the most aggressive of the bunch, his thoughts on Chris who was outside with only Mike as protection.

He heard a muffled scream from outside, just as the two who were left came for his throat.

"That was Chris!" Sven yelled from across the room.

Gabe didn't waste any more time. He looked behind him to make sure Sven and Roger were fully occupied, then turned back to his attackers and wrapped his hands around their throats. Both vampires turned to dust. He glanced back at Sven and Roger. They hadn't seen what he had just done. If they had, they would have known about the powers Lucifer gave him.

That was not something he could allow.

Gabe rushed out of the house as Sven and Roger killed the last of the vampires.

It was nearing ten o'clock at night. There wasn't much light, as the wind had picked up and clouds littered the sky, covering the moon and stars.

The only thing he saw as he came to the road was the rubber left on the cement from a car that had peeled off. He had no doubt Mike and Chris were in that car. If only he could materialize to her side, but he'd never been physically in that car. He could only materialize to places he had once inhabited.

“Sven, come with me.” He ran to the Hummer. He rolled down the window as Sven slid into the passenger seat.

“Roger!”

“Yes,” Roger yelled from the porch.

Tom had no doubt gotten the hell out of Dodge, but this was the last of Gabe’s worries at the moment. He felt blood run down his arm from his wound. He had no time to tend to it. “Go back to Tom’s house. Wait for us there.”

“What’s the plan?” Sven asked as they tore out of the driveway.

“I need to find her.”

“What about Dave and Tom?”

“I’ll worry about them later.”

* * * *

Chris wasn’t sure if Mike was alive or not. If she relied on the myths of vampires, then his head was still securely attached to his body, which meant he was alive. If that was bullshit, and they could die by gunshots, then he was dead.

She couldn’t see a damn thing, but she could feel blood. Everywhere. They had been thrown into the trunk of a car by a bunch of vampires

She felt over Mike, trying finding a heartbeat. She couldn’t find one. She shook him. “Mike? Mike, can you hear me?”

He didn’t move.

This was not good. She couldn’t panic now. Not in a trunk, with her best friend bleeding to death or possibly dead already.

She wouldn’t cry. She had to think of what she would do next. The men who took her had been vampires. She had seen the eyes of one of her attackers, and they had been completely white, just as Gabe’s had been the day she had been attacked.

Placing her hands on the lid of the trunk, she willed herself to remain calm. Gabe would help them. Somehow he would make things right. *That’s what he does. It’s his job.*

The car took a hard left turn, which caused Mike’s body to roll on top of hers. He was dead weight, and she couldn’t get him off of her. The trunk was too small to maneuver, and she was starting to get claustrophobic. She couldn’t breathe with him on top of her. She tried breathing slower and deeper, but it didn’t work.

And the blood. It was running over her arms, her neck. She could feel his weight pressing down on her lungs. She started to hyperventilate.

She tried positioning herself better and felt something that nearly made her heart stop.

Her cell phone.

Would it work in a closed trunk? At least she could open it and use the little bit of light it provided to get a better look at Mike. She yanked it off her belt, brought it around Mike’s body and flipped it open. What she saw was debilitating.

The soft blue light from the phone pad showed how much blood Mike had lost. His head hung over her left shoulder, so she couldn’t see his face. His arms, her arms, and his back were saturated in blood.

Shit, she didn’t have Gabe’s number. What the hell was she going to do, and who could she call?

She dialed Stephen’s number, but no one answered. She tried dialing Jess’s, but that

didn't work, either. *Please, please, God help me*, she prayed. What could she do? *Please, God, don't let Mike die.*

She recalled how Gabe could say things to her and she could "hear" them. So she thought of him and tried communicating with him to call her cell phone. *Gabe, call my cell. I need you. Call my cell.*

He'd told her he couldn't communicate with her by thought when they weren't close, but if he felt something of a nudge from her, anything, she'd be grateful. She held the volume button down so the phone was now on vibrate. She couldn't be certain that the vampires could hear the phone over the car, but their hearing was excellent, so she didn't doubt it. She tried to keep her breathing normal, but it wasn't working. The more she tried to breathe normally, the more erratic breathing became.

She waited and she prayed. He had effectively gotten into her head at the bar. Why couldn't she hear him now? Were they too far apart? He knew she had her phone on her.

Her phone vibrated, causing her heart to leap into her throat. She pressed the button to take the call. "Gabe?"

"Where are you?"

Oh, thank God! She whispered frantically into the phone, "I don't know. I'm in a trunk with Mike. He's seriously hurt. Is he dead? Please tell me he's okay, Gabe. Please. He's my best friend. There's blood everywhere." She tried to take a deep breath, but it was impossible with Mike's weight crushing her.

"Are you hurt? We heard gunshots, Chris. What happened?" he asked in a calm voice, as if he were trying to keep her from going over the edge.

Too late.

"Gabe, what do I do? It's not me, it's Mike. He's not moving, and unfortunately, he's on top of me. It's getting hard to breathe. I can't breathe, Gabe!"

"We're on our way. Try to move him, Chris; you have the strength. You know you do. Now, are you hurt? Were you shot?"

"Mike was shot. Not me. Mike! He's going to die!"

"Hon, just relax, we're on our way. I want to know if you're hurt. You can't help Mike if you're injured. The gunshots won't kill him, I promise."

Chris tried to answer him, but she couldn't.

"Chris?"

She was able to move Mike a little to the left. "No. I'm not hurt," she croaked. She tried not to cry.

"Okay, I'm going to stay on the phone with you. When they stop the car put the phone in your pocket—"

"I'll have to keep the phone open for it to stay on, and it won't fit."

"Make it fit. Just keep it on so I can figure out where you are. Also, do me a favor. Don't antagonize them. Please. Do you understand me?"

"I think I'm too scared to antagonize them."

She started to say more, but the car shut off. She stuffed the phone in her pocket.

Five minutes later, the trunk still hadn't opened. All sorts of scenarios ran through her mind. They were going to run the car off of a cliff. They were going to set fire to it in a parking lot. They were going to fire machine guns at the trunk.

She whispered toward the phone, "I think they are going to roll us off a cliff or something, Gabe. Set fire to the car—something. It's been five minutes and nothing's

happened. I wonder if they are just going to leave us to die?"

Or was Mike already dead? Gabe said gunshots wouldn't kill him, but he wasn't breathing or moving at all.

She pushed that thought aside. She couldn't hear what Gabe had to say, because her phone was in her pocket, and she didn't want to risk taking it out. Murphy's Law would bring those vamps back just as she was holding her phone.

"I can't hear you, but it's making me feel better to know you can hear me." She tried taking her mind off of eminent death. She conjured up a picture of Mike, Stephen, Dave and herself playing football.

That didn't work.

She brought up the image of Gabe standing in front of the shower with no clothes on.

That worked a little.

She heard a key opening the trunk. A flood of light momentarily blinded her.

Someone moved Mike, then rough hands picked her up and pulled her out of the trunk. When her eyes finally adjusted, she winced. There were five vampires standing there, and all had white eyes.

Not good. Odds were they weren't overly happy.

"What, it takes five of you to apprehend one small woman?" She spoke as loud as she could without seeming obvious, but she wanted Gabe to hear her, and she wanted him to know how many they were up against. Then she recalled his asking her not to antagonize them. Oops. "Where are we?"

"Does it matter when you're going to die, anyway?" the biggest vampire asked.

That would be a big *no*. "Well, when you put it that way, I'm guessing not."

"Patrick, you owe me for the last hit. I get her."

She turned to look at the slender blond man who had said that.

"What's that supposed to mean? You get me?" She glanced around at the surroundings and tried to figure out where they were. "What are we in, a football stadium? Local high school?" Shit. The blond vampire started walking toward her. These were such vague hints of her whereabouts, Gabe would have no idea where to start looking. She held out her hand in an effort to stop him. "I seriously wouldn't do what you are about to do."

He laughed. "Why not?"

"No good reason comes to mind, so if you give me a few minutes, I promise to come up with one."

When he kept advancing she pulled out her cell phone. "Ambrose," she said, knowing full well the impact that name would have on these vampires. "I'm going to die, but here's the thing—" The vamp stopped in mid step with a look of disbelief on his face. "The vamp who is going to kill me is six-one or two, blond-blond, as in white blond, and he has a black dragon tattoo covering part of his neck. Make sure when you kill him that he suffers tremendously."

She could see the doubt in the vampires' expressions.

"Damn it, Chris, we don't know where you are yet!" Gabe said from the other end.

"I know, but my time is up."

The vampire closed the distance between them and took the phone from her hand. She heard Gabe yell her name.

"Big mistake, bitch. Pain doesn't scare me, and neither does the Alliance."

The vampire threw her phone to the ground.
It broke into a dozen pieces.

* * * *

“Son of a bitch!”

Sven closed his eyes. Though he hadn’t been holding the phone, Gabe knew he’d heard every word that had been spoken.

“Lucifer!”

Sven snapped his head toward Gabe. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Saving Chris.”

Gabe called out for Satan again, this time getting an agitated “*I’m already there*” in his head. Gabe had no idea what this was going to cost him, but he would have given anything for Lucifer’s help. Gabe had heard the vampire threaten Chris, and he’d be damned if he allowed the bastard to hurt her.

And damned he was.

“Do not call on him. You will indebt yourself—”

Gabe growled, “Drop it, Sven, and drop it now. Go back to Tom’s house.”

Sven returned his gaze to the road and shook his head. “It’s your death.”

* * * *

Chris was going to save herself the embarrassment of fighting. It would be futile, and she would rather a quick death than a drawn-out spectacle.

So she braced herself, hoping she wouldn’t die crying like a baby or whining like a bitch.

“I give you a Hummer, and you already let someone borrow it?”

Chris spun around. Standing behind her was Lucifer. She’d never been so glad to see someone in all her life. She launched herself at him, putting her head on his chest and giving him a bear hug. “I am *so* glad to see you.”

“You always say things to me that no one has ever said before. And here you are covered in blood and getting it all over me. I can’t believe I’m allowing this.”

She let go of him and turned to see the vampires backing away. She caught sight of the car and looked back to Lucifer. “I think they killed Mike,” she said, starting for the car. He grabbed her arm.

“Mike’s not dead, and trust me, you don’t want to be around when he wakes up.” He handed her keys. “Close the trunk, get in the car and go to Tom’s old place.”

“I don’t know where I am,” she answered apologetically.

“Take a right out of this parking lot and you’ll know where to go.”

“You want me to leave Mike in the trunk?” How could she do that? He was her best friend. Her brother.

“He’s a vampire who’s seriously injured. Yes. Leave him in the trunk.” Luc waved his hand, and her cell phone, which had just been in a million pieces, was now good as new. He handed it to her.

“Good point. Okay.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Thanks.” She started walking to the car and couldn’t help but add, “You’re a real angel.”

Lucifer turned his attention to the vampires, shaking his head. “I save her life and she

insults me.”

* * * *

Chris pulled into the driveway at one in the morning. Two turns ago she had heard thumping coming from the trunk. Part of her really wanted to pull over and see if she could help, while the other part knew what *would* help, and she just wasn’t going there.

Gabe was waiting at the end of the driveway with Roger, whom she hadn’t spoken to yet. The man looked completely unapproachable.

Gabe walked up to the window and she rolled it down.

“Jesus, are you all right? Are you hurt?” He tried to open the door, but she shook her head. She didn’t want to get out of the car.

A loud thump came from the trunk.

“Mike?”

“Yep. I decided to leave him back there. That’s what Sexy told me to do, and it sounded like a good idea to me.”

“Sexy?” Gabe asked. “Please tell me you’re not referring to who I think you are referring to.”

She gave him a small smile. “The one and only.”

“Christ.”

“Not even close.”

He winced and headed to the trunk. She rolled up the windows and locked the doors. When she finally got a good look at Mike, she cringed. He did *not* look good. Gabe all but carried him into the house. She couldn’t help but wonder what they were going to do for him. She rolled the window back down and waved at Roger.

“What are they going to do? It’s not like you can order takeout for that kind of shit.”

Roger raised an eyebrow. The gesture reminded her of Gabe. “He will feed off of Gabe.”

So they did feed off members of their own sex. “Are you serious? Is he going to be okay?”

“Gabe will help him. Out of everyone here, Gabe is the strongest.”

Roger stepped back as she got out of the car. “Speaking of blood and all, what are we going to do with this car? It looks like someone was gunned down in there.”

“I will take care of it.”

Roger was just as bad as Gabe at vague answers, if not worse. “You take the term ‘man of few words’ to a whole new level.”

Chris left Roger to do whatever it was he did and went inside the house.

She hadn’t felt this shook up since the day that man had attacked her. She felt fine until she had a few moments alone, and then the thoughts of what happened and what could have happened started sinking in. If Sexy hadn’t come along when he did, she would have been a snack for someone, and Mike would have been left in the trunk with no way to procure blood.

As if that thought wasn’t completely disturbing, she finally caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror as she was washing her hands.

She gagged. There was blood on her face, her neck, her hair. She spun around and turned on the shower. She couldn’t get undressed quick enough. When she got in the shower, it hadn’t even warmed up yet.

She picked up the loofa, lathered, and watched the pink water swirl around the drain in the white porcelain tub.

She let the water run over her for a long time. She didn't want to get out of the shower. The thought of what she had to deal with when she did was overwhelming.

She heard a knock on the door.

"Busy."

Whoever it was went away. She lathered again. Washed her hair three times. By the time she finished, her skin was slightly pink. Hell, she'd scrubbed it raw.

She began recalling the feelings she had while she was stuck in the trunk. Not knowing if Mike had died, not knowing if she could help him.

She was ashamed that she had been afraid of him, terrified of him waking up with her in the trunk, not knowing what he would have done. The visions she had of Mike, his eyes blazing pure white and attacking her, had brought out the coward in her. She tried pushing those thoughts away.

"Chris?"

"I'll be out in a minute." She turned the water off and picked up a towel from the counter. What would Mike have done if their situations had been reversed? Would he have done what she had, allowing fear to manipulate his every thought? No, he would have helped her in any way he could, right up to offering a vein.

"Do you have any clothes?"

It was Gabe. She looked at the clothes on the floor. They were a bloody, crumpled mess. "No, I don't."

"I'll go get something out of Jess's closet."

She went to the door and leaned her left shoulder against it. "Are you mad at me?" He didn't sound like himself. Normally smooth and deep, his voice now carried a hint of hysteria. He spoke too quickly and too forcefully.

"Why would I be mad at you? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Only that I had been afraid of my own friend. Had he heard her thoughts? Did he know how she had felt about her own brother? "No."

"You handled yourself well."

No, I didn't. She tilted her head as a thought occurred to her. "You called him, didn't you?" she asked, referring to Sexy.

No one answered.

"Gabe? Do you owe him something?"

Again, no one answered.

Now she felt like a liability to Gabe. What would he have to do, or pay, for Sexy's help?

She went to the bathroom counter and picked up her cell that she had to clean and flipped it open. She didn't know why or how, but just as she knew it would be, his name was on her contacts list.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

He wasn't a demented vampire. He had too much power to be a vampire.

She closed her eyes. This just wasn't happening. How could she accept the fact that she knew Lucifer? How could that good-looking man be the epitome of evil in this world?

She took a deep breath and clicked the send button.

He answered with one simple word. "No."

She stuttered. "N-no, what?"

"You don't want to be a liability to Gabe, so you were going to ask me if you could pay whatever it is I am asking for my services. The answer is no. You have nothing I want."

He hung up.

She was flabbergasted. She couldn't believe she had actually thanked him for coming to her rescue. Thinking he had come to help her out of friendship. What a joke.

She snapped her phone shut and pulled her towel tighter around her. Wait till she saw him again. She was going to give him a serious piece of her mind.

No, really, who was she kidding? She wasn't going to say shit to him. Only an idiot would make an enemy of Satan. His powers astounded her. How had he known what was in her thoughts?

She waited in the bathroom for five more minutes, and Gabe still hadn't returned, so she left the bathroom to go to Jess's room herself.

The bathroom was two doors down from Jess's room. When she opened the door to the bedroom, she caught Gabe standing at the closet. He had a shirt in his hand, but no slacks. He looked ... lost.

"She folds them up and puts them in her drawers."

She ignored him and went to the dresser. He probably thought she was hitting on him again as she paraded around in a towel, but this was the one time she could care less about his six-pack abs.

Well, she wouldn't beat him away with a stick, anyway.

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have left you outside."

"Please, let's not play the blame game. I don't have the patience for it." She picked out a pair of jeans and held out her hand for the shirt. He gave it to her.

"Are you okay?" she asked, finally getting a good look at him. "You don't look right." He looked pale and tired. The rush in his voice had disappeared.

"I'm fine, thank you." He inclined his head and left the room.

She almost went after him, but decided it would be best to get dressed first. She dropped the towel and pulled the shirt on over her head. A collared blue shirt that had black buttons. She didn't have a bra, and she certainly wasn't borrowing that from Jess.

When she turned to the bed to pick up the jeans, the door opened.

She turned to face Gabe and held the jeans out in front of her. "What the hell are you doing?"

Shock didn't begin to describe what she was feeling. The look on his face was unmistakable.

He didn't hesitate with his answer.

"You."

Chapter Eleven

“Me?” Chris looked around the room. Nope. There was no one else he could be talking to.

“You.” Gabe’s eyes devoured her. Made her feel like what little clothes she had on didn’t exist. How many times had she wanted him to look at her that way? Only now he seemed different. Possessed.

She blinked. “Here?”

He locked the door and took a step toward her. “Now.”

She tried backing away, only to find her legs hitting the side of the bed. Jesus help her, there was no retreat to be found.

“In Jess’s bed?” Shouldn’t they be worried about an attack? Should they be the one’s attacking? Where were the others? Where was Tom? She wasn’t sure this was the appropriate time for sex.

He started unbuttoning his shirt as he advanced on her. “Bed, floor, chair, desk or dresser—does it really matter?”

Well, when you put it that way.

No.

She moved to the side of the bed and tried backing up that way. Was sex with a vampire different? Would it hurt?

Fucking right, it’ll hurt. He isn’t human!

Then again, it might be better with a vampire. Lord knew the man looked good enough to eat. The seductive smile on his face held the promise of pleasure, but the intense set of his jaw and shoulders promised pain.

“Are you afraid of me, Chris?” He hesitated in his advance.

“A little,” she answered honestly. Especially because he looked like he was ready to pounce on her. Although, now that her brain had started working again, she realized she had been wanting him to pounce on her for days now.

So why was she suddenly afraid?

As he moved forward and she witnessed his eyes changing color, she quickly realized why her heart was slamming against her chest.

He was concentrated solely on her, and with those predatory light blue eyes turning white, he didn’t look human. When he looked like this, it amazed her that she ever raised her voice to him or argued with him. She must be insane. Who would go toe-to-toe with this man?

His messy black hair fell around his eyes, and the stubble covering the lower half of his face made him look sexual. Wild.

Unmanageable.

Watching him stalk toward her—shit, just looking at him—made her wet.

He tossed his shirt to the floor. His gaze never leaving her, he began unbuttoning his jeans.

Dear God, there were muscles on his body that she had never known could exist on a man.

She recalled what Mike had said the first night she had met Gabe.

He's the type I warned you about...

No wonder. With his face covered in black stubble, and his body rippling with corded muscles, he looked like a convicted felon on a bad day. He made pacts with Satan. He was a mercenary. He was a powerful vampire. He wasn't exactly the type you brought home to introduce to the family.

He wasn't the type you kicked out of bed, either.

She didn't move when he stopped in front of her. She didn't have anywhere to go. Not that she could make her legs move if she did.

Gabe had no such inhibitions. He pulled her shirt over her head, bent down, wrapped his hand in her hair, and pulled to the point of pain. When he lowered his mouth to hers, she closed her eyes, allowing him take her as roughly as he wanted.

She brought her hands to his chest, suddenly trying to hold him back. His intensity was beginning to frighten her. His fangs brushed against her tongue, and she tasted blood. Would he unintentionally hurt her?

No. He wouldn't. She trusted him.

She relaxed against him and let her hands roam down his body just as she had in her dreams. In her fantasies she hadn't held herself back, exploring his body as though they had all the time in the world. When her fingers brushed against the top of his unbuttoned jeans, she slid her hands inside, wrapped her hands around his arousal, sliding down the length of him until she cupped his sac.

He moaned against her mouth.

She began to remove his pants with her free hand, but once he realized what she was doing, their clothes were gone. Instantly.

Before she could contemplate how he had vanished their clothing, he let go of her hair and trailed kisses down her neck, between her breasts, on the flat of her stomach. She laced her hands through his hair as her entire body tingled from his caresses.

Knowing where he was going next, she actually tightened in anticipation.

This might very well be their only time together. The heads of the Alliance were here, and once they had finished their job they were leaving. She intended to savor every lick, stroke and nibble.

When he ran the tip of his tongue over her clit, she put her hands on the sides of his head to press him closer. The soft warmth of his tongue invaded the tender folds of her flesh. She parted her legs for him as best she could, thrusting forward to meet his tongue. As he stroked her with long, languid licks of that sinful tongue of his, she thought she'd come in seconds. Aching to draw out the pleasure, she forced herself to hold her orgasm back.

He slid two fingers inside of her. She bent her knees until she was half leaning, half sitting on the side of the bed. Her hands fisted in his hair.

This was what she had wanted since she'd seen him that first night, standing next to his bike with his helmet under his arm. She'd always wanted someone to accept her for what she was, and somehow she'd known he would. Just as she accepted his darker side.

Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes as Gabe teased her with his tongue unmercifully. He ran circles around her clit while his fingers worked a steady rhythm inside her, making it difficult to hold back her orgasm as she hoped to do. In her dream they had taken their time, but the dream had never felt like the real thing. It was so difficult not to succumb to what her body demanded.

“Gabe...” she warned. She looked down at him.

His eyes were closed, as if he were savoring the taste of her.

“Beautiful,” he whispered against her tender flesh. Wrapping his hands on the back of her legs, he brought her closer while opening his eyes and bringing his gaze to hers. She held the darker side of herself back, trying to keep her emotions under control. Not being able to do so, she closed her eyes so he wouldn’t find the truth in their color.

As much as she enjoyed what he was doing, his fingers caressing her skin, his mouth taking her to a euphoria she’d never known, her body wanted more.

“I want to feel you inside me,” she whispered.

He abruptly stood up, so fast that she barely saw him move. He flipped her onto her stomach on the mattress. Her feet were still touching the floor, the right side of her face was pressed into the comforter.

Gabe ran his hands up her back, letting them trail back down again, until he cupped her ass. The position was one of submission. Her knees moved further apart of their own volition. She practically begged him to take her from behind.

He leaned down and the mattress depressed beneath his weight. “I need you, Chris,” he whispered next to her ear.

Before she knew what he was doing she felt a sharp pain on the left side of her neck the same moment he drove himself inside of her.

It was both painful and erotic. Violent and forceful. Gabe wrapped his right arm around her waist, bringing her up from the mattress, which allowed him to penetrate deeper. The feel of his cock inside her, stretching her, nearly sent her over the edge. She gritted her teeth, moaning as he thrust into her.

Don’t come yet. Don’t come.

Her legs were entwined with his, his large thighs between hers. He made lazy circles with his hips with enough force to grind her clit into the mattress. Each thrust had her seeing stars. Beyond the physical contact, she’d never felt this close to another person. She trusted him with her life. Her secret.

His bite began to sting her. “Gabe...”

He raised his head immediately, but kept his arms around her. “Did I hurt you? I’m sorry.”

He pulled out and turned her over to face him. She scooted up on the bed as he crawled onto the mattress, bracing himself over her.

His eyes were white, their ethereal appearance sending goose bumps all over her body. She reached up, placing her hands on the back of his head, bringing his lips to hers. He pulled back, asking again, “Did I hurt you?”

“Just a little.” She reached down and guided his cock into her. Pain or not, she wouldn’t trade this time and experience with him for anything.

He moaned, bringing his forehead to hers. “Chris. Christ, I didn’t mean for this to—”

“Don’t you dare say it.” Not now. Not when their bodies moved together so perfectly. He might not have meant it to happen quite this way, so unexpected after what had transpired earlier. But she needed this. She needed *him* right now, not some misplaced sense of honor.

His thrusts were slow and steady. The emotion in his voice had spoken of his need. If anyone understood what it was like to need another person, it was she. She was all too aware of what it was like to be alone. To perform his job to the best of his ability he made

a huge sacrifice.

Family.

He needed her right now, just as much as she needed him. She'd do anything she could to make him feel whole, if only for a little while.

For as long as he'd let her.

She ran her hands over his back, loving the feel of his muscles as they played under her palms. In lieu of biting her neck, he licked, nibbled and kissed a path from her earlobe to the hollow in her throat. Tenderly, as if he enjoyed taking his time with her.

For some masochistic reason, she wanted to feel his fangs penetrate her skin. To feel the sting as he bit her.

She wanted the pain and the rush it brought. The intimacy it created.

His biting her produced a sensual viciousness that made her past sexual experiences seem like child's play. It spoke to the darkness she carried inside of her—a darkness she had buried a long time ago.

Bending her right leg, she brought it over his hip as he thrust in and out. "Bite me again," she whispered.

"Chris—"

"Please."

She winced as he did as she asked. It was only then that she could feel the power he held over her, the tapped strength he held in check as his fangs took what the animal in him needed. She wanted to be the one to nourish him in this capacity. The thought of him taking from another infuriated her.

She could feel herself getting lightheaded, yet she didn't want him to stop.

He began thrusting harder as she came closer to climax, and she knew she couldn't hold back much longer.

He retracted his fangs and licked her neck where he'd bitten her. He pulled away, bracing himself up until he could look into her eyes. God, he was beautiful. Perfect.

Then again, what would one expect from the son of an angel? He was practically Heaven-sent.

With his gaze boring into hers, he drove into her, and she couldn't hold back any longer. Her orgasm hit her hard. Crashing through her in waves of sensation. Pleasure. Elation. Completeness. Belonging.

She brought her legs up, wrapping them around him as she felt the tremors course through her. She saw him clench his teeth and close his eyes as he experienced his own orgasm.

She never wanted to let him go.

She came up to her elbows and nuzzled his neck as he came inside her. Wrapping his right hand in her hair, nuzzling into her neck, he whispered her name.

Chris lay back and ran her hand down from his back to his left hip. Absentmindedly, she drew circles on his hip with her index finger. Still inside her, stretching her deliciously, Gabe held himself above her. She watched his eyes gain back their light blue color. It was both a terrifying, yet awe-inspiring sight.

Were her own doing something similar? She didn't want the moment to end or the seriousness of the night brought back to them. Raking her nails up his left side, she looked up at him and grinned. "After a performance like that, this better not be a one-night stand."

He bent his head down for a kiss, nibbling her lower lip. "I'm just warming up."

* * * *

Chris's body felt like a warm piece of Jell-O. The last thing she wanted to do was leave the warm cocoon she and Gabe had created under the blankets, but she couldn't listen to her stomach growl any longer. The last thing she had eaten had been two bites of toast this morning—er, last evening.

She slipped out of bed without waking him and tiptoed to the dresser. She picked out a comfy-looking pair of gray sweats, got dressed and headed downstairs.

Gabriel MacPherson was something else. Whether he left, stayed, married her or turned gay, she'd never regret sleeping with him. Ever. The need in that man's touch nearly made her cry. He was lonely, and she knew lonely better than any other soul in the house.

She went to the kitchen, made a sandwich and grabbed a Pepsi. Settling in the upstairs living room, she turned on the television and sat cross-legged on the couch with her plate on her lap. It wasn't the most comfortable couch, nor was she supposed to eat in this room, but she didn't want to disturb anyone downstairs.

"I heard about Mike and came to see how he was doing."

Chris put a hand to her chest in a weak attempt to keep her heart from falling out. She turned around. Sitting in one of the chairs by the window was Jess. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"I'm sorry."

Chris put her plate on the coffee table and turned her attention to Jess. "Who told you about Mike?"

"Gabe. He called me earlier and said you would all be at the house." Jess got up from the chair and stood in front of the window. She had on black slacks and a white wrap-around blouse. Her short, blond hair was perfectly styled.

It was hard to imagine that Jess had gone out last night for blood. She was so put-together, looked so much like a soccer mom. And yet she had a darkness inside herself that hungered for blood. Had she fed off a man? Did Tom and Jess get jealous?

It was getting lighter outside. A hint of aqua blue and lime green tinted the horizon. It was odd to see Jess standing there with the light only a breath away.

"Where have you been?" Chris had been under the impression that Jess had run off with Tom. Did she know what transpired last night with him? If she wasn't aware, Chris wasn't sure she should be the one to tell her.

Jess only shrugged.

Chris looked at the television. "How is Mike? Have you seen him?"

"He's still up. Do you want—"

"No," Chris said, interrupting her. "He's okay, then?" Chris couldn't meet Jess's eyes. There was no way she could face Mike. Not after she had treated him like an animal.

"He understands, Chris."

Chris got up to take her plate of uneaten food into the kitchen. She didn't want to talk about this. That seemed to be the story of her life. Don't think about it and don't mention it and it will go away. If only it were that simple.

Jess followed her. "Chris—"

“You don’t know what I did. You weren’t there.”

“Roger told me what happened. Chris, Mike understands. The longer you avoid him, the harder it’s going to be to face him.”

Chris shook her head, turning to look out of the kitchen window. “If I was him, I wouldn’t speak to me. I was terrified of him. I didn’t know what to do, so I did nothing. Absolutely nothing. My best friend, for all I knew, lay dying on me, and all I could concern myself with was whether he would wake up and attack me.”

Chris fell silent as she watched the sun rise over the pine trees that stood on either side of the driveway. There wasn’t anything else to say.

“Well, I’m going upstairs. I need to get some sleep. So much has happened.”

Jess started to leave until Chris remembered Gabe was upstairs in her bed. Heat crept up her neck and settled in her cheeks. For the love of God, she’d had sex in Jess’s room on her bed. Awkward.

“Wait,” Chris said, holding out her hand. “Um, I could use some company.”

Jess frowned at her. “What’s wrong?”

Chris tried to look as nonchalant as possible, only she knew Jess knew her better than that. “Nothing,” she said with a shrug. “I was ... uh ... are you okay? Do you know about Tom, then?”

“I have to get some sleep, Chris. I don’t do too well during the day.” She tilted her head toward the window and the rising sun and kept walking.

Chris had followed Jess to the hallway. Just as she left the kitchen, she noticed Mike standing in the doorway to the stairs leading to the basement. Jess had her hand on the banister of the staircase, leading upstairs, then she came to a stop.

Chris stood frozen between the two.

She couldn’t let Jess go upstairs, yet at the same time she wanted to bolt from the room. She wasn’t ready to face Mike just yet.

Jess seized on the truth quickly and winked at her. “Gabe is upstairs, isn’t he? Is that why you’re trying to keep me down here?” Jess asked with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

Mike answered, completely oblivious to what they were talking about. “No, he’s not upstairs. He left. He had to feed before sunup. There was no way he could have gone the day without going out. I felt pretty bad, because I took a lot of blood, and it left him weak.”

The silence that followed told Mike more about the situation than a detailed, double-spaced report would have accomplished.

Gabe had fed off of Chris. It didn’t have to be said. It was as obvious as the rising sun.

Chris smiled, held up her hands and wanted to die on the spot. To melt right into the fucking carpet. “No. It’s fine. Really.” She went back into the kitchen on wooden legs, wishing she were invisible and wanting to slam every dish onto the floor until the place was littered with glass.

It fucking figured. She should have known. That he hadn’t wanted her before had never crossed her mind. The only reason he had come to her was because he had nowhere else to go for blood. She had been a convenient feed. A one-stop shop for sustenance.

Then why had it felt so real? Had she imagined his feelings for her?

“That son of a bitch,” Chris muttered under her breath.

“Chris, I’m sorry,” Jess said from the hallway.

"Can I please be hurt and pissed off in private? A moment to myself? Or does everyone have to witness my embarrassment?" It was obvious to everyone what Gabe had done. Used her. And dumb her, she had enjoyed every minute of it.

To the point of offering him *seconds!*

And why? Because he looked good naked?

"That son of a bitch!" she yelled louder. Who the hell did he think he was, using her like some common whore? While she was fuming, she could hear Jess and Mike, and that pissed her off even more.

She'd noticed the change in him ... as if it wasn't really him that had come to her, but some fucked-up version of himself. Toward the end he'd seemed normal. He'd even apologized for it.

He'd known.

"Let's just leave it alone," Jess said to Mike out in the hallway.

"He hurt her," Mike shouted. "He used her!"

"We don't know what happened."

"It's obvious what happened," Mike snapped.

Too bad they couldn't figure out that she could hear every word.

"Um, hello? I can hear you." She came out of the kitchen and leaned her back against the hallway wall, keeping her eyes cast down. Not only was she embarrassed about treating Mike like an animal, now she was humiliated because Gabe had done the same to her.

Karma was a bitch.

"I didn't even break a dish, though it seriously crossed my mind," she said in a sad attempt to lighten everyone's mood.

Jess didn't miss a beat. She took a picture of her and Tom off the wall and handed it to Chris.

Chris just stared at her. "What?"

Jess shook the picture in front of her face. "Well, break it."

"Break it?"

"Break it. Apparently he's an asshole, anyway."

"Why?" Chris asked.

"It'll make you feel better."

"Oh, well then..." Chris took the picture from Jess with both hands, stepped back, and slammed it into the wall. Pieces of glass shattered everywhere. Chris handed what was left of the shattered frame back to Jess. "Thanks."

"Did it make you feel better?" Jess asked.

"No."

Jess's face fell.

"Well, maybe a little," she lied. She tried getting her emotions under control.

She had to give Gabe credit. He'd warned her.

There will never be an us, Chris. Do you understand?

She certainly did now.

Chapter Twelve

Gabe woke to an alarm clock which read 3:27 p.m. in red letters. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to figure out where in the hell he was.

He sat up in a four-poster bed, which was located in the middle of a dark blue room. There was only one window in the room, and over the glass lay dark tint. Black drapes hung partially open.

As the fog cleared, he realized he was in Tom's room.

What the hell was he doing up here? Last thing he remembered was letting Mike feed off his wrist. The poor bastard had been one cut away from the grave. He recalled stumbling up the steps...

Then he remembered Chris standing in front of the bed partially dressed. A vision of her lying underneath him. Chris moaning.

The taste of her blood...

"Oh, *shit*."

He pulled a hand over his face.

What had he done?

Damn. He'd been weak after Mike had fed from him. He hadn't been thinking clearly. He'd given in to his desires, even though he had meant to protect her from himself. He recalled gathering his wits about him and leaving the room at first. Something had overcome him in the hallway, and he'd barged back in the room with every intention of taking her. He'd allowed the darker side of himself to take the reins, though somewhere during sex her blood had controlled the hunger, and from what he could remember she'd enjoyed it.

Why wasn't she here with him? Looking back at the clock he realized he'd slept nearly nine hours.

There was something that nagged him in the back of his mind. From the moment he had bit her...

Something about the taste of her didn't make sense. If he didn't know any better he would think...

His suspicions were confirmed, even though it was just impossible. She was the furthest thing from a Nephilim as she could get. Now that he knew the truth he'd have to find out what it was about her that stopped the turn.

He climbed out of bed and searched for his cell phone. A gut feeling told him this day had started off badly and would get steadily worse. At least he knew what she was for certain now. The question was, what would he do with this information?

He couldn't find his clothes anywhere. He flashed his phone into his hand, along with his jeans and T-shirt.

He dialed Naberius's number. Naberius picked up on the second ring.

"Yes?" Naberius's voice never failed to surprise Gabe. The man spoke in a perpetual growl.

Then again, the man *was* a demon.

"You owe me a favor." Gabe said as he walked into the master bathroom and turned on the shower.

“What do you want?”

“I need you here within the hour. I’m in Michigan. Is that possible?”

“Are you giving me a choice?”

Gabe laughed. He knew Naberius, being a demon from the Second Angelic Revolt, was forever busy. His cell rang constantly with some form of turmoil at any given time. He hunted Nephilim, which was why Gabe needed to speak with him. If anyone knew why Chris hadn’t turned, he would be the one. “Not really.”

“Then I’ll be there within the hour, won’t I?”

“Is it possible to be half demon without being a Nephilim?”

Naberius didn’t answer him right away. “I’ve never heard of demonic offspring not turning into a Neph at the onset of puberty. Is there someone you know that this has happened to?”

The information surprised Gabe. “There is, and I would appreciate your help on this matter.”

Naberius grunted. “After this we’re even.”

Gabe shut his phone and put it on the bathroom counter. He didn’t need to tell the demon where he was. Demons had much more power than vampires. Naberius would merely follow Gabe’s energy, as the two had met many times before.

And Gabe had much more power than demons, thanks to Lucifer.

After he had finished with his shower, he quickly got dressed, flashing the clothes right onto his body. Normally he wouldn’t use his powers to do something so mundane, but he had no other choice at the moment.

Faded jeans, white T-shirt and a black sweater would work. He got dressed and headed downstairs. He had to find Chris.

If he was correct in guessing what she was, she should be informed. Immediately. It would undoubtedly explain a lot to her concerning her nature and the unexplainable events that transpired when she was younger.

It was getting to the point that most of the time she was all he thought about. If she wasn’t with him, it had an effect on his mood. The closer Chris was, the better he felt. Until last night he thought it was because she was under his protection.

Now he just wanted to be around her.

Jess was ascending the stairs. Hopefully she had just arrived and had no idea that he had been in her room ... with Chris at one point. He had called Jess last night to check on her and fill her in on what had happened. Stephen had phoned. He’d tracked her last night and reported no wrong doing on her part. She’d only fed, and she’d remained oblivious to Tom’s problems with the Alliance. Gabe had called her before he helped Mike. After he let Mike feed from him, he didn’t remember much.

Just as she passed him he asked, “How are you doing this morning?” Jess had been with Tom for decades. Someone would have told her everything by now. This betrayal must hurt her deeply. Stephen must have spoken to her last night about Tom.

She walked up one step above him, turned and slapped him across the face.

She was no lightweight. His cheek stung from her assault.

“Okay, now that I’m sure how Sven feels most days, can you tell me why you did that?”

“Because you’re a pig.”

“You do know Sven is the tall blond one, right?”

Jess cocked her head at him. "You don't think you did anything wrong, do you?"

Well, that didn't sound good. Even worse, he was certain this had something to do with Chris. "Can you enlighten me?"

"It's none of my business," she said, turning around.

"Oh, no. You just made it your business." He grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him. "Now, why am I a pig?"

"Chris knows." Jess stared down at him with disgust clear in her gaze. "She knows you used her."

Gabe walked up to stand next to her. That was exactly what he didn't want to hear. "What did you just say?"

"You heard me. You went to her because she was here. She was a convenient feed."

Damn. "Is that what you told her?" His hunger had obliterated the last of the barriers he had set between them, but that wasn't what made him seek her out. Something about her drew him in, and though he might have done it differently if he'd had more control last night, he didn't regret that it had happened.

Apparently Chris did.

"It didn't have to be said. It was quite obvious. I can't believe you did that to her." Jess yanked her arm from his grip and left him standing on the stairs staring after her.

He started to follow her when his cell rang.

He looked at the ID. It was Sven. *Damn*, he didn't need his bullshit this early in the evening. Not when he had accidentally offended both women of the house. He flipped open his cell. "Where are you? You're supposed to be here."

"Houston, we have a problem."

Gabe closed his eyes. "*What?*" he growled.

"It looks like the work of our group of vamps. We know they've been working with demons, which is likely why there's no sign of a break-in. However, I can guarantee no one invited them in."

He didn't want to know. Still, he found himself saying. "Explain yourself and do it quickly."

"I'm on my way back from trying to find traces of our uninvited house guest. Especially after they left us a little present."

"What present?"

"Oh, just a few pictures."

Gabe wanted to slam the phone into something. Something that looked like Sven's face. "Pictures of what?"

"You and Chris."

Gabe tried recalling when they had been together out in public. Three different occasions. When they had left the club, and when he took her to his place and back to Tom's. It was likely when they had left the club. That was when he had been most pre-occupied because of their fight. They could have followed him without his knowing it.

"Where were we at? The club?"

Sven cleared his throat. "You two are extremely intimate in the pictures. You do this kind of shit at a club and you'd get yourself arrested."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Gabe snapped.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger. It looks like a dark blue bedroom to me. You feed off of her last night? That's the date on the pictures."

Gabe shook his head. "They couldn't have been here. That's impossible." And what the hell had they hoped to accomplish by taking pictures of him and Chris having sex? "Why would they do that?"

"My guess is they are letting us know they can infiltrate our makeshift headquarters. It's not exactly a power play on their part, but close to it."

Jess came out of her room upstairs. When she tried walking around him he held his hand out.

"You sense anyone here last night?"

She glared at him. "No. Why?"

He must not have sensed them, engaged in the pleasure he had found with Chris. That, coupled with the loss of blood, made him a prime target. But why hadn't the vampires or demons attacked?

Gabe spoke to Sven again. "I'll see you when you get here. Bring the photos."

"Plan on making a photo album?"

Gabe snapped his phone shut.

* * * *

"Shit. We're screwed."

"Relax." Chris tried reassuring Jess. The complications of a vampire gaining access to the house last night had made the rounds. If they could get into this house undetected, then Gabe and his group were up against some pretty powerful men. "I'm a wimp and the hunters didn't take me down."

"So you didn't hear the latest?"

Chris sat next to Jess on the couch in the basement with her sausage and eggs. Eight at night and she was having breakfast. Good grief. "The latest what?"

"This group of vamps that we're up against are old. Maybe even Sven's age. Plus they are working with demons."

Chris actually felt herself grow cold. If Jess was afraid, then perhaps Chris should be, too. But there wasn't much they could do about any of it. She shook the feeling off.

"When did we find out they were working with demons?" She wondered if Sexy would help them, but wouldn't demons be part of his own group?

"Last night, when they took Mike, everyone sort of figured that was the case, but this morning I heard Gabe talking about it on his phone. They broke in here last night and no one even knew about it. Not even Gabe. That means they're almost unstoppable since they're bigger in number than we are. They think it was a demon who broke in"

Well, Gabe had been busy with other things last night. Letting Mike feed from him, then feeding off of her.

Chris whistled. From what she had gathered, the older the vamp the stronger. Shit, they were screwed. "What do we do? And what did they want in the house? It's not like they tried to kill anyone."

For the first time since she had met her, Jess looked upset. "I don't know, Chris," she whispered.

Chris put her plate on the coffee table and turned to Jess. Jess seemed to be leaving something out, as if she were protecting Chris. "It'll be okay. We have great security."

"Weren't you with Gabe when they took you?"

Point taken. Chris shrugged. "Well, not in the same room exactly."

“Do you see why I’m upset? These vamps can get around them. They’ve done it twice.”

Chris immediately shook her head. “Sexy killed the vamps who took Mike and me. Certainly there are only a few others.” Gabe had never filled her in on how many vampires were in this group, and why would he? At least five of them were now dead, she was pretty sure.

“Who’s Sexy?”

Chris grumbled and pulled out her cell. She didn’t want to tell Jess who that was. She pulled up her contacts and called him, even though she was still pissed at him.

“What now?” he answered.

“What are you so grumpy about?” she asked.

“Talk, woman.”

“Did you kill those vamps last night?”

She heard him sigh. “No. We had dinner at a local Mexican restaurant, *La Rosa es B-Negativo*.”

“You have issues.”

“How long did it take you to figure that out?”

She hung up the phone, irritated with him enough as it was. “He killed them.” She started eating her breakfast. If vamps had broken in last night, what had they done? Why hadn’t Gabe been apprised of the situation?

“Who killed the vampires you were talking about?”

“Some ancient dude.” She didn’t lie. He was ancient if he was anything. And why would Jess care? They were dead. It didn’t matter who did it as long as the outcome was in their favor.

“Oh. Well, then, that’s even better. How many vamps can be working with Tom? Because apparently there are many more.”

“And what are they working toward?” Chris asked as she took a bite of her toast.

Jess leaned back on the couch and put her hands on her head. “This sucks.”

“I’m not going to comment.”

They sat in silence until Chris couldn’t help but ask, “Are you okay? You know, with Tom?”

“Do you know the one thing that’s inevitable when you’re immortal?”

“Well, I know for mortals it’s death.”

“For immortals it’s change. This is just another change I must get used to.”

Chris put her hand on Jess’s. She knew all about being strong on the outside, when on the inside you were broken. “But Tom’s always been there by your side during those changes.”

Jess’s face remained impassive. “I’ll live.”

Sven came down the steps with a huge black CD case. “You mind if I look through your CDs, Jess?”

Jess shook her head.

He went to the stereo system and started flipping through the CD case. He sure was a peculiar man. Funny, but strange. Chris could see the Norwegian in him. She could also imagine him going Viking. Sven put off a vibe that told the rest of the world to stay a few feet away.

Unless, of course, you were a willing woman.

She let go of Jess's hand and started eating again. She'd slept on the couch with Mike during most of the day, so she was hungry and tired.

"Damn, Jess," Sven said, looking up from the CD case. "The Spice Girls?"

"They were popular for a while."

He shook his head. He put in some heavy metal that Chris immediately took a dislike to. Rock was one thing, but mindless noise was another.

"Why are we listening to this racket?" she asked over the sound of the music.

"It stokes me up before a fight," he answered with a smile.

Chris looked at Jess and made a face. "Shit. We're screwed."

"I told you."

"Hey, everyone," Stephen said as he walked into the room. His black hooded sweatshirt was too big on him, and he had the headphones to his iPod hanging from his ears. He looked younger than she did at the moment.

"What's that smell?" Jess asked

"Takeout. Chinese is upstairs for everyone."

Chris looked at her breakfast. "How can you eat Chinese food when you first wake up?"

"You try getting an omelet at eight p.m.," Stephen said.

"Denny's, hello?"

Stephen flipped her off. "Smart-ass."

Chris was about to come back at him when Gabe came down the stairs. She started eating her eggs again. She'd managed to avoid him all day by attaching herself to Mike. Unfortunately Mike was currently taking a shower. She couldn't use him as a buffer now.

Stephen ruffled her hair as though she were seven years old. "What, no comeback? You're slipping, little sister."

She wanted to turn around and throw something hard and breakable at Stephen's head. It was all she could do to refrain. As she was taking a bite out of her eggs and eyeing Gabe as he turned off the stereo, her cell rang.

"Hello?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

It was Sexy. It surprised her that he called. He hadn't exactly been friendly during the last two times they had spoken. "Not really."

She pretended not to notice Gabe watching her as Roger and another man came down the stairs. She didn't recognize this new person, but something about him made her want to ask him to leave. He had yellow eyes.

Yellow eyes.

Where had she seen that before? She remembered someone with eyes that color. Someone she had known well. Someone she should remember. The only other time she had seen eyes that color had been in the mirror.

She glanced at Gabe, who was watching her intently. Was he trying to gauge her reaction? Who was this new person and why was he here?

She looked at the stranger again. He was not a vampire, and he certainly wasn't human.

Then again, maybe he was a vamp. Who said vamps couldn't have yellow eyes?

Lucifer's voice held a note of amusement. "Good. One of the vamps in the room isn't batting for your team."

She put down her fork, trying to keep her face impassive as she looked at Gabe. This was going to open up one huge can of worms. "Why tell me that?"

Jess stiffened next to her. Chris figured she must have overheard Sexy say that. Jess had enough to deal with, without something else going wrong.

"Beware of the wolf dressed in sheep's clothing."

"What?" Why was he playing mind games on her? Badly clichéd mind games at that.

"I'm trying not to get involved. Being that some of you are so clueless, it's getting difficult. I try to watch out for my own, Chris, and I'm warning you to be careful."

He hung up.

I try to watch out for my own, Chris...

She sat there, momentarily stunned. Well, what the hell? He offered information without asking for something in return. There was hope for him yet. Then again, him telling her this might benefit him in some way.

"Who was that?" Gabe asked.

As if he didn't know with his supersonic hearing. "Sexy."

She couldn't help but notice the dark look that crossed over his features. The pig. She looked back down at her plate and tried to focus her attention on her sausage.

"What did he want?"

She was stuck between telling him right now, in front of everyone, or in private.

Hell, why not tell him right now? It was probably the new person, anyway. The dude looked downright scary. He wasn't normal, that was for sure.

He had on blue trousers, a white, collared shirt and a dark blue jacket. He looked like he should be leaning on the railing of a yacht with a martini in his hand.

Yep, it was probably the new person. Let the vamps battle it out. It might make this night interesting. "He said one of the vampires here is battling for the other team."

Mike came out of his room. She didn't know why, but it suddenly occurred to her that she was the only human in the house.

That thought made her squirm a bit.

For some strange reason, she kept seeing a pair of familiar yellow eyes...

Chris shook the image away. She noticed that Gabe was looking at Stephen. Stephen, her ass. She started laughing. "Try the new guy. Stephen isn't the spy."

"The new guy isn't a vampire," Gabe told her.

She turned her attention back to Mr. GQ. He had a suit on, like Roger. He looked uptight, just like Roger. He was giving her a hard glare, just like Roger.

"Are you sure? He looks like a vampire," she said.

"Don't insult me, little girl. I'm a demon. My name is Naberius."

She blanched. Something familiar about that. She had enough non-human friends. "What next? Do werewolves exist?"

"Not the kind you're thinking of," Mike said from behind her.

"See? I knew I saw Santa Claus when I was three."

"So, where do we go from here?" Jess asked in a blasé tone.

"Yeah. Now that I smell that Chinese food, this sausage..." Chris stopped talking. She felt something cold on the side of her neck. Not to mention the fact that everyone, including the up-tight Naberius, looked like they saw a live grenade.

She tried to look down, to where most of them were looking, but was stopped by something sharp. If she didn't know any better, she would guess that Jess held a knife to

her throat.

"I take it you're not trying to cut my sausage for me?"

"You will never learn to take things seriously, will you?" Jess yanked her plate from her and tossed it onto the coffee table. The plate clattered against the wood and sent scrambled eggs flying in every direction.

"Should I cry? Or scream?"

"No, just follow along, and we'll try to keep you in one piece. Right, boys? Just remember, unlike Dave, I do have it in me to kill."

Jess took her by the neck and stood her up. Vampires and demons. People knifing others down. Gunshots and trunks. This was insane. "These are your clothes. You wouldn't want to spill blood on your own stuff, would you?"

"You have lost your mind if you don't think I'll slice your throat," Jess said.

Chris moved with her, careful to keep the blade from piercing her skin. "Let's see. Dave has held a gun to my head. I've been attacked by a madman with a knife. Thrown into a trunk. Now this. Yeah, you're right. I've lost it."

"Well, get with it, sister. 'Cause if you don't listen to me, you're going to lose more than your mind."

"And then what? Oh, I know. They'll kill you, that's what."

They had almost made it to the stairs, but Chris was having a hard time feeling afraid. It was like the time Dave had held a gun to her head. She hadn't truly believed he would kill her, but with Jess's deadpan voice and steady hand, Chris was convinced Jess would do it.

The last thing she wanted to do was allow Jess to get her past the stairs while she remained in control. Chris didn't want to make a move with the knife pressed into her flesh, either. Mike was super fast, and Jess would be, too. She wasn't sure anyone would make it to her in time if she tried to play hero. Her strength would be nothing compared to Jess's.

Knock the knife away.

They were almost to the steps.

Don't let her get any farther. Knock the knife away. Trust me, Chris.

Bullshit. Chris wanted to cross herself suddenly. She could hear Gabe's voice in her head, and it was truly creepy. How could he do that? And why should she trust him when he used her like a can of V8? What was she, a snack? Fuck that.

Chris, trust me. You of all people can do this. You know you have it in you.

Jess was just about to step up on the first stair when Chris made a move, fully preparing to get her throat sliced open. She brought her hand up to the hilt on the knife and threw her head back into Jess's, nearly knocking herself out in the process. She hit Jess so hard she heard a sickening crunch of bone, and she wasn't sure if the sound had come from her or Jess.

Chris was immediately let go. She fell to the ground, holding her head.

She heard grunts and a few curse words, but her head was throbbing and she didn't open her eyes.

"Jess—"

"Let go of me, Mike!"

"Let's go upstairs," she heard Gabe say. When Jess began arguing, he yelled, "Now!"

Chris finally opened her eyes and watched as the room cleared, leaving only herself, Mike and Stephen.

"Damn woman, I knew you were hard-headed, but that was ridiculous." Mike led her to the couch and helped her sit down.

"Just get me an aspirin and a cup of coffee." Now that the danger was over, she felt a wave of sadness. Nausea. Who next? First Dave, then Tom. Now Jess. Her family was falling apart.

Already fell apart.

It made sense, though. She was sure they all had been keeping a trained eye on Jess. You couldn't be with a person for over a century and not know what was in that person's heart. Jess had to have known what Tom was up to. Chris hadn't thought too hard about it because she'd been in a mess of her own.

Mike left and quickly came back with the coffee. "Hon, we don't have any aspirin. We don't need it."

"Great." The strange thing she decided to leave out was that she didn't need the aspirin. Her head had quit aching almost instantly.

"Mike?"

He had his arm around her back as they sat on the couch. "Yeah?"

"What happened to our family? It's gone." No other feeling came close to that of being alone in the world. Nothing mattered when you had no one to share your life with. The world seemed much bigger and harsher when you faced life alone.

He squeezed her shoulder. "No, it's not. It just got a bit smaller."

"Ain't that the truth?" Stephen said, sitting down on the other side of her.

This was what was left of her family. It was the last thing she had left to cling to. "Will you two promise not to leave?"

Mike put his hand on the side of her head and kissed her temple. "We're always going to be here, Chris."

God, what would happen to Dark Days? Tomorrow was Monday. Her cell would be ringing off the hook. Her email box would be full. Tom wouldn't be there for her to call if she had questions for him.

"Don't cry. It will make your head hurt worse than it already does." Stephen said to her as she began tearing up.

"So, it's just the three of us now?" she asked.

"Seems so," Mike said.

"You two aren't going anywhere, are you? Is it too much to ask for a day of reprieve?" She was feeling sorry for herself, something she had done much too often as a child. There were others to think of besides herself.

Mike sighed, putting his arm around her. "Things will quiet down once we figure out who's behind Tom and what it is that he wants."

She turned to Stephen. "What do you think he wants?"

"Besides us dead?" Stephen asked. "They don't want to answer to the Alliance, for one. Tom is with a group who wants to start a new regime. They want to make up their own rules."

"What happens to Jess?"

"She's facing the Alliance."

"Right now? How?"

"It takes three to pass a judgment," Mike answered. "There are three members here."

"Oh." She tried to imagine standing before Gabe, Sven and Roger. She couldn't. She tried getting up, but Mike stopped her.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mike shifted to block her path.

"Psycho or not, we can't sit down here while they kill her. We can't," she insisted.

"You don't interrupt them. It's just not a wise thing to do," Stephen said.

"But Stephen!"

"Sit down," Mike growled, snatching her back down. "It's not easy for us, either. Jess knew what she was doing, and she made her choice. There's nothing we can do."

She tried to keep still. It was difficult. There were pictures on the wall of them together. Chris and Mike at Christmas in front of the tree, decorations in hand. Mike had on that god-awful green sweater Jess had given him the year before. Chris had on a red tank top because it was always so damned hot in the house.

There was a picture of Stephen, Mike and Dave sitting on the couch. They were doing the 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' pose.

Another showcased her and Jess with aprons on in the kitchen. Chris had a big wooden spoon in her hand, which was covered in chocolate. You could barely see Stephen in the background, trying to reach for the spoon. Jess was holding a spatula to the camera.

"We were happy for a while, weren't we?" she asked, tearing up again. When had Tom and Jess turned bad? Had they always been on a quest for more power?

Mike answered, "Yes, we were."

"I wonder what happened?" Stephen asked.

Me, thought Chris. I happened.

Like always, though, whenever a family she had belonged to fell apart, she kept silent. Perhaps no one else would notice it was her fault. When she had been with her second foster family, and Berry, her foster father, had left the family for another woman, she heard what Carolyn had said. Her foster mother had been on the phone with one of her friends. Chris had been in the hallway.

"He left because of the added responsibility. This child isn't normal. We could all feel it. There was something evil about her. He left because one more goddamned kid was one too many. If I call the social worker about this, she'll place her somewhere else, and he might come back."

Chris never knew if he came back. She was sent away within the week.

"So what do we do? Sit here and look at pictures on the wall while they judge Jess upstairs? What if they decide to kill her?"

Would Gabe really sentence Jess to death? He knew how much Jess meant to her. At the same time, it didn't matter. Nothing would be the same whether Jess lived or died. And passing judgment and carrying out the verdict was what Gabe did. He wouldn't hesitate to do what was right by Alliance standards.

"This is no one's fault," Stephen said.

Chris laughed. She didn't mean to, but she couldn't help it. Fault always lay on someone's shoulders, and if it was anyone's fault, it was hers. "Sure."

"She's going to see my father."

All three turned around to look at the stairs. Gabe was standing there.

"What does that mean, exactly?" she asked.

“It means we don’t think she deserves death, and we don’t think she deserves to go free for a second chance. So we send her to my father. He will deal out her punishment.”

Chris knew she wouldn’t want to account to Ambrose for anything. From what she’d heard of that man, he must be truly scary.

“Chris, can I speak with you?”

Oh, Lord. Please not this and not now. She couldn’t handle much more drama. If her life kept on this course, she was going to lose her sanity.

She stood up. “Sure.”

Gabe was already starting up the steps. Mike took her hand as she passed by. “If you need us, we’ll be here.”

She gave them a weak smile. They were all she had left now. She couldn’t lose them. If she did—well, she just couldn’t think past the pain that thought brought with it.

She would do anything to keep them with her.

Even if she had to kill to do it.

And somewhere deep down she had the courage to keep that promise a reality.

Chapter Thirteen

"Listen," Chris said as she entered the living room. "I'm over it. I have bigger problems right now, like two members of my family pulling weapons on me in the past few days. The whole gunshot-slash-trunk thing with Mike. I'm not going to get all emotional on you if that's what you're worried about."

Gabe sat on the couch, leaned back against the cushions and put a foot on the edge of the coffee table. "Are you finished?"

Well, he never lacked points in the "rude" department. "I guess."

"Okay, I don't know what happened or who said what, but I swear I didn't use you for anything. It's not my style, and I would never treat you in such a manner."

Yeah, right. If only that were true. Even now, as she stood before him, she wanted only to walk over and fall into his embrace. She wanted to hear him tell her that everything would be all right. Even if it would be a lie.

He continued. "I wouldn't treat you that way. And if my memory serves me correctly, you more than liked it."

"Then why did you come crashing into that room? For sex? Because I'm such a likable person? Do you have feelings for me? Um, no. You gave a little Juicy Juice to Mike and you needed some in return. I'm not stupid. But you know what? I'm fine. You're fine. Everyone is juiced up and fine! So drop it. I'm not a china doll, and you didn't drop me."

"You know what?" He pushed himself off the couch and threw his hands up in the air. "I don't know why I bother trying to talk to you. You're such a woman," he muttered just as he walked into the hallway.

No. He. Didn't.

After she was able to pick her jaw up from the floor, she followed him downstairs. "I'm such a what?"

Gabe was saying something to Stephen when she came into the main room. He didn't acknowledge her, so she repeated the question louder.

Gabe finally turned to her. "I'm not having this conversation."

Did he honestly think that would work on her? Pah-lease. "What exactly did you mean by, 'You're such a woman'? I'm dying to know."

"I meant exactly what I had intended you *not* to hear. You're a woman, and as such, it is impossible to talk to you without some PMS episode."

Mike whistled.

Stephen's eyebrows shot up.

She ignored both of them and lowered her voice to a growl. "Buddy, you haven't seen anything close to a PMS episode."

"Well, then, I sure as hell can't imagine the real thing. Please advise me of the impending date so I can mark it as a red letter day on my calendar."

"You are such a jerk."

"Well, at least it's a step up from being a pig," Sven said as he came down the stairs with Naberius. Chris took a step away from the demon. Naberius had the audacity to wink at her as he passed by. She quickly looked away from him.

“Where did you put Jess?” Gabe asked Sven.

“Roger is upstairs with her now. We decided to take turns keeping an eye on her.” Sven looked at Chris. “What’s going on down here? A lover’s quarrel?”

“He wishes,” Chris snapped.

“Oh, there’s no wishing to be had.”

“I hope you rot in hell! As a matter of fact, why don’t I just call Sexy and see if we can’t set that up?”

“Sorry, sweetheart. Been there, done that, and burned the T-shirt.”

“You are so full of—”

Glowing white light blurred her vision. Part of the basement collapsed as dust, debris, and glass went flying in every direction. Chris hit the floor, with her arms instinctively over her head. A heavy board, or something of that nature, hit her back. She could feel pieces of glass rain down on her.

Dust prevented her from opening her eyes and caused her to start coughing, which made her inhale even more smoke and ash as she tried to catch her breath. It was impossible.

She heard shouts, creaks and the base boards settling, but mostly she heard Gabe.

“Don’t move,” he ordered her in a gruff voice.

As if she could. He took the board off her and turned her over. He looked horrible. There was dust in his hair, on his eyelashes. Dust everywhere. “What the hell was that?” she asked as he brought her head to his chest and held her there, the previous words of their fight dissipating like mist.

There were still creaks and yelling, but holding onto him put everything on pause. He wouldn’t allow anything to happen to her. She was protected in the safety of his arms.

He brushed the broken glass out of her hair. “Are you hurt?”

She felt her lower lip quiver as he dusted more dust and glass off of her. “No. You?” she asked, leaning back to look up at him.

Her earlier anger at him melted away. She tried looking around to find Mike or Stephen, but the dust hadn’t settled.

“What *was* that?”

“It was some type of bomb.” He ran his thumb over her cheek before setting her away from him. “Stay here with Stephen.”

He left to make his way through the debris.

“Chris, can you get up?” Stephen took her arm.

“I think so.”

Her back was on fire, but she was sure the board hadn’t caused her to bleed. It would be one hell of a bruise, though.

She and Stephen stopped short when they heard a clanging upstairs. “What the hell is that?”

“Damn, I’m missing the action,” Stephen said.

“What?” she asked.

“I haven’t heard that sound in centuries.”

“What is it?” she asked again.

“Hand-to-hand combat. They’re using swords, and there are many of them. Nothing else works with us. There are only a few ways we can die. Burning, decapitation, a huge wound.”

“A huge wound?”

“Well, I’m certain we wouldn’t survive the chainsaw massacre,” Stephen said with a smirk.

Which quickly reminded her, “Where’s Mike? Where’s half the house?” She could smell things burning.

“He’s up there fighting with Gabe, Sven and demon-boy. I’m thinking the other half of this house is DOA.”

“Who else was upstairs besides Jess?” she asked.

“Roger.”

She thought she could hear Tom. She couldn’t make out what he was saying, though. It sounded like a scream.

“Stay here, do you understand?” Stephen said, crawling through the debris to get to the fighting. “They might need help.”

Stay? So the rest of the house could come crashing down on her head? Besides, she couldn’t hear what Tom was yelling about, and she desperately wanted to know. Not to mention, she couldn’t breathe.

She waited until Stephen was out of sight and started crawling through the debris. She began making her way toward the sound of fighting.

It seemed as though a beam had sectioned the house off into two distinct sides. When she came to the fork she went left, in the direction of the front of the house.

Then she heard Jess screaming for help, which was coming from the other direction.

“Tom! Help! My legs are stuck.”

Shit. *Don’t do it*, her inner voice said. *She’ll bite the crap out of you.*

She heard Jess trying to free herself, moaning in pain. Then she heard Tom.

“Jess!”

He wasn’t very far away. It sounded like he was still fighting. Chris didn’t know what to do. They had turned on her—didn’t care if she lived or died. If Tom saw her, he might very well try to kill her. She should leave Jess where she was.

But she couldn’t. There was a flickering light coming from the south side of the house, and Chris was sure it was fire. If she didn’t help Jess, she could die in that fire.

Burning, decapitation, a huge wound.

She started crawling toward her right, away from the fighting. Away from Gabe.

There were splinters of wood and dry wall scattered all over. Chris tried being careful, yet by the time she got to Jess she was scratched up badly.

“Jess?”

Jess was on her right side, facing away from her. It looked as though an entire wall had fallen on her. Only her upper body was visible.

“Chris?”

Chris crawled closer. She had no idea why she was here. Was she going to help Jess? How could she? She didn’t have the strength to lift this debris off of her. Even if she did, Jess would turn on her if she still had the strength to do it.

“I’m here.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Just shut up for a minute.” Chris got closer, wanting to see what the damage was. With her fear of Jess gone, along with her common sense, she noticed Jess’s legs were nearly crushed. Jesus, it had to hurt like hell.

Chris knelt down next to her and pushed some of the smaller pieces away from Jess. Damn. A beam as big as the one that currently had the house separated into two distinct sides was lying on top of Jess's legs. "This is not good. I can't get you out."

"Jess!"

Chris spun away from Jess when she heard Tom yell again. She could have sworn he sounded much closer.

She looked back to Jess, who had her eyes closed. The pain on her face was evident. Memories assaulted her of happier times, and Chris didn't have it in her to turn away.

"What can I do?" Chris asked.

"Nothing. Just don't leave me here alone."

Did she think she was going to die? She couldn't die. She would heal. She wasn't losing any blood. Was she?

"Are you bleeding?"

Jess's breathing was becoming labored. "Yes."

Chris leaned back, not sure what she should do next. She turned around and yelled for Gabe. She didn't know what else to do.

Jess laughed. "He won't help me."

"Listen, I'm trying to forget the whole 'let's kill Chris' episode downstairs, okay? I refuse to sit here and watch you die. He'll help you. He told me himself that he feels you don't deserve to die. You'll be going to Ambrose, and I want to make sure you get there in one piece."

"Why would the Alliance help me?"

"I'm not asking the Alliance to help you. I'm asking Gabe."

"Because he used you and fucked you, suddenly you think he's at your beck and call?"

That cut deep. Chris didn't respond. She called for Gabe again. More dust settled, and both she and Jess coughed. The house could come down any second.

Gabe hadn't used her. The way he had helped her after the explosion? The look on his face when he brushed the dust from her? She had no doubt that he had feelings regarding her. Things just went too quickly between them, but something was there. She could feel it.

Jess finally opened her eyes and looked up at her. Her eyes were white. "Why help me?"

"I don't turn my back on family. Even when they have decidedly turned their backs on me."

A hot breath of wind caught them both off guard. The fire was getting stronger. Jess closed her eyes. "You're weak."

Chris would have never thought Jess could be so cruel. She could only kneel beside her, stunned into silence and crippled in any effort to help her.

"Move, Chris. Now."

Chris turned to see a horrifying sight. Gabe had a huge sword trained on Tom, who was not looking like the Tom she knew at all. Blood coated his clothes, and the welcoming smile he'd so often given her was gone, replaced with a look of hatred.

"I'm going to give my sword to Chris, though my better judgment would deem otherwise. She's going to keep it trained on Jess. One wrong move and she'll end her life. Understood?"

Tom nodded at Gabe. Chris went pale. The sword Gabe held over Tom had blood dripping off it. Both Tom and Gabe's eyes were white, just like Jess's. The last thing Chris wanted to do was touch the sword or put it over Jess's neck.

She stood up, keeping her eyes on Gabe. She was sure she would break down if she looked at Tom or Jess.

She took the heavy sword when Gabe handed it to her and held it over Jess, just as she had been told.

Gabe gave her a questioning look and she nodded to him. This was not a game, and he was expecting her to be strong. She wanted nothing more than to make him proud, so she focused all her attention on Tom. Though she had a sword trained on Jess, someone she loved, Chris was on the right side of this battle. It was Tom and Jess who had lost their way.

Gabe and Tom began moving the wall. It took a few minutes to get all of the debris off Jess, and Tom did not make a wrong move.

Chris was surprised at how intently she watched him. She was more than ready to act if necessary, and that thought scared her immensely. What kind of monster had she become that she could kill a friend so easily?

Better yet, why was Gabe helping Tom and Jess?

They removed the last of the debris and Chris stepped back when Tom bent down to help Jess. He picked her up, laying a kiss on her forehead. Chris heard Tom whisper that everything would be all right.

Chris wanted to go to them, ask them why they were doing this. She wanted to dial nine-one-one. She wanted to wake up on Thanksgiving morning and start over.

She wanted Gabe to look at her the way Tom was looking at Jess.

Gabe came over and took his sword back. "Let's go."

"But—"

"Don't question me. Just do as I say for right now." He took her hand in his.

She did. With a backward glance at Tom and Jess she followed Gabe. They seemed more like the people she remembered as he cradled Jess to his chest.

She let Gabe lead her through the debris to the other side of the house. She did her best not to cry, but she didn't succeed. The thought of Jess in that much pain tore at her heart.

Tom, whom she thought of as a father figure, hadn't any love left in his heart for her. He hadn't even seemed the same man.

When they finally crawled through an opening that brought them to the front lawn, she stood in stunned silence.

Mike and Stephen were still fighting. Mike fought with a sword, much like Gabe's. He looked like ... hell, she didn't know what he looked like, but he didn't look like her brother. He was deadly and precise as he killed.

Without realizing that her tears had ceased, she turned her attention to Stephen, who held a small dagger in his hand. He had just killed the man he had been fighting, and she watched as he bent down and dragged the dagger across the man's chest, wiping the blood off it.

The efficiency of his action made it look as though he had done it a million times before. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. He sheathed his dagger at his waist and looked over at her, as if he had sensed her watching him.

She had never known him to carry a knife on his belt.

“Are you okay?” Stephen asked her from across the lawn.

She opened her mouth to say something, but for the life of her, she didn’t know what to say.

Sure, I’m okay. How are you? Did that vampire give you a hard time, Stevie?

A movement to her left caught her eye. She squeezed Gabe’s hand tighter. She watched Mike twirl his sword as he walked over to them. She instinctively backed up.

“What?” Mike asked, looking offended. “Do you think I’m going to attack you or something?”

“I-I don’t know,” she stuttered.

If she thought he looked offended before, that was nothing compared to the look he was now giving her.

Gabe put his hand on her shoulder and she nestled herself into his right side, keeping her eyes on her brothers, who were staring right back.

Jesus, they looked medieval.

Gabe squeezed her shoulder. “Sven, Roger, get the bodies out of here. They don’t need to fall into the authorities’ hands. The rest follow me. The fire rescue and the cops are en route. We can’t be here when they arrive, and neither can the bodies. Let’s get this done within the next five minutes and get to a motel.”

Chris looked at Roger, who was standing next to Sven with a small sword in each hand. She had thought him dead.

“Where’s Tom and Jess?” Stephen asked.

Chris felt the weight of the situation settle around her shoulders. They couldn’t know that Gabe had let them go.

He let them go for you...

She clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking as she wondered what Gabe would say. In that moment she knew life without him would be no life at all. She would do anything for him. Her breath caught when Gabe looked down at her. She could see the heat in his gaze as their eyes locked.

After a few seconds he faced her brothers. “They got away.”

Chapter Fourteen

Tom dipped the washcloth back into the warm water and wrung it out. His hands were shaking as he brought the cloth to Jess's face. Within the hour he would find out who gave the order to bomb his fucking house—with his *wife* in residence—and God have mercy on their soul when he did, because mercy would not be found with him. His group of vampires and demons were getting ahead of themselves. He had formed this group with one goal in mind, one intention—to bring down the Alliance.

The Alliance didn't believe in democracy. The four heads of the Alliance made the rules, and every vampire in existence was forced to follow those rules or face the assassins employed by the Alliance.

Not anymore.

"Tom?"

He leaned over Jess, adjusting the pillows behind her head. She'd been unconscious for over an hour, tossing and turning. Color now infused her cheeks from the blood he'd given her, but it was not enough. She needed more.

"I'm here." He swept her hair from her face, his anger doubling as she winced. His men had put her in this state of pain, all because they had taken matters into their own hands when they'd arrived at the house. The order had been to move in and eliminate the heads of the Alliance, then Ambrose would have come days, if not hours, later to avenge his son. Everything fell into place until the fools had lit up his house like the Fourth of fucking July.

"Things aren't exactly working out the way we had planned, are they?"

"Everything will fall into place." He had his doubts, though sharing them with her right now would be a mistake. She needed time to heal.

"Chris isn't human."

Tom gently wiped her neck with the damp cloth in attempt to get the dust off her. "We've always considered the possibility, but I think she and Mike have been involved at one time."

"I don't think so. She's falling for Gabe too fast, like she's craved intimacy for too long. We should have never brought her into the fold."

"I needed someone to run Dark Days during the day. She never was one to ask questions, and she kept her nose out of our business. She was young and easy to manipulate."

"Not anymore. You should have seen her fucking Gabe. I saw her eyes, Tom. They changed to a yellow-green color." Jess used her elbows to sit up against the pillows.

"Why in the hell did they bomb the house? You didn't give that order, did you?"

He should have never sent her in to shake up the heads of the Alliance. Because they had no idea Jess was involved, she had gone inside the house unchecked. "Hell no, I didn't. I'm going to find out who did, though. You need more blood, anyway, and one of those bastards is going to provide it." Underneath the covers, her legs were broken and battered. It would take a few days and a lot of blood for her to heal completely. The humans didn't know it, but they were about to help his wife recuperate. "I'll be right back."

She nodded and closed her eyes.

When he opened up the door and left the bedroom, he felt his eyes change. Fucking idiots. If he couldn't control this group, he'd lose everything he'd worked so hard for. Mike and Stephen might enjoy the pathetic vampire way of life, but he opted for a less controlled atmosphere. If he killed a human or two, he shouldn't have to worry about a deadly assassin sent to sever his head from his body.

Out in the main living room of his headquarters, vampires milled about. The demons were nowhere to be seen, and the humans were sitting in the small office space in the corner. They had lost over ten vampires in the fight after the bombing. Most of the vampires present were now shaken, obviously wondering if going up against the Alliance was a good idea. He needed to motivate them, but first he'd see Jess healed.

He marched straight to the humans sitting around the desk. "Who bombed the fucking house? Who gave the order?" Where had the grenades come from in the first place? He didn't have grenades in his stockpile of weapons.

Jeremy had the audacity to shrug his shoulders. "You gave us the order to move in. We did."

"I gave the order to move in, not throw *ten fucking grenades*. Jess was in the house." The other humans backed away. Jeremy sat at his desk, leaning back in the chair as though his life weren't on the line.

"The heads of the Alliance were in the house as well. Isn't that why we're here? You paid us to take them out."

Just the thought of a few humans taking out the heads of the Alliance was laughable. "I paid you to go in when needed. Vampires and demons carry an energy with them that other immortals can pick up on. You were never to give commands, and there is no way in hell any of you could have taken on any vampires, let alone those in charge." In two strides he was in front of Jeremy, and with a simple twist of the wrists, Jeremy's neck snapped.

He bent down and hauled Jeremy's body over his shoulder. On his way past the vampires he said, "The humans are yours. Do what you will."

* * * *

Chris sat in one of the cushy chairs in the lobby of the motel with a cold Pepsi in her hand. The men were arguing about who was going to room with who.

She had never thought men could be so bitchy.

Mike suggested that he, Stephen and Chris room together, while the other four, Gabe, Sven, Roger and demon boy share a room.

Gabe made the point that if they did it that way, four of the major power hitters would be in one room, while two lesser powers and a teeny woman would be in the other. Not a smart idea.

Mike said he wouldn't room with demon boy, and demon boy became angry at being called demon boy.

Gabe said there were some demons who were decent, and no one had to insult their entire race.

Naberius, in a growl directed toward Mike, said that certain vampires needed to be taught some manners, and he was just the demon to do it.

Mike had told him to "bring it."

Just as Naberius was about to “bring it,” Gabe stopped him. Stephen had stepped up next to Mike, ready to take him on as well.

She put the Pepsi can to her head.

To make matters worse, there were witnesses.

Gabe had clearly had enough when he shouted, “Naberius will room with Mike, Stephen with Sven and Roger, and Chris will room with me.”

“You are fucking high. Chris rooms with us,” Mike said, indicating himself and Stephen.

“Just give me two minutes with him, Gabe,” Naberius said, staring at Mike. “And he will learn his place.”

Chris got up from her chair and went to the desk. The testosterone in the room was nauseating. “Can I get three rooms, preferably right next to each other?”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

The poor guy behind the desk was about to have a heart attack. Gabe appeared next to her and handed the desk clerk cash. Nothing else was said as the man handed Gabe three cards, and Gabe signed for the rooms.

Gabe took Chris’s arm and walked past the rest of their party. “Let’s go.”

There were no further arguments.

They walked up the stairwell to the third floor. Chris ignored everyone as Gabe opened the door to their room. She walked past him and immediately snatched the remote off the dresser, sat on the bed and turned on the television.

“I’ll be right back,” Gabe said as he left the room.

She searched for a local news channel. Sure enough, they were on the eleven o’clock news. Funny, just hours ago they had all been in the basement looking at pictures, dealing with knives and throwing around insults.

She suddenly realized that all those pictures were lost.

Pushing that thought aside, she watched the news for about twenty more minutes. She couldn’t sit and rehash everything she had been through with Tom and Jess. She had to concentrate on the here and now.

If she didn’t, she’d probably have a break down. She glanced toward the door. What was taking Gabe so long?

* * * *

Gabe had four bags in his hand from the local gas station. Tired, hungry and dirty beyond belief, all he wanted to do was take a shower and climb into bed. All of them had needed clean clothes and something to eat, so he’d gone out to procure the much-needed items. He hung one bag on Sven’s doorknob and knocked. He didn’t wait for Sven to open the door. He walked across the hall to speak with Naberius. The demon had been calling around, talking to other demons to see what he could find out about Chris. From the connections Naberius had, they had a decent chance at finding out who Chris’s parents were and why she hadn’t turned Neph.

Naberius opened the door before Gabe had the chance to raise his hand to knock.

Gabe handed him a bag.

“Dinner?”

Gabe nodded. Naberius threw the bag on one of the double beds. “Mike, Gabe brought us something to eat.”

Mike didn't answer him. Without a word he pushed past Gabe and left the room.

Gabe had hoped Mike would warm up to Naberius somewhat. That was why he had the two rooms together. It would make it easier on Chris if he did. She was going to remember everything Mike said and did to Naberius. If she witnessed Mike's distaste for demons, then learned the truth of her own nature, Mike's reaction to Naberius would devastate her.

Naberius sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. "I found out who her father is."

From the look on Naberius's face, Gabe could tell it wasn't good news. "Hit me with it."

"Balam."

"You've got to be kidding me." Gabe had met the demon a time or two. Balam was a demon from the first fall with Lucifer. He was a terrible king of Hell, commanding over sixty-six legions. Why couldn't he have been a demon from the Second Angelic Revolt?

"I wish that I were."

"Do you know what happened? Why he left her? What about her mother?"

"Actually, that's the surprising part. It seems he wanted her to have a life. Her mother died when she was three, and soon thereafter he put her up for adoption. He even checks in on her every so often."

"Balam cares for her?" Demons from the first fall with Lucifer were terrible bastards. Most cared for no one but themselves, unlike demons like Naberius, who were involved in the Second Angelic Revolt. They fell because they lusted after human women, not power.

"From what I understand, he loves her. He prides himself on the woman she has become. Plus he's closer than you'd think. He's staying with Tom, and I think it's so he can watch out for her. I don't think Tom has any idea who Balam is to Chris."

Great. Just what he wanted to deal with. A three-headed king of Hell. And whose side would Balam align with when the two forces clashed? "I'm going to need to break this to her."

"Good luck with that."

Gabe left Naberius's room, turning the new information over in his mind. Chris was probably wondering why he had been gone so long, and he loathed bringing this up now. He figured he could wait until Tom and his group were taken care of, when things had settled somewhat in her life. She was not going to like the news he had to give her. Then again, she had to know she was different.

Hopefully his revelation would go over smoothly. Doubtful that would happen, he knocked on the door.

She opened the door with a bored expression on her face, as if she didn't give a shit who stood on the other side.

"Why did you open this door?"

"Because someone knocked."

He frowned at her. "You should know better. It could have been anybody out here."

She merely nodded. He barely refrained from giving her a lecture on her own safety. She wasn't used to constantly watching her back.

"Here." Gabe handed her a sub.

"What kind?" she asked.

“Steak and cheese.”

“How did you know my favorite?”

“Mike.” He walked past her into the room.

“Speaking of, how’s he dealing with demon spawn? I still can’t believe you put the two of them together.”

Gabe stopped and turned around to face her. He cocked his head to the side, studying her. No, she wasn’t going to take his news well at all. “You know, he doesn’t like the way you all talk to him. It’s extremely disrespectful. He doesn’t make rude comments about vampires or humans.”

“Why is he here, anyway? You never did say,” she asked, dismissing his statement.

Gabe put the bag of groceries on the desk. How could he tell her Naberius was here for her? He couldn’t. “He has powers we don’t.”

Chris went over to check out what he had purchased. Donuts, shavers, shaving cream, body wash and shampoo. “What, no conditioner?”

“Sorry, I didn’t think about it.”

“A bottle of pills.” She picked it up to read it. “Midol!”

He laughed and went in the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He definitely had to wait until later to tell her about her heritage. She’d been through too much tonight as it was.

* * * *

Chris heard the shower turn on, so she ate her sandwich as she watched the rest of the news. There was an update about the house. The firefighters had put out the fire, which had been relatively small. The police were not sectioning the house off, because they had found “the cause of the fire.”

Apparently they had found grenades—plural. She turned the news off and tossed the remote away.

What were they going to do? It seemed as though Tom’s people attacked, and after they attacked, Gabe secured his group for protection.

Were they ever going to fight back? She was sick and tired of hiding. First they’d hid from an unknown group of vigilante vampire-killers, and now they were hiding from a known group of immortals who were hell-bent on obliterating them.

By the time Gabe emerged from his shower, she had finished with her sandwich. She tried to ignore the fact that he was in a towel. Only a towel.

“The shampoo and body wash?” she asked. She kept her eyes on his and off that magnificent chest, partially wet and thoroughly delicious. The feel of that body was still too fresh in her mind.

“In the shower.”

She closed the door to the bathroom and put a hand to her head. What the hell was wrong with her? Just because he looked good, smelled good and played the protective role perfectly did not mean she should jump in bed with him again.

He was leaving soon.

She needed a new mantra. “It could be worse” just didn’t cut it anymore. It might even have brought out bad karma to think it, because every time she used it, shit *had* become much worse.

She knew what her new mantra should be.

Like a can of V8.

She had to hold back a giggle. She was losing it again. She should be used to it by now. That mantra would remind her that, though he had a great ass and looked remarkable naked, he wasn't the type to give her the family she wanted. His life revolved around killing, and he would never settle in one place. Most importantly, he had used her for his own gain after allowing Mike to feed off him.

She got in the shower, washed, lathered her hair and wondered what the hell she was going to wear to bed. All she had was a towel and the clothes she had been wearing, which were covered in dust.

When she was through with her shower, she dried off and wrapped her towel around her.

"Um, did you buy clothes?" She called through the door.

"The way we all looked? It was a risk just getting into the Quick Mart gas station. If they hadn't had Subway in there, you would have been eating a bag of Doritos. Hell, I'm surprised they let us check in here."

Well, shit. She was surprised they'd allowed them to check in after the way they had acted. Their appearance paled in comparison. "What do you expect me to wear?"

"Don't you have a towel?"

What a jackass. "That's *all* I have. What am I supposed to do tomorrow? Pretend I'm part of a nudist colony?"

"We'll worry about tomorrow when it comes."

Chris wanted to pound her head against the door. "That's not good enough."

"How about I get Mike to do some laundry?"

His humor was lost on her. "Have you *seen* my clothes? It looks like I wore them through a Marine boot camp and slept in a bed of nails."

She heard him growl and say, "Women."

"Don't start that again."

"I'll be right back."

"What are you going to do, go out in your dirty clothes?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it."

She cracked the door open and peeked out. Damn he was a sight. V8. V8. "You can't go out in a towel."

"They're just next door. Who's going to see me?"

"I'll go."

"The hell you will," he snapped.

He was going to cause WWII. No one would notice her in a towel, but him ... he looked like a god. "What's the difference?"

"The difference is you're a woman."

"You're such a pig," she said to him as he left the room.

He was gone for quite a while. She'd had time to watch a whole episode of *M.A.S.H.* Where was he?

She got up from the bed and opened the door to her room. She peered out into the hallway. "Gabe?"

There was no one in the hallway. She looked around. She left her room and tiptoed down the hall with her white towel firmly around her and knocked on the door next to hers.

Sven answered. The look on his face was priceless. "Well, I did call for room service, but I didn't think you were on the menu."

"Jackass," she said as she passed him and let herself in the room. Stephen's eyebrows went up. "Where's Gabe? He's been gone forever."

"Not here. He left a while ago," Stephen answered.

"Oh, okay." She looked out into the hallway. It was still clear, so she hurried across the hallway and knocked on the door to Mike and Naberius's room. Mike answered.

"What the hell?"

"Is Gabe in here?" She pulled her towel up and gripped the edge in her right hand. She began to worry something had happened to him. What if the vampires had caught him by himself? Would he have the power to defend himself against such an attack?

"No."

Shit. Was he okay?

"Oh. Well, sorry." She would just have to go back to her room and wait.

"What are you doing running around in a towel? Why did Gabe leave you alone?"

She waved her hand in dismissal and jogged back to her room, only to stop short.

She didn't have a card to get back in.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. She knew without turning around that the men had come out of their rooms and now stood behind her. Energy penetrated the air in the hallway. It held such electricity that it made the hair on her neck stand up.

She smiled, turned around and cringed. Sure enough. All five men were out in the hallway. Sven, Stephen and Roger standing in front of their door. Demon spawn and Mike stood at their door.

She held up her hand while holding her towel up with the other. "It looks bad, I understand. But I'm not looking so much for Gabe as I am for clothes."

Sven snickered.

She shook her head. "Okay, that didn't come out right."

"Oh, no. We completely understand, sweetheart," the demon said.

"Watch your mouth," Mike snapped at him.

The demon's eyes flashed light yellow as he growled, "Or what?"

Oh Jesus. Vamps and demons were about to open up and beat the shit out of each other in the hallway of a cheap motel. "Please don't fight in the hallway. Please." She looked at Sven, who looked mildly amused.

"What?" he asked her.

She shook her head. He *would* find this amusing, and here she was about to have a heart attack. "Do something!"

"What the hell is going on?"

Everyone turned to see Gabe standing at the end of the hallway.

"Absolutely nothing," Stephen spoke up. "Except Naberius and Mike are going to kill each other, and Chris is standing half naked in the hallway."

Sven shook his head with mock sadness on his face. "Gabe gets to room with her, and I get stuck with you two dipshits. What's wrong with this picture?"

Everyone filed back in their rooms, leaving her and Gabe alone. The energy that had infused the hallway dissipated.

"You don't have a card, do you? You left it in the room."

She shook her head. "No, I don't have it. Do you?"

"I don't need one."

He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. Both had seen better days and yet he'd gone out to get her clothes.

He walked over to the door. She heard it click and watched as he opened it.

Impressive. Perhaps she should make a pact with Sexy. Looked like it could be useful.

He walked over to the small desk and placed a few Wal-Mart bags on it. She glanced inside the bags. Two pairs of jeans, T-shirts, socks, shoes and some other items. "Why didn't you just go to my house, or your motel room? Or both?"

"And chance some of them being there? I didn't have anyone with me. They tend to stay in groups."

Chris picked up the pink drawstring pants and white tank top. It was a little cold for a tank top. She held it up and glanced at him. He only smiled. She started for the bathroom, then turned back to him, as something came to mind. "Why did you let Tom and Jess go?"

He was changing into his own drawstring pants, and when she saw him, every thought flew out of her mind.

"Because I'm stupid."

She stuttered, "Wh-Why are you stupid?"

He quit getting dressed and gave her a once-over. It was absolutely clear what he had in mind. His voice fell three octaves. "Come here, Chris."

V8, girl! He's just going to use you! Her inner voice screamed at her.

Is that really so bad?

Moron, where did your self-respect go?

To my nether regions. I need a little respect down there. Respect is a good thing.

Don't do it. Remember your mantra. Like a can of V8!

I have a new mantra.

A new mantra? I didn't approve a new mantra! What new mantra?

Bottoms up!

She quit arguing with herself. What was a little sex between two responsible adults? It was the most natural thing two people could do together.

Sex was good.

Sex with him was *great*.

Last night they'd gone at it for hours. She doubted there was a place on her body he hadn't touched or tasted. After he had taken her blood, his head had seemed to clear. She had to wonder if he'd truly used her, or if his hunger had just given prodded the inevitable. Because that's what she'd viewed sex with him as—inevitable.

With her newfound confidence she dropped her towel. From the look on his face he liked what he saw. For once she felt sexy, and her voluptuous curves that never seemed to want to fit into her jeans were absolutely perfect. It gave her a wonderful sense of power.

He dropped the pants he was going to put on. She stepped into his arms with alarming ease. They fought more than anything, and yet she admired his strength and sense of right and wrong. She'd been under so much stress lately ... but here, in his arms, the stress of what they faced melted away.

He cupped her face with his hands. Leaning down, he brushed his lips lightly over hers. The simple gesture wiped the memory of the night away, and when his tongue

invaded her mouth, much more intimate memories assailed her. The things he could do with that tongue.

He was slow this time. Sensual. There was nothing quick about his movements. Nothing rough. It was as though they had all the time in the world to explore each other's bodies.

He led her to the edge of the bed. He sat down and she straddled his lap, never once breaking their kiss. He ran his hands down her back, slowly making his way to her ass, then pulled her closer. She moaned deep in her throat and splayed her hands in his hair as his erection strained against her.

He smelled like the men's body wash he had bought. A musk that filled her senses with wicked thoughts.

She broke off the kiss and slipped her feet to the floor. She kneeled on the floor in front of him and took his cock in her hands. When she licked him from the base of his cock to the tip, he took a sharp intake of breath. She wrapped her hand around the base and covered his cockhead with her mouth, running her tongue over it, licking the tip.

She loved the sounds he made. Each moan, groan and growl goaded her on. His reactions empowered her. Made her feel strong, desirable and feminine all at once. More, he made her feel wanted.

She played, licked, teased and sucked him gently. He grew thicker in her mouth and hands, and she grew bolder.

"Chris." He fisted his hands in her hair and groaned deep in his chest. "You're killing me."

Wanting to explore more of him, she eased away and started licking her way up his chest. Edible didn't even begin to describe him. She wanted to crawl inside his skin. She yearned to touch his soul. She couldn't help but wonder what it would have been like if they had met under different circumstances. Would they fight as much as they did now?

With a low growl, he picked her up and set her on her back on the bed, switching their positions. Anticipation thrummed throughout her body. Leaning over her, he kissed her neck, working his way down her body, just as she had done to him. He slid off the bed and went down on his knees, jerking her to the edge, putting her legs over his shoulders.

In an erotic assault, he licked, teased and rubbed her senseless. His determined attention and caresses drove her insane. How could a man spend as much time showering her with such profoundly personal affection and feel nothing?

Just when she thought she would die from the pleasure, he gently bit her inner thigh, right at the juncture of her leg and torso. Shock and arousal shot through her and had her seeing stars. While his fingers slid inside of her, and his thumb stroked her clit, she grasped at the bed cover, hoping to maintain a semblance of control.

"Come for me, Chris." Again, he gently bit into her leg. Her back arched and her breathing came in clipped breaths.

"Holy hell." Jesus, it *was* better with a vampire. She was sexually ruined for life. How could she go from this back to an ordinary man who couldn't bite? Someone who couldn't take from her and bring her life into their body?

Another growl vibrated through his chest as he bit into the juncture of her other leg. "Now."

Unable to resist, she let go of her control. Under the sweet assault of his mouth, two

orgasms hit her within minutes.

After the second orgasm had ebbed somewhat, he stood up and brought her to her feet. He took them to their original position, with her straddling him at the edge of the bed.

Their bodies came together in a perfect rhythm. He filled her as if they were made for each other. The thought of him leaving tore at her, so she stopped thinking about it. Instead, she wrapped her arms around him in a feeble attempt to keep him with her always.

Gabe couldn't get enough of Chris. The powerful taste of her blood, thick and warm on his tongue, seduced his every nerve. The sounds she made as he was making love to her proved to be a roadmap to her pleasure. He knew exactly what she liked, and it surprised him more than anything. She was the loudest when he bit her and entered her, and that couldn't have pleased him more. She was tight, made for him, and her blood was sweeter than any he'd ever tasted.

He let her ride him, taking a rosy nipple into his mouth, sucking and nibbling until her moans filled the room.

She tightened and convulsed around him. Arched into him, driving him deeper. And when she came again, he came with her.

He felt her tighten around him again, watched as her head fell back and her eyes closed. He kissed her neck, the pulse beating just under her earlobe, and wrapped his arms around her. God, he didn't want to leave her. She needed stability, a man who could dedicate his life to her. He was unable to do that. He couldn't take her away from everything she loved.

He'd only known her a few short days, but the anger that surfaced every time he thought about leaving told him he had feelings for this woman. She'd wiggled her smart ass into his heart, her story of love and family echoing his own.

* * * *

Chris never wanted to let go of him. Leaning forward, she rested her head on his shoulder. He was the last man she needed to get involved with, but he was the only man she had ever wanted like this.

She barely knew him, and he was leaving soon. He wouldn't be returning.

There was a knock at the door.

She sighed. "Well, at least fate has learned better timing, eh?"

He didn't answer as he stood up and laid her on the bed with a kiss to her forehead.

She smiled, covering herself up with the blankets, searching for the remote. She'd shower with him when the intruder left. That'd be fun.

Gabe threw on his gray drawstring pants and opened the door.

It was Dave.

"Dave?" She couldn't believe her eyes. She started to get up, but remembered she was naked.

Dave didn't miss that fact. He looked appalled. When he finally tore his gaze from her, he glared at Gabe. "You son of a bitch."

Gabe snatched him by the shirt and hauled him in the room. Then he shoved him into the wall, causing bits of plaster to rain down on Dave. "You little fuck."

"Gabe!" she yelled.

“I know,” Dave said, putting his hands up. “I know.”

“You have *no* idea. I gave you a second chance and you spit in my face. Were you part of tonight’s plan?” Gabe shoved Dave into the wall again. More particles of paint fell into Dave’s hair.

“No. That’s why I’m here. I—”

“Little too late. The house is destroyed. Luckily we were all downstairs. Well, all except for Jess and Roger. Jess didn’t move fast enough. If Chris had been in her place, she would have died from the wounds.”

Dave shook his head. “I’ve held from the beginning, I’ve never wanted Chris hurt. That’s why I left Tom’s place. I didn’t like what they had done and I told them so. They told me if I was weak they would kick me out. I swear. Tom was so busy with Jess that he barely paid attention to me. When I made to leave, the vampires tried to kill me, just like they’d killed the other humans. Listen, they know where you are. You need to get Chris out of here.”

Gabe grabbed him by the throat and pushed him against the wall again. “You’re a damn liar. If they wanted you dead, you’d be dead.”

“Tom stopped them. How else would I know where you were?”

Chris watched as Gabe considered that. He let go of Dave and turned away from him. Gabe had become too involved in this case. Hadn’t he told her before that he normally came in, judged them and left within hours?

Not this time. He’d lived with them. He knew Tom, and he knew Mike. He had seen the pictures, had witnessed the emotion within the friendships.

And Gabe knew how much Dave meant to her—how much they all meant to her. He’d proved it by allowing Tom and Jess to leave back at the house. She doubted he would make the same mistake again, even if he knew she didn’t want Dave to be hurt.

He pulled out his cell and flipped it open. “Mike, get your ass over here.”

He snapped his phone shut. Gabe locked his gaze with hers, and she knew by the look on his face that he was fully prepared to hand down Dave’s verdict. She doubted it would be a good one this time.

Within seconds Mike was knocking on the door. Gabe glanced at Dave. “Answer it.”

Dave looked sick for a moment, but did as he was ordered.

When Dave opened the door, Mike looked shocked. Then relieved.

Then he punched Dave right in the face.

Chapter Fifteen

Dave went stumbling back as Gabe sat on the bed, and Mike came in and slammed the door shut behind him.

Chris shrank down under the covers. This night was getting better and better. She'd barely finished with her multiple orgasms, and their room was being invaded. Now she was surrounded by vampires while she had no choice but to cower naked under the covers.

Note to self—next time grab some clothes and duck into the bathroom.

"Just looking at you makes me sick," Mike said to Dave. There was a vein on his forehead that stood out, and she could have sworn she'd never seen that before.

"I can easily say the same about you." Dave wiped blood from his nose with the back of his sleeve.

Mike bared his fangs and went after Dave again. Just as Mike pulled his right arm back, he finally got a glimpse of Chris and her obvious state of undress.

He went from extremely scary to completely confused. Then his face went dark.

Before she knew what he was doing, Mike let go of Dave and lunged at Gabe.

Gabe dodged him by leaping off the bed, leaving Mike to plow into the wall. "Watch yourself, Mike," he warned.

Mike didn't listen. She wasn't even sure Mike could hear Gabe. He looked as though he were in a world of his own, primed and ready to kill.

He spun around, ready to go toe-to-toe with Gabe.

There was another knock on the door. "What the hell is going on in there?" It was Stephen.

"I'm gonna kill Gabe, then I'm gonna kill Dave, that's what's going on," Mike yelled.

Chris heard Stephen say, "Shit," then louder, "Hey, demon, come open this door. Quick."

Too late—Mike was already going after Gabe again. Dave came to the side of the bed and sat next to her. "This is like watching *Ultimate Fighter*."

"This is not funny." Christ, she couldn't even move to stop it. Not that she'd get in between those two. That would be suicide. She knew the reason Mike didn't want her with Gabe. Gabe would be leaving soon, and Mike was trying to protect his little sister. Still, this was getting out of hand.

There were a few punches thrown, mostly Mike trying to get a hit on Gabe. Gabe was looking less and less amused with every punch thrown.

The door opened just as Mike pulled out a vicious-looking knife from the waist of his jeans.

Gabe straightened and cocked his head at Mike. "Boy, I would suggest you put that away."

"You should have kept it in your pants. I warned you once, and now I'm finished warning. You're leaving soon, and where does that leave her? You're an inconsiderate bastard."

The demon came in, followed by Stephen, Sven and Roger.

“What the shit?” Sven asked. “And here I was watching a rerun of *CSI*.” He came over to the bed and sat next to her, his shoulders on the headboard, his arms folded across his chest. “Go ahead, Mike. I could use a good laugh.”

“Oh my God, you are all crazy!” Chris smacked Sven in the chest, trying to get him to move and do something.

The demon nodded his head in agreement and folded his arms across his chest much the same way Sven had done.

“I thought we had decided Gabe was an asshole,” Mike said to Chris. “Then he insists on sharing a room with you, and now this? Are you telling me you wanted him? If not, he’ll die.”

“She obviously wanted it. She *is* naked,” Sven slid his hand under the covers and tried to peer under the blankets. “Aren’t you, my dear?”

“Get out of here!” she screeched, smacking him. He laughed and tried to lift the blanket again. “Get out!” she yelled, pulling the blankets tighter around her. She punched him in the shoulder. “Gabe, you better do something about your friend!”

“Sven!”

Sven was laughing hysterically as he got up from the bed. “See? She’s already ordering him about. Plus she’s called him an asshole, nagged him for clothes—hell, they’re halfway to being shackled.”

“Can we not have a town meeting in our bedroom?” she asked.

“Our bedroom?” the demon asked. “Oh yeah, she wants him.”

“Get out!” she screamed. They might be used to this type of raw violence and nosy conversation, but she wasn’t. It was none of their damned business what happened in this room. They couldn’t even lift a finger to stop the fight. Instead they watched the men as though things like that were a common occurrence and nothing to worry about.

One by one they left, save Dave and Mike. Mike kept looking at her and shaking his head. She would not be apologetic about this, nor ashamed.

Gabe held his hands out. “Are you finished?”

“For the time being,” Mike said.

Gabe sighed and nodded. “Since you know Dave better than I do, I was going to ask your opinion on what should be done with him.”

“I used to know him. He’s a stranger to me now.”

“Then you could not determine if I should let him live or not?”

Chris glared at Gabe. He wouldn’t look at her.

“Kill him.”

“Michael Thomas Elton! You take that back this instant!” Chris ordered.

Mike glared at her. “So the bastard can stab me while I sleep? I gave him a second chance. There is no third.”

Chris stood up, bringing the sheets with her. “Tom has turned his back on us, so has Jess. Why toss another member of our family out just because he messed up?”

Mike looked incredulous. “Are you fucking serious? I was shot eight times in my chest. The people he calls friends did it. The same friends threw us into a trunk, intending to kill you as well. Would you like me to embrace him like the brothers we used to be?” He looked from her to Dave. “He’s not my brother any longer. He is my enemy.”

Chris closed her eyes and lowered her head. What could she say to that?

She decided the best course of action was getting into the bathroom and cleaning up,

leaving the men alone. Certainly Gabe wouldn't kill Dave. He'd let Jess and Tom go free for her. He'd keep her brother safe—hopefully.

Dave wasn't a bad person. He was just seriously confused right now. He didn't know which side he should be on. Tom had likely filled his head with a ton of bullshit and now he was forced to pick a side. It seemed as though he had picked a side. If Dave had witnessed the vampires kill humans, as he said he did, then that had likely sealed the deal for him.

With nothing else left to say or do, she gathered up the sheets she had around her and lifted them off the floor. As she walked past Gabe, he stopped her with a touch to her arm. She figured he wanted to ask her a question, but when she turned to him, he bent down and gave her a light kiss on the lips.

"We will be finished shortly."

She nodded. She didn't need a dictionary to know what that meant. Soon they would be able to pick up where they left off.

The small gesture gave her a ray of hope. She couldn't keep the smile off her face as she walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Gabe had momentarily stunned her with his show of affection in front of Mike and Dave. Then again, it was probably some form of macho bullshit letting the others know he could have exactly what he wanted.

She cleaned up quickly in the bathroom and came back out into the main room.

When she emerged from the bathroom in her pink and white pj's, the men were still talking.

Gabe rolled his eyes.

She pointed to the door and mouthed Stephen to him. He nodded.

She left and went to Stephen's room. He opened the door after a few knocks. "Hey."

"What's up, little sis?" he asked. He was in red boxer briefs. That was something she could have lived without seeing.

"I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes." When he indicated for her to come in, she shook her head, noticing Sven and Roger in the background. "Alone?"

"Sure thing, hold on." She stepped back into the hall and waited. A wave of hot air had hit her when he had opened the door. Good grief, they liked it hot. At least he hadn't been dressed for winter.

Then again, now that she was blind after seeing his red boxer briefs, a pair of sweats wouldn't have been discouraged.

It was going on three in the morning, but she wasn't at all tired. Truth be told, she wanted everyone out of her room so she could have Gabe all to herself. Instead, their room had become the unofficial vampire headquarters.

Stephen came out wearing a blue robe.

"Where did you get the robe?" she asked.

"You'd be surprised what Sven can come up with if you ask for it. You should see the appetizer plate we have in there. It serves twenty, but we've already knocked about half of it down." He smiled. "Do you want some?"

"No. I can't eat like a pig and not get fat. Jerk."

He walked with her to the double doors that led to the balcony. He held the door for her.

It was a nice night out. A cool breeze, abundant stars to look at.

Stephen propped the door open with a small rock. "The weatherman says we have a storm blowing in. It doesn't seem like it, does it?"

She shook her head. "No, it's beautiful outside."

He leaned his forearms onto the balcony. "So, what's on your mind?"

"Jess. Tom."

"What about them?"

He surprised her with his question. What the hell did he mean, "What about them?" Didn't he care at all what happened to them?

"Even though what they did to us was horrible, how can you and Mike dismiss them so easily? So quickly? Mike just told Gabe to kill Dave."

He shrugged. "They betrayed us. You've never lived in a time period where the law was basically in your hands. Survival wasn't of the fittest or the strongest. It went to those who weren't afraid to do what had to be done. No matter how distasteful that may have been."

Well, she suspected that was true enough. "I know. Even when I tried to help Jess, she called me weak. It was as though she hated me."

He pushed away from the balcony, giving her a strange look. "When did you try to help Jess?"

Shit! "Um, what?" she asked, completely at a loss on how to pretend she hadn't just said that.

He moved to stand in front of her. "When did you try to help her?"

She didn't know what to say. Stephen would know if she was lying. "I—"

"Don't lie to me."

She cleared her throat. Gabe was going to be pissed, but she couldn't lie to her brother. He'd likely know it was a lie, anyway. "When you all were fighting. I heard her and knew she was hurt. I went to help her."

"That was stupid."

"I know."

"No, you don't, or you wouldn't have done it," he snapped at her. He stepped closer. "What happened?"

She remembered Gabe's words. "They got away."

"Because he let them."

"Stephen, please."

"Did he? Tell me the truth, Chris. I saw Gabe with Tom. He could have taken him easily. What happened when they were out of our sight? Gabe let them go for you, didn't he?"

She shook her head. She couldn't betray Gabe like that. He *had* let them go for her, but Stephen couldn't know that. "I'm sorry. I love you, Stephen—"

"But you love him more? When the hell did that happen? You were always so guarded when it came to anyone outside the family, and then Gabe walks in and you fall at his feet."

She laughed, stepping back. "I don't love him. I've only known him a few days."

"Then why do you stare at him? Why do you defend him? Keep his secrets? If you don't love him, why do you sleep with him? I know you better than that, little sister. But think about this. He's leaving. And it doesn't matter if he has feelings for you or not. Whether it's tomorrow or next week, he *is* leaving. And he isn't the type to take any extra

baggage.”

She already knew everything he was saying was true. He was right, but she didn’t want to listen. She only hoped she could handle it when Gabe did go. Chris tried to look away, but Stephen put his hand under her chin and made her look at him.

“If you’re happy to spend only a week or two with him, more power to you. Enjoy yourself. But if you’re falling for him, then you’d better back off. He has no place in his life for you.”

She nodded, swallowing down a lump in her throat. “I know.”

He brought her into a hug. “I don’t want to see you hurt because someone else dropped out of your life.”

“You and Mike are all I need. Dave, too, if Mike doesn’t kill him.”

Stephen laughed, letting her go. “Good luck there.”

“What about you? What do you think about Dave?”

“I don’t know.” Stephen shook his head, looking up to the sky. “Part of me wants him dead just so I don’t have to worry about him. Another part of me doesn’t want to see him hurt. I can’t make that call, though, so I’m not going to concern myself with it.”

“That’s pretty callous, don’t you think?” she asked.

“No, I don’t. Being what we are, we don’t trust many people. Dave’s shown he’s not to be trusted. If Gabe asks me about Dave, I’m going to vote for his death.”

If her brothers could turn on each other so easily, what would keep them from turning on her when they discovered her secret?

It suddenly occurred to her there was a real possibility that she would walk away from all of this with no one.

Chapter Sixteen

Chris figured she wasn't very good at keeping secrets. She hadn't meant for anyone to find out that Gabe had helped Tom. Besides the guilt she felt over that accidental admission, she was upset at Stephen's dismissal concerning Dave's welfare.

Was she the only one who cared about what happened to him?

She knocked on the door to her room. It clicked, and she walked in. Gabe was lying on the bed, stretched out on his back, with his right arm over his face.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she walked to the bed.

"I'm just tired."

That surprised her. He seemed so indestructible and so strong, it struck her as an odd thing for him to say.

"I'm tired, too. Tired of the crazy things happening all the time," she said, sitting on the bed.

"I'm used to that. I've been doing it for so long. I'm physically tired. I can't remember the last time I had a few days off."

She put her hand on his leg. Poor guy. "I can't imagine."

"I can't say that it hasn't been interesting. Some of the things I've seen throughout the years would curl your toes."

She figured as much. His admission reminded her of their differences. Their baggage. "So, what's the craziest thing you've ever seen?"

She could only see the lower half of his face, because his arm was lying across his eyes. He smiled.

"Sven running out of a cave with a lit torch, screaming." He started laughing as he recalled the memory. He moved his arm and put it under his head so he could look at her. There was laughter and warmth in his blue eyes.

"It was pitch black outside, not even a star could be seen. It was so silent, you could almost call the silence a sound. A hum. Of course this was way before cars or electricity. I think it was in the thirteen hundreds, if I recall correctly. Roger, my father and I were waiting outside the cave for Sven and just bullshitting. Sven had gone in to find some vampires we were hunting."

He laughed again. "We hear a screech come out of the cave that sounded like a woman, and it ripped through the night. So we all stand up and get ready to fight, thinking the shit's about to hit the fan. Instead, out runs Sven. He's the one screaming, and he's screaming at us to run, only we're laughing too hard to move by then." His laughter was contagious. She started laughing, too. "He runs past us and out come a string of vampires. There must have been hundreds."

Still laughing, she asked, "What did you do?"

"Well, we stopped laughing, for one." He shook his head. "I'll just never forget the Viking running out of that cave screaming like a girl." He laughed again. "That was hilarious."

She lay down as Gabe put his arm out for her. She nestled into his side. "But what happened to all of those vampires?"

"They were class D vamps, meaning Forrest Gump seemed intelligent to them."

She brought the covers up and over them and snuggled into his side. She'd never snuggled with a man before. Well, she had snuggled with Mike, but this was a completely different feeling. She'd had a one-night stand before, but no feelings beyond sexual attraction. She had never wanted to feel her skin against another's. Lay her head on someone's chest. "I don't understand."

"How do I describe it? Let's just say they're *not* inbred. Only my father, or at the very least Sven or Roger, can create a vampire without the human losing something in the transition. We don't know why, exactly, only that he's the first. So, in a weird way, it's like inbreeding in reverse. All normal vamps have been made by my father."

"How did he fall from grace?"

Gabe didn't answer her. He turned to his side, facing her, and laid his open palm on her stomach.

"What do you dream of?"

Caught off guard, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"What is it you want out of life? What are your dreams?"

To have someone love me unconditionally. To him she said, "A family. A snowy Christmas morning where I wake up and I don't have to drive anywhere to be with those I love. Kids. Puppies. A lazy cat." She looked to the ceiling and began seeing some of the things she always wanted. "Laughter. Getting up early on Easter to hide Easter eggs." She shrugged. "A family. My family."

He didn't say anything.

"Did you have that?" she asked him.

"In a way I had too much family."

That statement was insane. Something she would never understand. "I don't think there can be such a thing."

"I had over two hundred people in my family at one time."

"What?"

"I was born in the twelfth century. Born into the clan MacPherson. My dad was the laird, so everyone knew me. My house was a castle, and there was never a moment to myself. Unless I got up really early in the morning, which I did more than not. I would find a place inside the castle or out in the courtyard that no one was occupying, just so I could hear myself think. Before the sun rose everyone was up and moving around like ants on a dirt hill."

His life sounded like a fairy tale to her. "That sounds exciting."

"Not really. There were times I liked it, though. When I was seven I began to train. I enjoyed that."

"Train for what?"

"War."

"At seven years old?" she asked incredulously.

"Sure."

She shook her head. "Well, that aside, it was much better than what I grew up with."

"What did you grow up with?"

She shrugged and laced her fingers through his. "No one. Everyone. My parents left when I was four. I went to a foster home, because they couldn't locate any more family members, or the way I like to look at it, no one else in my family wanted to be burdened with me. I had to have had more family, wouldn't you think? I had a grand total of four

foster parents before I turned seventeen. Every house was different and I can remember a certain aspect of each. At my second home I couldn't take baths, only showers." She laughed. "I don't know why that's the one memory I have from them. Just wanting a bubble bath so badly."

He didn't say anything so she continued. "Every time I was adopted, the judge who legalized the adoption would take a picture of me and my new parents. The first time I didn't remember much about it, but I saw the pictures and I was smiling. The second time I remembered being happy and wanting to frame the picture and put it in my new room. By the third time I was no longer smiling in the pictures."

"When did you meet Tom?"

"Two days after high school graduation I applied for a job at his office. I thought it was weird to interview at nine at night, but the pay was good. After I started working for him I took over the day shift. I was the boss, and he trusted me to handle things until he got there at night. He would only work until midnight or so, crunching numbers or checking email. I was more in charge of the editing that went in the newsletters and the correspondence during the day. Anyway, one day he asked me where I was going for Christmas. Truth was, I wasn't going anywhere. I guess he sensed it, because he came over the night before Christmas and told me to get dressed, I was coming over for dinner."

Gabe smiled. "That's the Tom I remember."

"I thought they were insane. But we stayed up until five in the morning, and everyone was so nice I did everything I could to get invited back. I started baking, because they all seemed to love it so much. I got good at it, too, trying recipes just so I could bring them something delicious next time I saw them."

She quit talking, remembering what Stephen had said. "*I don't want to see you hurt because someone else dropped out of your life.*"

Gabe had no idea how much people could mean in someone's life. That's why she would give Dave all the chances he needed. She never wanted to be alone again.

Dave would always be her brother. She would never turn her back on him.

"What will you do with Dave? Where is he?" she asked quietly.

He squeezed her. "Don't worry about it."

"What is that supposed to mean? I asked a simple question."

Gabe let go of her and turned to lie on his back again. "I'm not going to answer it, Chris."

"He's important to me," she argued, sitting up. "Don't you understand what family means to me? I just explained to you why I love them so much. They're all I have in this world and I won't give up on them so easily. Can't you understand that? Does family mean nothing to you?"

He looked back at her, anger apparent in the heat of his gaze and the tone of his voice. "Those two hundred people I spoke of? I watched them die. I watched them age, and I watched them die. Trust me, I know about losing family. I've done it for centuries, which is a hell of a lot longer than you have."

He sat up and leaned forward. "How many times do you have to be stabbed in the back to learn your lesson? When will you realize that Tom, Jess and Dave aren't the people you once knew?"

"Dave's not a bad person."

Gabe shook his head. "I feel sorry for people like you. You wouldn't have lasted a week in my time."

"Well, I feel sorry for you. Your job and your condition have made you immune to the effects of death and the havoc it can have on a family. What do you want me to say? Good for you that you can, as you put it, snap Dave's neck without a speck of remorse?"

"Jess was right. You're weak."

She got up from the bed and strode to the door. How he knew what Jess had said to her was beyond her. No matter, he was out of line. "I'd rather be weak than be a monster."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not coming after you. You leave this room, you're on your own." He picked up the remote and flipped the television on.

She opened the door and left the room, going across the hall to Mike's room.

She knocked quickly, hoping Mike would hurry up and open the door. She didn't want to deal with Gabe making a scene in the hallway.

Naberius opened the door. His eyes were a freaky shade of yellow. She felt lightheaded as she recalled a memory she had of herself when she was eleven. She had been standing in front of a bathroom mirror, terrified of what she was seeing.

There had been something wrong with her eyes...

"What do you want?"

Naberius's voice snapped her back to reality. "Uh, is Mike here?"

"No."

Shit. She looked back at her room. She didn't want to go back in there and face Gabe. He was so stubborn when it came to Dave. She wasn't in the mood to fight with him right now. "Where did he go?"

"Come on in," Naberius said, moving to the side of the door and holding it open for her. He was only wearing a pair of low-rise jeans.

She didn't budge.

He leaned toward her, and she had difficulty keeping eye contact with him. Damn, he was scary. What could a demon do? What powers did they have? She was sure she didn't want to know.

"If you recall, I'm the only one in this group who doesn't bite."

She swallowed down the lump that was trying to lodge in her throat. "True. But I'm wondering what it is you happen to do."

"Fine by me," he started to close the door.

She cursed, putting her hand on the door. "Can I wait for Mike? When do you think he'll be back? Where did he go?"

"Out. I don't know, and I didn't ask him."

Well, he seemed normal enough for being a demon. Gabe trusted him. "You know, I have your boss on speed dial if you try any freaky shit."

He actually laughed. She hadn't seen him smile up to this point. "He's not my boss, but I'll keep that in mind."

He held the door open and held his arm out toward the room, allowing her in. She almost turned around and walked away, but she found herself walking past him. Hell, with what she had been through in the past few days, one demon shouldn't scare her. Especially when he was helping them out.

"So, what did you two fight about?" Naberius walked to the table in the corner of the

room and lit a cigarette as he waited for her to respond.

She stood by the television. "How did you know?"

"You wouldn't be here if you hadn't."

Good point. "I think he's going to kill my brother."

"Dave?"

"Yeah. Do you know where he's at?"

Naberius flipped his Zippo lighter shut and raised his eyebrow. He blew out a line of smoke before he answered her. "Do you have a need to know?"

She grunted. "You sound like Gabe."

"We practically lived together in Hell for a millennium, so I would think so."

She couldn't have been more stunned if he had announced that he liked to wear women's underwear. "What?"

Naberius just stared at her with those disturbing yellow eyes. Or were they light green? She couldn't tell with the lighting in the room set to such a dim level.

Now that she felt a bit more sure that he wasn't going to torture her in some ungodly way, she finally realized the man was hot.

He had an eight-pack of abs. He had cut lines at the sides of his hips and a strange, intricate tattoo on his right hip.

She could tell by his silence that he hadn't meant to say anything about Gabe. "Oh, no you don't. What are you talking about? He said he was born in the twelfth century. That he was raised in a clan."

"I thought you knew. Now that I know you don't know jack shit, I'm not going to be the one to tell you."

"Oh, come on," she pleaded. Gabe was so secretive about everything, she'd only learned things when he let his guard down, which was next to never. She did recall him saying something about Hell, having been there, done that, burned the T-shirt. She hadn't taken him seriously, though.

The phone on the nightstand began ringing. Naberius answered it, then handed the phone to her.

"I'm busy," she said when she put the phone to her ear.

"Are you finished?" Gabe asked.

She hated when he said that to her. "Are you willing to answer my questions about Dave?"

"Not a chance in hell."

"Yeah, well, you'd know," she said, and hung up. She glanced back at Naberius. She stood completely still as he took another drag off his cigarette. He would tell her what she wanted to know. In fact, she was quite certain he wanted her to know or he wouldn't have let that earlier bit of information slip.

He didn't seem the type of man who made simple mistakes.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

She wasn't going to give him a chance to change his mind. "How did you meet him and why was he in Hell in the first place?"

* * * *

"So, to sum it up, he's lived two lives? And he remembers the first because he made a pact with Sexy?"

"I really hate it when you call him that," Naberius said.

"Yeah, you and everyone else."

"First life, his mother's name was Celeste. She was a vampire, and she lived in Hell. She raised her son there. She tried keeping him on the straight and narrow, but that was impossible. He grew up living the life of a demon."

"Then something changed in the past, and that life ... I don't understand," she finally said, giving up.

"His mother, Sam, changed her destiny."

"With a cross?" she asked. Celeste and Sam were the same person. She tried getting everything he'd told her right in her head.

"Yes. A cross made by—"

"A fairy?"

"Yes."

"I'm beginning to understand." He looked pleased with her admission. "I understand you've been in the heat too long."

He shook his head. "Sam *was* Celeste. In two thousand seven she became a Keeper of the Cross. The cross took her back to Ambrose, around the twelfth century. She became trusting of him. Apparently, so trusting she slept with him and became pregnant."

"With Gabe."

"Yes. Then the cross took her back in time again to Ambrose, sometime right after the flood, only this time he did *not* know her. He'd never met her before. He killed her and made her a vampire, the first vampire he ever created. Then Cresil, the demon who had the cross made, took her from Ambrose. She gave birth to Gabe and raised him in Hell."

She began to understand what Naberius was saying. "Then time went on, and it repeated. In two thousand ten, which has not yet come around, she went back in time, only Ambrose knew who she was this time, because he had killed her. He remembered her."

"Exactly," Naberius said, looking relieved that she was finally catching on. "And Celeste interfered, because she wanted Gabe to have a normal life, and she wanted a better life for herself."

Chris nodded. "So she helped herself, by telling, um, herself, what was going to happen."

"So she could prevent it the second time around."

"Okay. And then she did prevent it. She wasn't killed by Ambrose, so that part of her life in Hell never existed." She thought she understood it now. "So when Gabe found out that he had lived another life, he wanted to know ... why?"

He put his cigarette out and leaned back in his chair. "Ask him."

She raised an eyebrow. "He doesn't answer my questions."

"I can see why. You never run out of them."

"Well, this is confusing." She held a hand to her head. These people were going to make her crazy. So Gabe's destiny had changed, but instead of not remembering his first life, he made a pact with Sexy and he remembered everything from that previous life.

That was heavy shit.

She figured Naberius was finished with her questions, and the last thing she wanted to do was anger a demon.

“What kind of name is Naberius? It’s too long. Don’t you have a nickname?”

She heard him mumble something, but she couldn’t make it out. It was probably a good thing, since she was sure that he didn’t like her. “How ’bout I make a nickname up for you?”

“Please don’t do me any favors. I can’t even imagine what fucked-up name you would come up with, considering you call Satan Sexy.”

She laughed. Perhaps this demon wasn’t so bad after all. “Let’s see. A nickname for Naberius.” She looked him over. He was certainly Sexy, but that name was already taken. His yellow eyes were a bit of a turn-off, though. Made him look like a cat, or something.

She could call him pussy.

She burst out laughing. No, she couldn’t do that. Not if she wanted to leave the room alive. “What about—”

“No, thank you. I don’t want one of your nicknames. Especially if you can’t keep a straight face when you come up with it.”

“No, that was another one I was thinking about,” she said with a wave of her hand. “How about—”

He held up his hand, interrupting her. “There is something seriously wrong with you. I thought I was sadistic.”

She started laughing again. “Stop. Wait, I’m trying to think.” Something cat-like. Hiss? Claw?

“Mr. P.”

“What?”

She was laughing so hard tears were coming out of her eyes. Mike chose that time to come in the room.

“Mr. PC.” She howled with laughter. She couldn’t stop laughing, so she put her hand over her face and doubled over in the chair.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Mike asked.

“She’s lost her fucking mind.”

Oh, God, if they only knew.

“What are you laughing at?” Mike asked her.

“Mr. PC.” She tried to breath, unable to take in an adequate breath.

“What does PC stand for? Politically correct?” Mike asked.

She choked on laughter and nodded, unable to do anything else.

Naberius shook his head. “Bullshit. What does it stand for?”

She stood up from the table and started for the door. “I’m taking off. I have to get to sleep. I’m getting ditzy.”

“You’ve always been ditzy, now what does it stand for?” Mike asked again.

She got to the door and opened it. She had to stop laughing so she could get the words out. It took her a full minute, and all the while Naberius was looking less and less amused.

“Whew, goodnight, Mike.”

Mike shook his head. “Night, freak.”

She waved at Naberius, unable to keep from laughing. “Night, pussycat.”

He jumped up from the chair, and she slammed the door behind her before he got to it.

She heard him yell something from inside the room, as she made her way down the

hall. She thought she heard him yell something about bullshit. She wiped the tears from her face. He'd been smiling when he bounded out of that chair, so maybe he needed something to laugh at as well. She sure as hell needed that.

It was nearing six in the morning. She decided to step outside and get her bearings. She couldn't just knock on Gabe's door and say, "Okay, time for bed."

She opened the double doors to the balcony and leaned on the railing. When had she had a moment to herself? When she had left Tom's house that first time? That seemed like ages ago. When she drove back with Mike in the trunk? She had been so stressed out she hadn't thought about anything. She'd only been concentrating on how scared she was and allowed herself only to react to the events around her. She hadn't had time to think about them at all.

The sun was starting to rise, and the air had a definite bite to it.

She had to admit, she was a bit let down that Gabe hadn't come for her yet. Guess he'd had enough of her.

She watched a white Lexus pull into the parking lot. Two women got out and walked to the office.

She missed Jess all of a sudden. The old Jess. The one she had gone shopping with. Watched movies with.

Chris would have loved to unload everything she had just learned about Gabe onto her. They would have talked about it over a cup of coffee and some cherry coffee cake that Chris had baked and brought over in her Tupperware.

Jess wouldn't be there for her anymore. She had no other girlfriends to chat with.

Chris turned to go back inside. Now she knew why she didn't think about the new events that were taking place in her life. She didn't want to be alone with her thoughts because that meant a serious dose of reality, and she wanted nothing to do with that.

When she put her hand on the door handle and jiggled it, the door wouldn't open. A laminated white paper said she needed a card to get back in before seven a.m.

Damn.

She started down the steps. The two women that had gone into the office were downstairs. She could hear them talking as they came up the stairs. As she passed them she realized they had a key.

Chris smiled and held out her hand. "Oh, hey, are you going to the third deck? I came out for some fresh air and forgot my card. Would you mind letting me in?"

"Christine?" One of them asked.

The woman had a set of fangs.

Chris instinctively looked toward the rising sun and realized this woman had to be an older vampire. Chris felt the blood drain from her face and took a step down, away from them.

Too late. She had given herself away.

"This was too easy," the blonde one said, taking a knife off her belt.

"Why, like, make things messy? Just snap her neck and let's find Dave. These heels are killing me," she said, pointing to red, four-inch-high heels.

The other pouted. "You know how I like blood."

"Well, duh. You're like, a vampire," the dark-haired one said.

I have got to get the hell out of here. Were these the class D vamps Gabe had been speaking of, or were they just Paris wannabes?

“Naberius?” Chris called out. “Do you know him? Have you seen him? I locked myself out, and he has the key.” Dear God, was she rambling?

The dark-haired vamp backed away. The other shook her head saying, “What, like, are we supposed to know all vampires? Like it’s a club or something? What a bitch.” She started to come at her with the knife.

The dark-haired one grabbed the other by the arm. “Naberius is a demon.”

Chris snapped her finger and pointed at the vamp, more excited than she was willing to admit. “That’s him. He has yellow eyes?” Chris took another step down. There was no way she could outrun them, but she wasn’t going to stand there and let them snap her neck or let the blood freak cut her. They might think that the vampires in her group couldn’t come out during the daytime, but a demon sure as hell could.

“How do you know what he looks like?” The tall one asked.

“He’s upstairs waiting for me.”

“No way,” the blonde one said. “Dude, isn’t that the guy you hooked up with a while back?”

The dark-haired vamp ignored her as a sneer spread across her face. “Naberius don’t give a shit about you. He’d probably help us do it.”

She eyed the dark-haired woman, knowing she was probably right. “No, not true. How do you think I know him? We’re together.”

The blonde turned to the other. “I thought she was screwing Gabe?”

Shit! “He was so last week,” Chris said, laughing, trying to talk like them.

“That’s crap. I don’t believe her.”

“Naberius has a birthmark on his hip,” Chris said quickly as they moved toward her again. “He can pop right down here and help me. He’s on his way as we speak.”

“Holy shit, she does know him,” said the dark-haired one. “And she’s seen him naked.”

Thank God, Naberius hadn’t felt the need to pull a shirt on when she had gone inside his room. And thank God for low-rise jeans.

“What’s the birthmark?”

Chris hadn’t gotten that close. She only knew it was some sort of seal. Apparently, Pussycat knew the dark-haired vamp pretty well.

“He’s right behind you. Ask him.”

Both vamps turned around, and Chris pushed the blonde into the other and leapt over the railing.

She was on the second story. She landed hard.

She felt her ankle twist, but she forced the pain out of her mind and bolted for the office.

Shit, shit, and double shit. From now on she was going to attach herself to Gabe’s leg, no matter how much he annoyed her.

She ran into the office, shut the door and locked it.

It didn’t surprise her when she saw a man lying dead behind the counter. He had been stabbed. She bent down to feel for a pulse, but there was no need. He was dead. His neck was sliced open.

There was a bang on the front door as Chris searched under the counter for a weapon. She heard the glass crack. She stuck her head over the counter to see dumb and dumber holding a huge rock.

She kept searching for a weapon. Surely the hotel staff kept a gun.

She found a locked drawer.

She heard another bang as she searched the dead man for a key. No key there. She opened various drawers and found the room key cards, alongside three other normal keys. One looked like it would fit.

She tried it in the locked drawer. It fit. She quickly turned the key.

Inside the drawer was the smallest gun she had ever seen. She could probably shoot *herself* with it and keep going.

Next to it was a small knife.

She grabbed both.

There was another bang on the door.

Dang, they were weak. She could have broken the door in by now. She hoped no one was hearing all of this. At six in the morning, some people might be trying to check out and get an early start.

Then again, if anyone saw two psycho supermodels trying to break the office door down, they might skip checkout.

When the glass finally shattered, Chris was almost relieved.

The blonde vamp stepped through the broken door and over the shattered glass. "I just got a manicure, you fucking bitch," she hissed as she held out her knife in front of her.

Chris stood up and held out the gun.

The blonde immediately started laughing at the tiny weapon.

Chris had her left eye shut and followed her train of sight down the top of the small gun. "It might not kill you, but it will slow you down. So I suggest you back up, rethink your mission and go home and repent."

Holy crap, did she just throw out a B movie one-liner?

The blonde threw her long hair over her right shoulder. "Fuck you," she snapped, advancing toward Chris.

Chris pulled the trigger. She shot the blonde five times in the chest. It was sickening the way she saw the bullets enter the woman's clothing. Chris pulled the trigger again, but only soft clicks filled the air. She was out of bullets.

The woman staggered back, cursing, but she didn't fall.

"This shirt cost me over a hundred dollars!"

Chris's eyes couldn't have gotten wider when the vampire she had shot flew at her. Literally *flew* at her.

Chris ducked and stabbed out with the knife. *Vampires could fly?* Why hadn't someone informed her of that little fact?

The other vamp bounded over the desk and joined the fight. Chris stabbed one of them in the heart, another in the throat. Nothing seemed to penetrate them.

Memories began to flood through her. Fighting instincts. Her movements were much quicker than she would have expected as she concentrated on her survival. Their movements seemed to come at her slower and slower, as if she were in the movie *The Matrix*. Was she moving fast, or were they just moving slowly? What the hell was going on?

The dark-haired vamp wrapped her hands around Chris's neck, and she panicked. She brought the knife across the vamp's wrist. Apparently what the owner had lacked in

the gun department, he made up for with sharp knives.

She nearly cut the vamp's hand clear off. She'd sliced through some of the bone. Had it been the knife, or the power she felt that had made it so effective? What was happening to her?

Chris stumbled over the dead body of the hotel manager when the vamp let her go. The dark one screamed. Blood was running down her arm as she held it up.

"I doubt we'd survive the chainsaw massacre," she recalled Stephen saying.

Chris picked herself off the ground and tried to run. The blonde snatched her by the hair and tackled her, both of them slipping in the puddle of blood on the cheap linoleum floor. Chris landed on her back from the force of the vamp pulling her hair, and the blonde straddled her.

Instinct told her the blonde had just put her in a death position.

Chris started slashing like a mad woman. She knew where to cut the vampire, and she didn't stop. Both were coated in blood, and Chris wasn't sure whose blood it was. She was sure the bitch had cut her at least once.

To add insult to injury, the blonde vamp bit her in the neck.

Chris stabbed her in the back, and the girl let her go. She only let one vamp bite her, and she was not him.

Chris put her hand on the blonde's neck, holding her still, and slashed her just under her jaw line.

Blood spilled all over Chris and hit her in the face from the gaping wound in the blonde's neck. Blood spilled into her eyes, and drizzled into her mouth. Chris pushed the blonde off her and started to gag.

Naberius came tearing around the desk and came to her side. She pushed further away from the blonde vamp and held up her hand. She didn't want anyone near her.

The dark-haired vampire ran screeching out of the office, and the blonde just lay there, convulsing.

Chris wiped at her mouth and backed up to a wall to use as support. She was trying to catch her breath, but every time she did she gulped blood down her throat.

Naberius knelt next to the blonde vamp, and from his dismissal, she figured the girl was dead.

He took out his cell and pushed the two-way button. "Gabe, we need clean-up in the office downstairs. Now. I can do it if you like, but you might like to see this."

Naberius went outside and left her with the two bodies.

She would not feel guilty about this. She wouldn't. Not when everyone else in her little group had fought earlier in the night, and she hadn't done jack shit.

She tried spitting out more of the blood from her mouth. She heard someone come into the office and she tensed.

Gabe came around the desk and stood there staring at her, crumpled and bloody, using the wall for support.

She lowered her eyes, keeping them from his view. There was blood everywhere. The floor was coated in it, she was coated in it, and the bodies lying around her added to the puddles building on the floor.

She quietly sat in it.

She had royally fucked up. She felt like an ass for having left in a fit earlier. Why couldn't she understand that this wasn't a game? When was the seriousness of the

situation going to hit her?

The phone rang on the desk. Gabe answered it. "You've reached Red Oak Motel, how may I help you?" Gabe waved his hand at Naberius outside. "No, sir. Someone had their television up too loud. We have rectified the problem."

Gabe hung up the phone. "We're going to have to get everyone out before the maid service gets here. Go upstairs and get things together. Take Chris with you and get her cleaned up. I'll keep an eye down here until you all are ready. Try and keep Mike and Stephen out of direct sunlight."

Gabe stepped over the two bodies and held his hand out for her. She grasped it and got to her feet.

"Any of this blood yours?" He ran his hands over her and checked for injuries. How many times had he done that by now?

"I don't think so." She pulled away, avoiding his hands as she walked past him. God, she was humiliated.

Naberius waited for her just outside the door, and she walked out of the office in front of him.

"What happened?"

She felt the wetness the blood created on her shirt. It was cold and sticky and she felt like ripping it off of her body. "I defended myself."

"I would say so."

"It's called survival. I had no other choice."

He left it alone. They got to the top of the stairs, where she had been locked out. It clicked open before she reached it.

Naberius went down the hall to get Mike, while she woke up Stephen, Sven and Roger.

Roger answered the door. He pulled out an ancient-looking sword that had been lying beside the door, obviously looking for the person who had turned her into a walking blood cell.

She didn't even flinch. "We need to leave."

"What happened?" he asked. "Are you hurt?"

"Pack your things. We need to leave now." She didn't want to explain herself.

She left Roger standing in the doorway as she waited in the hallway. She wanted to go into her room, but she had no key. She was still in her pajamas.

Her entire body was on fire. Fighting the urge to curl into the fetal position, she closed her eyes and tried focusing on the fact that she was still alive. But what had happened in the office? What was she that she could jump from two stories and move as fast as she did?

She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. She had to keep it together. Breaking down now would be the worst kind of folly. She was stronger than this.

Mike came out of the room, looking tired and less than pleased. "What's the secret? Why are we leaving, do you know? Spawn won't tell me shit," he said as he rubbed his eyes.

"I told you not to call me that," Naberius warned.

"There was an incident," she said.

"An incident? What the hell does that mean?" Mike asked, turning in her direction. "*Jesus*, what the hell happened to you?"

He started to come over to her and she held out her hand. She didn't want to get into it and she didn't want anyone near her. She turned to Naberius. Blood started getting into her eyes, and there was too much blood on her hands to wipe it away with. "I need to get into my room. I can't see."

"Okay," he said, putting his hand on her arm and leading her to the door. Before he opened the door he flashed a rag into his hand and wiped at her eyes.

"Chris—"

"Don't, Mike," she warned.

Naberius opened the door to the room and led her into the bathroom, turning on the faucet. The thought occurred to her that she should be getting used to this by now. The fighting and the blood. The weird powers that everyone had.

"I need to take a shower."

"We don't have time."

She waited until he left the bathroom, then she scrubbed until she couldn't feel her hands. She ran the cloth over her body as best she could, but she could do nothing about her clothes.

When she was finished, she left the room with Naberius, who had stayed in the front room waiting for her. Everyone else was in the hallway.

Mike came up to her and gave her a once-over, holding a bedspread around him.

"You killed a vamp?"

She shot a look at Naberius, who'd obviously filled everyone in.

"They wouldn't shut up," he snapped. "You catch their names?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't. I didn't think I needed to take roll call." She raised her eyebrow. "You knew that dark-haired vamp, didn't you?"

They started walking down the hall.

"How did you know that?" Naberius asked.

"Cause when I tried to get away, I threw your name out there like a bad habit. The dark-haired vampire knew you. Then she said there was no way I knew you, so I mentioned your birthmark. Sure made a believer out of her real fast."

"My seal," he corrected her. "So it *was* Meline. I wasn't sure."

"Who is that and what's a seal?" she asked.

He held open the door to the balcony. "We knew each other in the early seventeen hundreds. My seal was put there by Lucifer. Every demon has a seal."

She raised an eyebrow. They came downstairs in silence and filed into the office. Mike and Stephen went to the back office to stay out of the sunlight.

"What now?" Sven asked.

Chris stood by Naberius. She was afraid Gabe would begin yelling at her any minute for leaving to go downstairs. She didn't feel like arguing with him about it.

"We leave. We get into the Hummer and go to Chris's."

"That isn't entirely safe," Mike said from the back.

Gabe locked eyes with her. "We're done with safe. We get ready to go after them, and we don't stop until they're dead."

That would mean this case would be closed.

When that happened, Gabe would be gone.

Chapter Seventeen

Chris sat in the back of the Hummer, roasting in the heat of the vehicle between Mike and Stephen. It wouldn't have been so bad if Gabe hadn't turned up the heat because Mike and Stephen had been complaining. Why, she had no clue. Both were covered with bedspreads they had lifted from the motel.

She was stuck in the back between them, while Gabe drove and Naberius rode shotgun.

Sven and Roger were behind them, driving a stolen Dodge pick-up truck. She had to wonder what the police would make of the disappearance of the motel manager. His family would never know what happened to him. Which reminded her...

"Where's Dave?" Chris asked Mike in a whisper.

"With Satan," Naberius answered from the front.

He turned in his seat to face her. "We couldn't deal with his shit, and for some reason, Gabe decided to let Satan watch over him."

At least he was still alive. She rubbed at a trickle of blood running into her bra. She itched everywhere. She found it quite ironic that she was covered in blood in a truck full of vampires.

Talk about wrong time and place.

Chris looked at Gabe's reflection in the rearview mirror. As if he felt her gaze, his gaze shifted up and met hers briefly before turning his attention back at the road.

He knew. She'd felt something inside, something different about herself as she fought those two vamps. She had no doubt he knew what it was.

"What is it?" She studied him in the mirror, wishing he would look at her again.

"What is it about me?"

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Everyone stilled. Mike and Stephen quit shifting under their covers, and Naberius stared straight ahead, but their attention was riveted on her question and the awaited answer.

"What could it be?"

Mike eased back his cover and gave her a questioning look. She ignored him and the tremor of instinct telling her that he wasn't going to like her after this conversation. She could already feel tears welling up.

She'd wondered for years what it was about her that people shied away from. What made her so different that human instinct made people shy away? Something that the vampires she called family either couldn't sense or didn't care about. She had a feeling she already knew what it was, but she prayed she was wrong.

"Do you know who your real parents were?" Gabe asked her.

The truck was silent. She didn't want to answer, but it wasn't really a secret. She cleared her throat. "No."

"Their names?"

She shook her head and swallowed down the odd memories that were trying to come to the surface. Scary memories filled with pain. "No," she whispered.

"Does the name Balam sound familiar?"

“No.”

Gabe caught her eyes in the rearview mirror again. “You have no recollection of your father?”

She let out a deep laugh that she really didn’t feel. “I said no. Why?”

“Humans don’t kill vampires very often.” Naberius turned to her. “And if they do, they sure as hell aren’t twenty-four-year-old women with no prior fighting skills.”

The mood in the car was becoming tense. Sitting between Mike and Stephen, a place she’d always felt so safe, now felt like an inescapable trap.

She no longer wanted to have this conversation. She wanted no part of it. She regretted bringing it up and wished that she could recall her words.

She met Mike’s steady and questioning gaze. “He’s talking crazy.”

“Your courage, your skill? It seems ingrained,” Gabe said.

“Ingrained from where?” she snapped. She clenched her jaw when Naberius cast a look toward Gabe. What did they know that she didn’t?

“Family genetics,” Gabe answered.

“My parents left me when I was four years old. They gave up being my family then.”

Gabe shook his head. “That does not change the fact that you are their daughter by blood.”

His gaze met hers in the rearview mirror again. Secrets and knowledge lingered in the pale blue depths of his eyes. And sympathy? By having tasted her, could he know something he wasn’t sharing?

After she gave him directions, Gabe pulled into her driveway and turned off the engine. He didn’t move to unbuckle. No one did. Everyone sat and waited.

She started shaking. She felt like she was on the verge of something, and she wasn’t prepared for it. She’d wanted answers all her life. Now they were within her reach, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Gabe turned in the driver’s seat to face her. “Have you noticed how well you take everything that has been given you? The fact that your family was made of vampires? Satan? Demons?”

She shrugged, unable to speak.

“Did something click with you when you killed that man back at Tom’s house? As if it had been too easy? That it hadn’t been luck?”

“It was luck,” she insisted as she tried to ignore the truth of the words he spoke. He was right. Just as she’d felt more powerful with him, she’d taken out the blonde vampire with a speed that astounded her.

His gaze never left hers. “Did your actions come easy to you?”

She swallowed. “Perhaps.”

“You have ingrained tendencies, instincts and skills. I think you have forgotten your younger years, or have emotionally blocked them because they remind you too much of a past that hurt you. A past that you fear you would do anything to go back to. A family? Perhaps a family that abandoned you? That’s why you cling so tightly to the people in your life now.”

She shook her head and struggled to draw air into her lungs. If Mike and Stephen weren’t blocking her in, she’d have been out of the truck by now.

She wanted out of the truck. She *needed* to get out of the truck. Mike was on one side, Stephen on the other. She felt needled in. Why did everyone have to stare at her?

She should have never brought this up. She glanced at Naberius. He didn't look away. Had he known? Of course he knew. She was the reason he was with them. She'd known it from the beginning—the moment she had seen his eyes and the way he watched her.

She was evil.

Sven walked up to the truck and Gabe waved him away. He and Roger went inside her house.

"You weren't really surprised the family who had taken you in were vampires, were you?" Gabe leaned toward her. "You had already guessed it."

"No," she insisted. "I didn't."

He wouldn't listen to her. "In your subconscious you already knew they were vampires, but you never made an issue about it because you knew you were different just like they were."

"Let me out. Now," she snapped at Stephen. She tried to open the door by leaning over him. He wouldn't let her.

Stephen grabbed her wrists firmly and stopped her. "Chris—"

Please, *please*. No one would want to be around her. Mike would hate her, just as he did Naberius. She kept shaking her head. *Spawn. Demon boy*. She wasn't good enough. "You don't know." Gabe couldn't know for certain. No one could.

Stephen's grip felt like steel bands holding her down until she gave up. She stopped trying to get out of the truck.

She was normal.

She could make them love her.

They didn't know.

She could change anything she wanted to change about herself, she'd been doing exactly that for years. If only Gabe would shut his damn mouth.

"Your blood isn't that of a human," Gabe said.

She turned to him, tears building in her eyes. "Shut up! Shut the fuck up!"

"You were bounced from foster home to foster home. You never knew why until you saw your eyes changing when you reached puberty. When you saw Tom, you knew what he was. It was instinctive. That's why you were more than happy to become part of their family. If the truth ever came out, they might understand. They might continue to love you."

She shook her head.

"Chris—"

"It's not true." She choked down tears and turned to Mike. She couldn't lose him. She kept shaking her head. "Don't listen to him, Mike."

Stephen let go of her wrists, probably in disgust.

Gabe kept on. "Chris, let it go. You can't lie to yourself any longer."

"You are a liar!" She turned to Stephen. "He's lying," she insisted. "Don't listen to him."

The silence in the truck was suffocating. She tried to block Gabe out, but he wouldn't stop.

"Your father's name is Balam. He's one of the first angels to be cast out with Lucifer. He's a king of Hell." Gabe slammed her with the past. A past she had buried so deep even she couldn't trust the truth of it any longer.

Accept the truth. His voice whispered in her head. She knew what he'd say next. She

didn't want to know, but she knew all too well. She'd been burying the secret for years.

“Chris, your blood is that of a demon.”

Chapter Eighteen

Chris's reaction was immediate and intense. She tried going after Gabe, while Stephen and Mike held her back. She made it difficult for them to control her. "You are a goddamn liar!"

She tried breaking their hold. "Let me out of this truck. Let me out!"

Mike put his arms around her, coming out of his blanket. She tried pushing him away until she heard him hiss.

A ray of light hit his hand, which started turning red.

She helped him quickly cover, and some of the fight went out of her.

As much as she tried, there was no getting out of the truck. She put a hand over her eyes. She didn't want anyone to see her like this. She hadn't wanted anyone to know this about her.

She couldn't control the color of her eyes when she was this angry. Any raw emotion made them change to a black and yellow mix. That's why she always calmed herself down before she got to such an emotional state. That's why she had created her mantras.

Her thoughts drifted back to the motel, when Gabe had come into the front office. She had lowered her eyes because her emotions had been a wreck. She hadn't needed a mirror to know what he would have seen if she hadn't hid it. She had calmed herself as she had walked with Naberius upstairs so she could face her brothers without giving her secret away.

But Gabe had already known. There had been no reason to hide from him.

How long had he known? Why did he have to tell her in front of Mike and Stephen? They were all she had left.

Every time people thought she was a bit different they left. People were afraid of what they couldn't explain.

The reason her second foster father had left, hadn't anything to do with extra responsibility like his wife had thought. Chris had been in the bathroom, trying to figure out what was happening to her body. She was twelve, going through puberty. Her eyes kept going from light green, to yellow, to black. She thought she was possessed, but hadn't felt any different.

Her foster father had knocked on the door, and she had called out that she would be a few more minutes. He'd come in, anyway, complaining about the time she spent in the bathroom.

Her eyes had been half black and half yellow. If she thought it had scared her, she had nothing on her foster father.

He'd had a stroke.

He had never said what he had witnessed that day, but he hadn't really stayed long enough to speak to anyone. After he had been released from the hospital, he just left.

Her eyes had finally settled on a light green color, but her foster mother had noticed the change. She had given her up soon after.

The second Chris had laid eyes on Naberius, and he'd informed her he was a demon and not a vampire, she had known what she was.

She sat in silence as everyone except Gabe got out of the Hummer. It was already

starting. Mike wanted nothing to do with her. He had made it clear how he felt about demons.

Stephen hadn't been as vocal against demons as Mike had been, but he still didn't want to socialize with Naberius. No one had wanted to room with Naberius. No one had wanted to be around him.

She wasn't sure what color her eyes were. Even without the need to hide what she was from him, she couldn't meet Gabe's gaze.

She closed her eyes. He knew, and he hadn't run screaming in the other direction—yet.

She sat sideways in the backseat of the Hummer. Gabe was still in the front seat watching her. She wasn't sure if she was mad at him, or if she was glad he had done this to her. She felt like she had just wakened from a bad dream.

Hell, she had been the one to bring the subject up. Perhaps, on some level, she just wanted this out in the open.

"Do you hate me?" Fear thickened his voice. As if he was worried about how she felt about him.

Drained of the will to fight, she shook her head and kept her hand over her eyes. "I could never hate you."

What she had feared most had come to the surface. In front of two of her family members. Dave. Oh, man. Dave wouldn't accept her. Look what he had done to Mike and Stephen.

Hell, she could barely accept herself.

"You still don't remember your parents?"

She took a deep breath, lowered her hand from her face, and looked out of the window. Her eyes weren't normal, but she figured Gabe had seen worse. "My mother was human. She had auburn hair and gorgeous blue eyes. My father had long, black hair. I can't remember much about him."

"Because he's the part of your past you don't want to remember?"

Tears fell down her cheeks. She didn't know. She could barely recall them. "I take it he was a demon."

He reached in the backseat and put his hand on her thigh. "You are no different than you were yesterday."

She laughed. "If I am anything *at all*, I'm different. You have no idea what it's like to be half demon and half human. The human part will not accept me. My foster parents proved it. As much as I would try to blend in, you could tell there was something different about me."

"I understand completely. Do you think I could live in the human world?"

"Yeah, well, you're not human. At all."

"Half."

She finally looked at him. "No, you're not."

"Yes, I am." He squeezed her thigh. "My mother is human."

She had forgotten what Naberius had told her in the motel. His mother was human.

"Well, don't we make the couple?"

Gabe laughed, getting out of the truck. He opened her door and offered his hand.

"Don't worry. I couldn't be happier that you're half demon."

She gave him a perplexed look as she got out of the Hummer. "Why?"

“Because, my little demon, you are going to be my secret weapon.”

“Do I want to ask?”

“Probably not.” They walked side by side up to the porch. “But I’ll clue you in, anyway.”

She came to a stop at her front door. “Well?”

“Naberius and I have encountered many half demons. He is actually a part of the Second Angelic Revolt, the demons in charge of keeping the Nephilim number down. He protects the human race from them.”

“Nephilim?” It was then she recalled Gabe fighting that Nephilim, and when he had come into the car and explained that a Nephilim was the result of demonic offspring. She hadn’t yet met Naberius, so it hadn’t clicked that she might turn into one of those creatures.

“We’ve no idea why you are not a Neph. We only know there are some half demons that don’t turn into a Nephilim at puberty—at least that’s what Naberius found out. You fall into that small percentage.”

She turned away, shaken and frightened. “Am I going to turn into one of those ... things at some point?”

“No. You would have turned at puberty.”

She took in a deep breath. Finally, something to be thankful for. Turning back to him, she reached for more courage. “Then what am I?”

He stepped up to her and wrapped his arms around her, dirt, blood and all. “You are Christine Fitzpatrick. That’s who. The what is inconsequential.”

“To you, perhaps. To me it’s important.”

“We are going to have Naberius test you tomorrow.”

She pulled back. “Test me for what?”

He smiled. “To see what you’re capable of.”

* * * *

“I can’t.” She folded her arms across her chest and shook her head. There was no way in hell. They’d been training for three hours, and she still couldn’t see the sense in half the shit he asked her to do.

“Woman—”

“You can woman me all you want, but I’m not doing it.”

Naberius put his hands out and made a choking gesture toward her neck. She instinctively backed up.

He turned toward the house. “Gabriel!”

She snorted. “What do you think he’s gonna do? He’s certainly not going to make me jump off the goddamn roof of my own house. Seriously, what the hell is that going to teach me?” She looked Naberius up and down. “Haven’t you ever heard of the saying, if everyone else jumped off a bridge, would you do it too? Well, my answer was always no. I’d say there’s a parallel here.”

Gabe opened the sliding glass door. “What?”

“Tell your woman to get on the roof before I toss her ass first.”

Gabe raised his eyebrows. She merely shook her head.

“You should be thanking Naberius for agreeing to teach you some aspects of fighting, not pissing him off.”

“I’m not jumping off the roof. Period.”

Naberius took two steps toward her, his eyes glowing yellow—and partially red, which meant he was really getting mad. “Get your ass on the roof.”

“Kiss it.” She flipped him off and turned to go back in the house, maneuvering closer to Gabe in case the crazy bastard tried killing her. She wouldn’t put it past him.

Gabe sighed and put his hands together, as if he were praying. “Please entertain the way he wants to teach.”

Pouting and trying to look pathetic, she stopped by her patio set and watched Gabe. She didn’t like to play the pitiful woman card, but sometimes it worked. “You don’t care about me at all, do you?”

Gabe tilted his head, his features hardened. “Now that’s just bullshit. However, I need you to be ready for tomorrow night. Naberius doesn’t have to do this, you understand.”

She turned back to Naberius. “Hey, Gabe just said you didn’t have to do this. Why don’t you go inside and make yourself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and leave me the hell alone?”

She turned back to Gabe with a smile, which quickly dropped from her face. He didn’t look very pleased.

“Oh, all right.” *Damn.*

Gabe’s fierce look was quickly replaced with a smile. “You won’t regret it.”

Yeah, right. She didn’t even look at Naberius as she made her way to the fence. This was such bullshit.

“Where are you going?”

She swung her hands in the air in frustration and glared at the demented bastard.

“I’m getting on the goddamned roof, what does it look like I’m doing?”

“I’m going to end up hurting you, I swear it.”

She kept her mouth shut. For once.

Twenty minutes later she was flipping him off again as she stood on the roof of her house. He said he would teach her how to command her body, and stretch her physical limitations. She could do almost anything in her body, and he was working to sell his point.

She wasn’t buying.

“Just jump. You won’t get hurt.”

She kept shaking her head. “I’m two stories up, pussycat. Unlike you, I don’t land on all fours.”

“Well, I wouldn’t bet the bank on that,” Naberius snapped.

It took a few moments, but when the implication of what he had just said finally hit her, she got agitated. “Pig!”

“You have a dirty mind. And just so you know, better a pig than a pussycat. Now jump!”

She looked down at the grass, which normally looked cushy and inviting. From two stories up it looked hard as hell. The wind ruffled her ponytail.

She recalled jumping the railing at the hotel. Her ankle had twisted, but within seconds the pain had gone away. “Are you sure I’m not going to twist my ankle or something? I did earlier today.”

Naberius shook his head. “Just remember what I told you. Light as a feather.”

She looked down at the ground one more time. Okay. Just do it.

“Jump, damnit!”

She bent her knees and kicked off of the house, thinking about landing softly, just as Naberius had told her.

Light as a feather, light as a feather.

She closed her eyes when she saw the ground rushing up at her. All thoughts about being light as a feather rushed from her mind.

She landed, lost her balance and pitched backward onto her ass. It didn’t feel good at all and burned horrifically as she got to her feet and tried to rub the sting out of her poor bottom.

“Well, not the most graceful demon I ever met, but you are half human.”

She screwed her face up. “That was not fun.”

“Do it one more time.”

She made the cutest face she could, and lowered her lashes. “Good lord, do I have to? You lied. It hurt.” She patted her rump to prove her point.

“I’m a demon. Of course I lie. Stop being such a baby and get your sore butt back up there. Perhaps if you landed right it wouldn’t hurt.”

She felt tears well up. “I don’t want to do it again.”

Naberius’s eyes glimmered yellow. “Do *not* cry on me.”

He came over to stand in front of her. She tried not to flinch, but failed.

“Vamps will come at you from behind, stab you in the back and call it fair. They will use any means to kill you because you are a demon. You could find yourself fighting four vamps, because once they find out you’re a demon, they’ll team up to bring you down.” Naberius pointed to the roof. “Get up there and do this right. I’m teaching you escape routes. I can fight four vamps. You can’t.”

She nodded her head. For some inexplicable reason she didn’t want to disappoint him.

“Quit expecting so much out of life. Life sucks. For most, life sucks and then you die. At least you have an out.” Naberius backed away and pointed to the roof again.

She willed her lower lip not to quiver and went back to the fence.

She thought her heart would hammer right out of her chest.

By the time she got to the top of the roof, skinning her knee twice, she yearned to kill Naberius. She was actually shaking in anticipation as she thought about kicking him in the groin and watching him double over. Then she’d kick him square in the face and he’d stumble back. She’d take Stephen’s sword to finish him off, laughing all the—

“Jump already!” he called from the lawn.

“Can’t you teach me something else other than launching myself off of buildings like a jackass?”

“This will be the last jump, princess.”

She took a deep breath, tried not to think too much before she jumped, closed her eyes and made herself feel light as a feather as she pushed off the roof.

She busted her ass even harder.

This bull was for the birds.

“Take five, princess.”

She kept herself lying on the grass, merely turning her head to watch Naberius walk in through the sliding glass doors, and Mike and Stephen walk out.

She sat up and tried fixing her black tank top. She looked like she'd gone a round with The Rock.

A storm was pulling in. It wasn't sunny, nor was it dark. She was a bit surprised to see her brothers outside this early in the day.

She stayed sitting on the ground as they approached, her head down, and realized she was waiting for them to call her spawn. To tell her they didn't want to be around her any longer. To say all the hateful things they'd spewed at Naberius.

Stephen came over and ruffled her hair, laughing.

She looked up at him. "What's funny?"

"How about our not telling you that we were vamps, and you not telling us that you're a demon?"

"Half demon," she corrected. And it wasn't as though she had known what she was before she met Naberius.

"Well, little demon, are all the secrets accounted for?" Stephen asked.

"I might have a few more."

Mike gave her his hand, and she used it to pull herself up. "It can't be any more shocking than what we've already been through, that's for sure."

"Oh, I don't know."

Stephen smirked.

She glanced at the clouded sky. "Are you two okay out here?"

"We're covered up enough for a day like this," Stephen answered.

Gabe and Naberius came out of the house. "How's she doing?" Gabe asked him as they came to a stop on the patio.

"Decent," Naberius answered.

She made a face at him.

"Your five minutes are up." Naberius walked toward her and made Stephen and Mike get out of the way. They sat in chairs on the deck along with Gabe, covered in hooded sweats and gloves.

She rolled her eyes. With the way things had been going, the last thing she wanted was everyone watching her mess up.

"Can't you tell them to go away?" she asked, turning back to Naberius.

Before she knew what he was doing, he punched her in the stomach.

Hard.

She doubled over and fell to the ground, unable to catch her breath.

That stupid son of a bitch.

"So, you don't remember much about fighting or did they teach you anything? Couldn't you see what I was going to do?" Naberius sneered and waited for her to answer.

She gritted her teeth and remained silent as she stared up at him. Her heart pounded in her ears. Her skin flushed with heat.

"Well?"

Lying on the ground, waiting for her stomach to unknot made her easy prey to another attack from him. But the sad fact was, she couldn't move.

"Is that necessary?" she heard Mike ask.

"Shut up or go inside," Naberius growled.

She coughed the pain away and tried recalling anything that could smash Naberius's

ugly face in.

Not a whole lot came to mind. Unable to talk yet and knowing that Naberius was waiting for an answer, she only shook her head. Her breathing was getting better. Her strength began trickling back.

“Demons always teach their young how to survive, though you were only four when they left you. Considering you weren’t fast enough to see that coming, we should—”

She launched herself from the ground and brought her leg up to kick his throat, as hard and as fast as she could. So hard, it hurt her leg when she did it.

It was well worth it when Naberius fell backward.

It took him a few seconds to be able to speak again.

“What? You didn’t see that coming?” she asked, throwing his words back at him and nursing her stomach.

“Okay. You can move quickly,” he said, his voice raspy.

She smiled, then turned to Gabe, Stephen and Mike. Roger and Sven had joined the audience. Roger actually clapped. Sven called out, “Good one. I want to see him get his ass kicked.”

“That’s just not going to happen,” Naberius said.

She was about to respond when out of the corner of her eye she saw Naberius come for her. She dropped, rolled and tried flipping him by entwining her legs with his.

He sidestepped the move and brought her to her feet in one quick motion, with his hands fisted in her shirt. Coming face-to-face with a pissed-off demon was terrifying. Her senses couldn’t differentiate between training and Naberius actually trying to kill her. These senses must be the ingrained tendencies Gabe had been talking about.

She immediately brought her right knee up. He immediately doubled forward. She turned so her back was to him, and flipped him to the ground where he squirmed for a few seconds.

This time everyone applauded. Mike let out a holler. Instead of paying attention to Naberius, she took a bow.

Bad move.

He swung his leg in an arch and swept hers out from under her. His elbow connected with her ribs when she hit the ground as if he were Jet-fucking-Lee.

It took her breath away, but she was able to roll away from him to protect herself from another hit and jumped to her feet. Until the chair from her patio set came hurtling through the air at her at a thousand miles an hour.

It hit her around her shins, causing her to launch forward over the top of it, landing in a humiliating heap on the lawn.

Son of a *hooker*, that hurt.

Naberius stopped his attack while she managed not to throw up. She did *not* want to do this anymore. It was only fun when she was the one doing the ass kicking.

Out of her good ear—the one that hadn’t smashed into the ground—she heard Naberius ask, “Can you do that? Do you have telekinesis?”

“Teleka-whatsis?” She massaged her shins while keeping an eye on Pussycat.

Psht. Pussycat her ass.

“Try to move a chair.”

“I can’t do that.” She pushed her hands against the ground to get up, grunted and decided to stay down. He might hurt her again if she got up. Playing possum could have

its advantages.

“Think you can hit me with it?”

If only. “No, but I wish I could.”

“Try.”

What the hell was he talking about? Was she supposed to coerce the chair to move? Good grief. It was an inanimate object.

“Concentrate on the chair, and think about its texture. Think of your hands touching it. Notice its contours. Now envision it going where you want it. Move the chair with your mind.”

She did as he told her. She stared hard at it. She imagined the feel of the cold steel, imagined wrapping her hands around the legs and pulling it to her.

Nothing happened.

“Concentrate.”

“I am,” she insisted. It was a bit difficult as she saw everyone staring at her.

“Obviously, you’re not.”

“Well, I can’t if you’re bothering me.”

“You’re such a human,” he said.

“And you think that’s an insult?” she snapped.

“It *is* an insult.”

He was starting to piss her off. Growling deep in her throat she pushed off the ground and faced him.

“I can’t believe you let that vamp get away today.” Naberius shook his head.

“Shut up and let me concentrate.”

“You can’t do it, give up.”

She growled and started to tell him where he could shove his opinions when she saw the chair rattle out of the corner of her eye.

Did she do that?

He came to stand beside her, suddenly serious. “Try again.”

She took a deep breath and willed the chair to hit him, just to shut him the hell up. To smack him right upside the head, and knock the smart-ass right out of him.

Using everything she had inside her, she focused on the chair. Imagined wrapping her hands along the curved back, picking it up and slamming it into his face. She could *feel* her eyes changing color.

A slight tingling let her know her pupils were changing to horizontal slits—like a cat’s, only flipped. The light green of her eyes shifted to yellow and black.

This would work. She could feel it as clearly as she could feel that she was controlling the darker part of herself.

Damn, it almost felt sexy. Powerful.

The chair moved all right. Only it moved in slow motion. So slow that her cheering section started laughing. It wobbled in the air one last time, like a newborn bird attempting to fly for the first time.

Naberius held out his hand to put the chair down. “Not quite what I wanted.”

“Ha, ha. I’d like to see one of you knuckleheads do it,” she said, putting a hand over her eyes. “I think I have a migraine.” She was seeing stars.

“How come I’ve never seen you look like that before?” Mike asked.

“Because I never wanted you to see me like that.” She opened her eyes, unwilling to

hide from them any longer. She had accepted the darker parts of their nature, now it was their turn to do the same for her.

“Chris, you and Naberius can take a break for a while.” Gabe stood and rolled his broad shoulders as if he were preparing for a fight. “I’d like to speak with you for a moment.”

* * * *

Gabe handed Chris the container of Chinese food he’d gone out to get. He was proud of the way she was taking all of this on. Unlike what most women would do, she hadn’t broken down and told them all she quit. She hadn’t balked too much about the dead bodies she’d been piling up. She even seemed to enjoy the training, when she was sure no one was looking.

“We just had Subway a few hours ago.”

“That was more like seven hours ago. You need to eat.”

Chris shrugged and opened the box. He found himself content to sit back and watch her eat. Her black tank top hugged her breasts, which peeked over the top of the garment. Her waist tapered down to hips he could really sink his teeth into. It was nice to see a woman with a womanly body, not some stick figure with a fake tan and ridiculously highlighted hair that consisted of ten shades.

Chris was a natural beauty—a subtle beauty. Her light green eyes and beautiful red hair complimented each other perfectly.

“What are you staring at?”

“You.” As Chris had trained with Naberius, Mike and Stephen had approached him about joining the Alliance. They weren’t daywalkers yet, but in a very short period of time they would have that ability. Possibly a year or two, maybe less. During that time they could train at the Alliance Headquarters in Scotland and work with the assassins on night missions.

Their only concern was Chris. What would happen to her if she were left alone.

With her fighting skills, she could also become a member of the Alliance. She had the speed, and with a little determination and some more training, she’d have it in the bag.

“I don’t like it when people watch me eat.”

He smiled and glanced away. “Has it ever crossed your mind to move? Have you ever wanted to see the world?”

“Not really. I like the familiar.”

Yes, she did. What would she answer if she knew Mike and Stephen had intentions of leaving Michigan? Would she also want to go?”

“Is Naberius teaching you well?”

She choked on the noodles. “He made me jump off the roof, Gabe. What do you think?”

“He’s going to teach you about handling a sword next. You have the abilities, they’re just buried. It’s like a male dog whose testosterone has finally started to pump through its body, and suddenly it lifts its leg to pee without being taught. It’s instinct.”

“Did you just compare me to a dog’s pissing habits?”

He sighed. “You understand what I’m saying.”

She smiled, letting him know she was just kidding. “I do feel as though some things

come easily. I don't think it will take me long to wield a sword."

She'd do anything to save her family, and right now she believed learning to fight would help them in the oncoming battle. She wasn't learning this for herself; she was going through training to save her remaining family members.

She was completely unlike him. He was so selfish that he wanted to put in her application for the Alliance himself, to ensure she would accompany them back to his home. He wanted her there, not because that was the best place for her to be, but because he desired it.

Beneath her gruff exterior, she had the softest heart. Once she considered you part of her family, she would do anything to keep you there.

Wanting to be closer to her, he sat on the floor beside her, pulling her into his arms until her legs were lying over his, nearly straddling him.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to feed you." He took the white cardboard box out of her hand and skewered a piece of chicken with the fork.

"No, I can do it." Her face had a beautiful flush to it. She held out her hand.

He held the fork out of her reach. "Open your mouth."

"Gabe, this is silly."

"No, it's not. Now open your mouth and let me feed you." *As you have done for me.* Her blood was rich and sweet, the true attributes of demonic blood. He'd never had the blood of a demon, he'd only heard of the rich texture and taste. Human blood—even vampire blood—paled in comparison.

She opened her mouth slowly and leaned forward. He slipped the fork into her mouth, and she closed her lips around the piece of meat. Blood rushed to his cock.

"See, that wasn't so bad."

She lowered her gaze. "You're leaving soon. You said it yourself that there will never be an us. Sex is one thing, but this seems so much more..."

"Intimate? I'm only feeding you, Chris."

She raised an eyebrow and tilted her head toward his erection. "Don't preach to the choir."

Yeah, he couldn't exactly hide his response. He didn't want her to pull away from him right now. He twirled some noodles onto the fork. "Can't we enjoy ourselves for the time being? We don't know what the future might bring."

"I know you will be leaving. You can't deny that."

"Open."

She took the noodles from the fork, leaning forward once again. Her cleavage was visible just over her tank top. He trailed the fork down her neck and over her breasts, unable to stop himself.

She shivered.

Just a hint of sauce on her neck. He slid his hand behind her back and brought her further onto his lap so he could lick it off.

"Gabe ... we shouldn't do this again."

Her skin tasted sweet, the blood beneath beckoning him to take another taste.

"You're a part of me, Chris. You always will be."

"Don't you think this is moving too fast? What if it's just an infatuation?"

"Only time can tell." He doubted she allowed men this close to her often. It would be

hard for her to open up to people after everything she'd gone through. She was afraid they would leave her ... just like he would.

And she knew this, yet she still melted into his embrace as he nuzzled the top of her breasts.

"I can't do this." She pulled away and stood. "Naberius said he'd meet me outside in a half an hour. I'm sorry, Gabe. I just can't do this."

He watched her leave, angry with himself for pushing her that far. How could he tell her that she made him feel things that no other woman had ever made him feel? They'd known each other for only a short while. He wasn't a silly lad with his first love. He was centuries old with his first love.

He wondered if the age made much of a difference. The need to go after her was strong. Take her back, make her feel safe. Don't allow her to fight in the oncoming battle. But he couldn't coddle her, and he knew if he asked her not to fight, she would only find her way to the battle by herself, in order to protect her brothers. He wanted to keep an eye on her during the battle, or have Naberius by her side.

He had to allow her to experience the immortal side of her nature. Not until she'd faced that and accepted it, could she accept him.

Chapter Nineteen

While Chris took a shower, Gabe faced Mike, Stephen, Roger, Sven and Naberius in her living room. "I'm sure everyone questions why I'm taking Chris with us to this fight."

Mike, perched on the edge of the couch, held up a coffee mug. "That's a nice way to put it. My version is a little different."

Gabe sighed. He was in no way familiar with explaining himself, but he'd had an epiphany when he was in the motel, discussing Chris with Naberius. "I put in an application to the Alliance for her, you and Stephen to join us. This will be your test. You asked me if you thought it possible to join. Well, here's your chance."

"Test?" Stephen got up from the couch. "Let me guess. We get out of there alive and we pass."

Mike came to his feet. "I'm not willing to take that kind of risk where she's involved."

Naberius remained seated in the recliner. "It's not your risk to take. She's become very adept at the fighting skills I taught her. Demon children learn fast because the need to fight is ingrained into their DNA. She was meant to be a Nephilim. Fate desired something different for her. If you've ever fought a Nephilim you would understand the survival instincts that lie deep within her."

"Are you comparing Chris to a Nephilim? She's barely over five feet tall. She knows how to bake, for Christ's sake. She just learned to hold a sword two days ago." Mike ran his hand through his hair.

Gabe felt defeated, and he hadn't even begun. How could he explain to five unattached men, fighters nonetheless, that he couldn't go on without Chris? In a short time she'd come to mean so much to him. Having her in the Alliance was the only way to make certain she could remain with him after this mission and keep her happy at the same time. She wasn't the type to merely follow someone around. In her family she had made herself as useful as she could.

He could be the one to train her. With her abilities she could make it through this battle. She *would* make it.

"Naberius is going to keep an eye on her during the fight."

Sven shook his head. "That's putting him at a disadvantage."

"I'll be fine."

"Why do you want Chris in the Alliance?" Mike asked.

Gabe shifted. There it was. He wasn't sure how to explain to them his feelings. Would they understand? Like Chris herself had pointed out, it hadn't been long since they had known each other. But the feelings were there, whether he could explain them or not.

"He's falling for her," Stephen said.

"So he sends her into a fight when she's only been training for a few days?" Mike turned to glare at him. "How does that make sense?"

It didn't. He was a selfish bastard.

Mike glared at him. "Have you told her about the Alliance?"

“No. I didn’t want her to have yet another distraction weighing on her mind.”

Mike only shook his head, the disgust he had for the topic written on his face.

“During the fight, keep an eye on her,” Gabe said, leaving the room. He went to Chris’s room and shut the door. Christ, what was he doing? Was he willing to risk her life to keep her with him? Was he being selfish?

She came out of the bathroom, a pink towel wrapped around her. She looked tired but beautiful nonetheless. She’d been training for over ten hours a day. She glanced at him as she sat on the bed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.” *Everything*. Instead of saying it, he walked over and sat beside her. He wrapped his arms around her, inhaling the soft floral scent of her shampoo as he kissed her wet hair. She would be fine. He’d make damn sure of it.

He wasn’t used to needing anyone, but he needed her.

He’d called his father. Now that Chris was involved in this fight, he wanted his dad to be there. Hell, he would have the entire Alliance there if he could command it.

Ambrose should be there any time now, and Gabe had given him the directions to where the fight would begin. Everything would run smoothly. It had to.

* * * *

Chris played with the salt and pepper shakers as she sat at her kitchen table with Naberius. After she had emerged from her shower, he’d felt it necessary to sit her down and give her a pep talk.

They both knew she wasn’t ready for this. If Naberius thought she was ready, he wouldn’t feel the need for this talk.

Everyone had rested up last night, and today she had trained for hours in the backyard with Naberius. She was getting better, but still wasn’t ready for a battle concerning life and death.

She and Gabe had barely slept. When they were together, she didn’t want to miss those moments. He’d be leaving after this fight. He’d be moving on to his next case. She’d be left behind to find a way to live her new life. Instead of pulling away from him, as she did the day he’d fed her, she only left his side to train. The rest of the day they spent in her room.

“I believe in you, Chris. If you do exactly what you were told, you’ll come out of this in one piece.”

Physically, she might. Emotionally was something else entirely. This fight involved her family, some of which had picked the wrong side. She couldn’t detach herself from that.

She cleared her throat. “Well, I hope I don’t let you down, ’cause I’m not believing too much in myself right now.”

To make matters worse, Gabe was counting on the fact that they had more power on their team. Three ancient vamps, one with powers no one knew about, Naberius and her. But he had spoken of demons being in Tom’s group, but none of them knew how many of them would be in residence tonight. No one knew for sure how many demons there were. They’d eliminated some after the bombing, but how many did they have to face?

Two and a half days of training wasn’t going to give her much of an edge. She was positive if she and Mike had a go-round in the backyard, he’d kill her in five seconds or

less.

“You have to be ready. When you go into a fight knowing you will be engaged, you have to remove whatever part of you that might hold you back. You can’t face an opponent with doubt written all over your face. You’ll die.”

She finally looked at Naberius. “What do you mean by removing a part of me?”

Gabe walked into the room. “You have to remove every moral restraint society has given you and rely solely on your instinct to kill. To hell with what you think is right or wrong. In battle there is only survival.”

He’d had put on jeans, forgoing a T-shirt. Mike had cranked up her heat, and after she made sure she wasn’t going to be the one paying the bill, she hadn’t much cared.

Now she was actually glad it was unbearably hot in the house. It made for a good view, anyway, which helped sidetrack her thoughts a little.

“Kill or be killed. That is the only thing you must concentrate on. You don’t think of your brothers fighting next to you. You don’t think of defending yourself. That will come naturally. You focus on the kill. On the very person that is threatening you that very second.” Gabe handed her a dagger in a sheath, a small gun with a holster and another small knife.

She had never seen him so serious.

He grasped her hand and pulled her up to help her strap on the weapons. “When we get there your nerves will be shot. Don’t focus on the what-ifs. What if Mike doesn’t make it? What if I fail? What if they win? Self-doubt will always lose a fight.”

He finished tightening the strap for the holsters on her shoulder. It bit into her skin.

“There are so many more of them. What if we don’t succeed?”

Gabe didn’t show any emotion as he looked into her eyes. “Then we die.”

“I don’t understand. You and the others seemed so laid back, so lenient up until now. They attacked and attacked, and we found safe spots. We always hunkered down and hid. Now you’re charging in, out-numbered, out-trained, with weapons drawn. Why did you wait so long, and what makes you so sure we’re going to win?”

“We had to wait for orders. It takes three members of the Alliance to bring down a sentence. We turn in our verdict to my father, who makes the final judgment.” He put his hand under her chin. “Chris, many people will die tonight. The Alliance does not take killing lightly. We don’t have jails or prisons. We do not have an appeal system. Once you are sentenced, you are sentenced to death. Period. We can’t make mistakes. And we win because we have no other option. These vampires have been killing humans for months. That is something the Alliance cannot allow. We’re the only group that has been trained to stop them.”

She nodded. His explanation for the need of his job solidified her feelings for him. She would never find another man like Gabriel MacPherson.

She glanced over to where Mike and Stephen sat on the couch in the living room. They’d argued with Gabe about her fighting in this battle. She had no formal training. She didn’t even have the stomach for it. She’d become frazzled in the middle of the night when Gabe insisted that she go with them.

“Okay.” *I’m not ready. I’ll probably never be ready.* Chris rubbed her forehead.

Gabe slipped a finger beneath her chin and tipped her head up to look at him. “It’s now or never, Chris. You’ll be fine.”

They’d be better off leaving her behind. Much like everyone else had her entire life.

She was a mistake. A failure.

Believing in her now could cost them their lives.

It made her question if he cared for her at all. Why would he put her in danger if he did?

She'd met the man of her dreams and he took no time in putting her front and center in a deadly battle.

"Are you ready?"

Her heart heavy, she replied with the biggest lie of her life. "I am."

"Mike, round everyone up. It's time to go."

* * * *

"Remember, the address is 439 Velnor Street. Don't storm the wrong house," Gabe said as they were getting into the truck. "We'll have to split and approach from different directions. In the event one team gets caught, the other can make the surprise appearance. But let's try to avoid that scenario."

She climbed in next to Stephen. Naberius slid in next to her, while Sven and Gabe took the front seat. The trash talk about demon boy had ended abruptly when her secret had come out.

Mike and Roger took the stolen truck. She watched them drive away as she buckled. "That's the least of our worries."

"Ain't that the truth," muttered Stephen.

"Must we kill the hot female vamps? It seems like blasphemy to me," Sven said from the passenger seat.

He said it in such a deadpan voice, Chris made a face. "Are you serious?"

Gabe grunted. "For once, he is."

Chris wrinkled her nose at him. "Dork."

"Vampire chicks are hot." Sven winked at her.

The ride to Alger was quiet, everyone lost in their own thoughts. She watched Gabe maneuver her Hummer through the streets. Confidence, readiness and power sat on his shoulders as if they weighed nothing. He'd let Tom and Jess escape once, so he valued life. Did she have what it took to make instant decisions as he had? To deliver a killing blow to someone she'd called family before they severed the head from her body? Would they do it?

All too soon they parked at a closed coffee shop four blocks away from their destination. Mike and Roger parked the stolen truck in the back by the dumpster.

"Like that's not obvious," she said as Mike walked over to their group.

"No one's going to notice at this time of night."

Hell, with the way they were all armed, no one would say anything even if they did notice.

She had a knife strapped to her hip with a razor-sharp edge and tip, and a dagger in her hand that she quickly tucked into her boot. Naberius had tried to get her to take nunchucks.

Nunchucks, for crying out loud. What the hell was she going to do with those except to knock herself out?

Gabe only took a long dagger as a weapon. Then again, she'd seen him materialize a sword when he'd fought the Nephilim, so it wasn't like he needed more until the fighting

started.

Mike and Stephen had an array of weapons under their clothes, and Roger had a vicious-looking dagger that sported a jagged edge.

Only Sven hadn't hidden his weapon. Not that he could have.

Sven had a huge sword in a scabbard at his waist, looking all the world like the ancient marauder that he was.

She eyed him. "They won't see you coming a mile away."

"I'm giving them time to come to terms with their impending death. I'm performing a courtesy."

"Enough," barked Gabe.

EEK. Obviously Gabe was well submerged into his battle mode. She'd seen him snap at Sven before, but not with such a vicious look on his face.

And for once, Sven didn't have a comeback.

Gabe pushed past Roger and glanced at her and Naberius. "Chris, Stephen, Mike and Naberius, you may take your leave. We'll give you twenty minutes to get into position. It will take you about ten minutes to get there at a moderate jog."

Gabe checked her weapons, making sure she had them on correctly. He tightened the straps on her thigh until it hurt. She didn't risk complaining.

"Roger, Sven and I will take the house from the front. You take it from the back. I'll give you a sign, so wait for it by the eastern second-story window. Remember, when the fighting starts, all hell's going to break loose. Concentrate on the second story, while we work the first."

"What about the vamps that aren't there?" she asked. Certainly some will be out getting their dinner. Not everyone would be at the house.

"We can't control that, Chris. We're only going to worry about what we can control," he said, pulling out her gun and making sure it was loaded. "The closest house is quarter of a mile away, if not more, so don't worry about police or being heard. Just realize we are much fewer in number, so kill as fast as you can and move onto the next."

Chris felt a flutter in her stomach and hoped she wouldn't vomit. She swallowed down the bile that had risen and nodded. Gabe's efficiency at checking her weapons while giving orders made her feel as though she were five years old and her mother was standing in front of her helping her put on her mittens. Not that she'd had a mother like that.

"Jess was the only one Tom trusted to bring with him to this group. He knew Mike and Stephen would have nothing to do with it. When he found out what Dave had seen, he worked Dave and fed him bullshit. This is where we let our community know vampires like Tom can't take down the Alliance."

Gabe turned to look at everyone. A silence fell over the group. "They will be talking about this battle for years to come. Five vampires, a demon, and a half demon, on behalf of the Alliance, took out a house full of vamps and demons. This will go down in the history books, men"—he turned to her—"and woman."

He glanced at everyone again. "Is everyone ready?"

She nodded. Gabe squeezed her shoulder, Roger wished them luck and Sven gave her a pat on the rear as she walked by. She turned around and glared at him.

"What? Football players do it all the time."

She looked at Gabe. "You need to do something about your friend."

“We get out of this alive, I’ll be sure to oblige.”

She turned to follow her team, the darkness of the night settling on her. She almost stumbled when Gabe’s voice whispered in her head. *You have the strength to do this. You’ve proven yourself twice before. Rely on your instincts. I believe in you.*

Chapter Twenty

Jogging to the secluded house with a band of armed vampires and a demon, she felt like a jackass. Like someone dressed up for Halloween. What in the hell was she wearing? Leather and weapons, that's what. She could just see herself knocking on someone's door and saying, "Trick or treat."

Only she had never had a heart attack on Halloween, and she'd swear one was imminent. Her heart hammered out a thousand beats per minute.

By the time they reached the house, she was sweating. They had sprinted, not jogged, all the way to the house. Needing a break, she bent down and placed her hands on her thighs, trying to catch her breath.

Mike and Stephen ran by. She straightened and started running again, reverting back to her old mantra.

It could be worse. It could be worse.

The hell it could! That was a damn lie. This was as bad as it got. Here she was having an asthma attack, and she didn't even have asthma.

She had to do this. There was no other option at this point. If she turned back, she would never be able to face any one of them again. Especially Gabe.

She passed Mike and Stephen to follow right behind Naberius, who looked seriously lethal as he made his way to the back of the house. His eyes were evil slits, and he had an aura that seemed to bleed danger.

Plus, he *made* his outfit work. He looked like he was born to wear black leather as he blended with the shadows.

She, on the other hand, looked like she should be carrying a fluorescent pumpkin bucket filled with Tootsie Rolls.

Needing to calm herself, she studied Naberius. His lack of fear, and the fact that he looked ready and willing to take on the entire house on his own, assured her she couldn't be backed up by a better fighter.

He turned, locked eyes with her, and she secretly wondered if she looked as fierce as he did.

Probably not.

She took in a steadying breath. She'd be fine. She just had to search within herself, like Gabe had explained to her. She had instincts.

No one here outside of her team knew what she was. They would dismiss her as a threat. She had an advantage. She was a secret weapon, as Gabe had said. He wouldn't put her in harm's way if he didn't think she could handle herself.

She had to trust him. She could do this. She nodded at Naberius, letting him know that she was ready for what they called the point of no return. Once she stepped onto the enemy's turf there was no going back. No departing until they won or lost.

They would either walk out of the house victorious, or they would be dead.

She had to do this. She was more than capable. If anyone tried to take her down they were going to get one hell of a surprise.

She'd introduce them to a part of herself even she was frightened of.

She rolled her neck and shoulders, bracing herself. She followed Naberius to the

surrounding wall and gate, which was brick and about five feet tall. She watched him effortlessly spring onto the top.

She took hold of the brick and tried climbing up. The rough texture of the brick bit into her hands as her feet did a Scooby-Doo pre-run against the wall.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

She grunted as she pulled herself up on the wall. Her stomach was flat against the brick, and her feet were dangling. She looked up at him. “I’m trying to get up,” she whispered back.

He looked up at the sky and put his right hand over his face.

What? What had she done? She wasn’t Spiderman, for Christ’s sake. Shit. She couldn’t scale a wall with her fingertips and toes.

Naberius shook his head, dropped on the other side of the fence, and sprinted over the lawn to the edge of the roof. Once he reached the roof, he didn’t break his stride. He kept running and jumped—clearing nearly twenty feet—and landed with both feet planted firmly on the roof.

Jesus H. Christ! How the hell was she supposed to do that? She turned back to Mike and Stephen. They were waiting for her to go. Stephen actually nudged her.

She jumped off the wall, sprinted to the edge of the roof, but instead of springing up, she skidded to a stop. Mike slammed into her, apparently under the impression that she was going to jump just like Naberius had done. Silly him.

“Damnit, Chris.”

She gained her balance and looked at him, whispering, “Hoist me up.”

“Woman!” Naberius hissed from the roof.

She turned back to him. “*What* is your problem?”

“Jump and grab hold.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

The edge of the roof was pretty far off. Still, he was looking pretty pissed, so she did as he asked. She bent her knees and jumped, hoping like hell she’d land on the roof or at least get hold of it.

She missed.

Only the tips of her fingers had touched the edge, not nearly enough to hold her body weight. When she fell back down Mike managed to keep her from falling all the way to the ground.

She looked back up at Naberius when she got her bearings. “I told you, I can’t.”

Shit, she was so going to die. Perhaps she had more human traits than that of a demon.

“Again.”

Again? She’d almost flattened Mike on her way down the first time. She was sure the last thing Mike wanted to see before he died was her fat ass landing on him. This was humiliating. They were all going to die because she was incompetent.

She tried shaking off her doubts. She’d try again.

She balled her hands into fists, bent down, wiggled her butt and jumped. She caught the edge of the roof and started pulling herself up. Naberius helped her by taking her arm and yanking her to her feet.

“Oh, gee, thanks for the help,” she muttered, rubbing her arm where he had grabbed

her.

Mike and Stephen had no problem getting on the roof.

They crept over to a second-story window. Here they would wait for a sign from Gabe. Naberius flattened himself against the side of the house next to the window, with Chris squatting next to him. Mike and Stephen settled next to her.

She was exhausted despite her pumping adrenaline, and the fighting hadn't even started.

As she crouched down with them, she realized she didn't belong there, had no idea why Gabe had insisted on her presence and why Naberius had tried teaching her anything. She was going to slow them down, or worse, get someone killed.

Why had Gabe insisted she come along? Didn't he care if she got hurt? Did she matter to him in the least?

Naberius nudged her with his elbow. "Quit fucking up."

Well, that was just what she wanted to hear. *Thanks for the encouragement!* Why didn't she just start crying so she could make a total ass out of herself?

She merely nodded. She could well understand why he was so agitated with her. She was making a mockery of his race with her inability to do anything right.

She swallowed down the tears that were pooling in her eyes. If she blinked, her tears would spill down her cheeks, so she kept her eyes as wide as she could, pushing down her self-pity.

"Don't," Naberius whispered.

A tear slipped. *Damn it!* "I didn't want to disappoint you."

"Now is not the time, so dry it up, princess."

She nodded, knowing he was right. And there was not better way to let him down than to dissolve into an emotional blob in the midst of battle. She felt a few drops of water hit her face. Apparently so did everyone else, as all four looked up at the sky.

It was starting to rain. Great.

Still crouched beside one another, Mike squeezed her knee, but she didn't look at him. She had to concentrate on what was to come.

Keeping their vigil, waiting for the sign that would appear across the street, a light came on in the window they were crouching next to.

It illuminated them. If anyone looked at the roof, in their general direction, they would see them in a heartbeat.

A radio turned on, playing the song "Gold Digger."

Just as she started to get her emotions under control, a light appeared in the bushes across the street. Twice.

They had their signal.

Chapter Twenty-One

Naberius turned to her. His yellow eyes glowed in the dark. “We get inside, we split up. Do as I told you and you will make it through this. Don’t embarrass me.”

“I won’t.”

“Get yourself ready.”

“I’m sorry?”

For the first time that night Naberius smiled. “Bring out the sexy.”

He went in through the window as she stared after him. Bring out the sexy? Did she hear him right? Had he been trying to throw her off?

Or was he trying to put her at ease?

She took a deep breath and focused on the very thing she had kept hidden all of the years prior. She focused on her instincts. She mentally prepared herself to fight, just as Naberius had taught her.

It started with a tingling sensation, then escalated into an emotional feeling that suffused her entire being. A connection between her body and her soul. She felt her eyes warm as the sensation filtered through her body.

She felt fierce.

Bring out the sexy.

She could do this. She wouldn’t be the weak link, the one to sabotage their success.

Taking her dagger out of the sheath at her thigh, weighing the smooth handle in her palm, she felt proud to follow in Naberius’s footsteps. She wasn’t ashamed of what she was. She looked at Mike and Stephen to her right. “How do you like your little sister now?”

Smiling at the looks on their faces, she stepped in through the window.

The vampire in the room had the music up loud, though his senses quickly picked up the intruders.

While Naberius made quick work of him, Chris opened the door of the bedroom and let her senses pick up where the other vampires were located.

There were vamps in the room to her right.

Shifting her grip on the dagger, ready to stab and slice any threat, she opened the door, and shut it behind her. Gabe had told them to keep it quiet as long as they could. The demons would sense them quickly enough.

There were two vamps in this room.

Of course she’d pick the vamps that were having sex.

Yuk.

She pulled out the other dagger from her boot while the male vamp bounded from the bed naked.

Now she had a knife in each hand.

She attacked him, slashing his throat, while fending off the female vamp with well-placed kicks. She wasn’t ready to be double-teamed. When she went for the male vamp’s throat again, she willed the lamp on the far nightstand to hit the female vamp in the face.

The lamp shuddered and fell to the floor, causing no harm.

The male vamp, obviously realizing she wasn’t human, was now trying to get away

from her, but she brought him down to the ground with a vicious kick to his balls and stopped to make the final cut to his neck.

One down.

She left his prone body, leapt across the room and caught the female as she tried opening the door. Chris pushed her onto the floor and straddled her. The bitch fought like a madwoman.

Probably because she had just witnessed Chris make short work of her lover.

The woman was no different. Once Chris quit dodging the woman's nails, she easily cut through her neck.

Both lay decapitated. For a split second she wondered if Tom knew these vampires personally. Did he care for them more than he did for her, or were they just a means to an end?

She left the room and heard someone yelling in an adjoining room. "The Alliance is here!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mike come out of one of the rooms.

Damn, he looked crazy. Deadly.

Thanking her lucky stars he was on her team and she didn't have to fight him, she ran into the room that the yelling had come from. She wished she knew where Naberius had gone, but she didn't have time to think about it.

There were three vamps in the room. Stephen was fighting one already. She engaged the other two, having gained confidence in her last kills.

She struck one in the heart and lunged at the other, bringing him over her knee. She only had to bring the dagger across his neck twice.

The first vamp clutched his heart and staggered toward the door. She sliced through his neck and tossed the body aside, allowing access to the door.

She looked at her dagger and the bodies. She *had* moved fast. The engagement had lasted only seconds. The vampires hadn't stood a chance.

"Chris, you're starting to scare me," Stephen said on his way out.

She was right behind him, a little afraid at what she had so easily done. No time to contemplate now. She went to the next room and only saw dead bodies.

"Most were downstairs," Naberius said as he came out of another room.

"It's clear." Mike came down the hall.

"Let's get downstairs." Naberius led the pack.

They sprinted after him and fanned out when they came to the first floor. Sven was engaged with three vamps in the middle of the room.

Chris caught sight of someone coming at Sven's back across the room. She acted quickly and brought a table flying through the air. It hit the man, causing him to bounce off the wall.

It worked! She turned to Naberius to see if he had seen. He was smiling. She felt like clapping her hands together like a two-year-old.

She sensed someone coming from behind her, and she turned, striking out with her knife. Gabe caught her hand just before she slit his throat. He wrapped his arm around her waist and brought his lips to hers in a crushing kiss.

When he pulled back, he whispered, "You're doing good. I'm proud of you."

Then he swatted her behind and engaged two vamps who had come from an adjoining room.

She smiled, completely baffled by why he had done that at such a time. They were eliminating the vampires so quickly, they'd be done in less than five minutes. No wonder he was in such a good mood.

A movement from the staircase caught her eye. She heard Mike mutter, "Oh shit." Thinking everyone had been killed on the second story, she leaned back to find the source of the movement.

The demons had arrived.

Her heart hit her ribcage with a thud. Naberius was already bounding up the stairs to engage them. She would be expected to do the same. That's why she was here. She was able to fight a demon easier than a vamp could.

She, however, was momentarily frozen.

A man that looked more familiar than her reflection stared back at her from the second floor balcony.

Before she could comprehend who she was seeing Naberius engaged him.

Naberius would kill him.

"NO!" She practically flew over the railing. Gabe shouted her name, yet she had locked eyes on her target as she bounded to the second story.

She brought Naberius down like a lineman would a quarterback. She wrapped her arms around his waist and they went tumbling to the floor.

He flipped her to the ground, thinking her an enemy, and stayed his hand only as his dagger pierced her skin.

"Chris?"

Before she could explain herself a demon came at his back. Unable to warn him in time she twisted herself around Naberius, taking the hit for him. A sharp pain stung her upper back, and she grunted in pain.

She looked up as the demon with the long, black hair held his hand out. She watched in amazement as the demon who had stabbed her went flying across the room, to land against the wall and slide to the floor, unconscious.

Gabe flashed to her side and picked her up, sliding his hand over her back. The pain in her back disappeared as though she had never been wounded. She hadn't been aware Gabe had healing powers.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What did I tell you? Concentrate only on your opponent. Not those falling around you!"

"Like you're doing now?"

"Chris—"

He looked pissed. She decided to drop it. "Okay, Gabe. I've got it."

He let go of her and flashed himself back downstairs.

The fighting began to deteriorate on the second floor as she and Naberius killed the demons—which, strange enough, had turned on each other with a command from the black-haired demon. At one point she had heard him shout her name, but she did as Gabe asked and focused on her fighting.

She needed to be on the first floor. Her brothers were down there. With difficulty, she slid her gaze away from the demon who had given her pause. She heard Stephen shout something from below, but she hadn't made it out what he had said.

Naberius was sprinting downstairs. With one more backward glance at the black-haired demon, she followed her trainer.

She came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, unable to get around Sven fighting a vampire. He handled his sword with ease and a grace that surprised her.

What was more surprising was that he actually looked serious.

As she bounded over the railing she heard Sven tell his opponent, "You're beginning to bore me."

The living room was empty, save for Sven, so she ran into a hallway that had stairs leading down.

She quickly sprinted down the stairs, sheathed one of her daggers, and unholstered her gun. A vampire ran toward her, fangs bared. With her gun in her left hand and her dagger in her right, she engaged him. It was difficult to maneuver on the stairs, with both walls constricting much of her movements.

"Here, let me show you how it's done in a situation such as this," Sven said, moving her aside.

"Thrust down"—he said, sinking his sword into the vampire's chest—"and then thrust up, and over without removing the blade." The vampire was just about in two different pieces.

"Now you just cut the rest of the head off like this." He shrugged his shoulders and finished off the vamp. The body crumbled to the stairs and the disembodied head thumped all the way down, bouncing like a soccer ball, to land in the basement.

Sven turned to her and she couldn't keep her lip from curling in disgust. "Sven, that was by far *the* most disturbing thing I have ever seen."

"Why, thank you, Chris. I'm glad to know this memory will last a lifetime."

She watched him jump over the body and into the open space downstairs. For whatever reason, she held her breath as she went by the body of the vampire. It wasn't as though he could jump up and bite her in his current state.

She had no time to contemplate Sven's little training session when two female vampires came at her from the left. Just before she engaged them, she saw Tom out of the corner of her eye.

The sight of him threw her off, allowing one of the vamps to stab her in her right side. She deflected their blows and returned a few of her own, all while in pain.

She raised her gun and pulled the trigger, shooting one vamp in the chest, the other in the face. This gun held a punch that the other little gun in the motel had lacked. As they cried out, she sliced their throats.

When she'd killed the last vamp, she backed into the wall to take a breath, wanting to hold her side but knowing if she got blood on her hands it would make her dagger slip from her grip. That had been something Naberius had ground into her over and over again that morning.

Spill as much blood as you can while keeping it off of you. A slippery handle is not something that will aid you in a fight.

Again, though she could barely breathe, she had no time to take in her surroundings.

Tom was headed straight for her, and for a few seconds, she thought he was coming over to help her.

She was wrong.

"You've one chance, Chris. I've known what you were all these years, and I never told a soul. I gave you acceptance when no one else would. I gave you a family."

Her hand ached to still the pain in her side, but she stood up straight to face him. She

could feel sweat beading on her forehead.

"You did give me a family, Tom. And I will always love you for it. But you're taking that family away." She gripped her dagger. *Kill or be killed. This man is your enemy.*

"I know your father, Chris."

"Let's not get dramatic, Tom. I've already seen him upstairs." She shook her head. "Don't you understand that you meant more to me than he ever did? I don't even know him."

"Then you'll help us?"

"Notice I said *meant* more to me. Past tense, Tom."

His response was to raise his swords and try to cleave her in two. His swords looked like pirates' swords, arched and thick. She didn't doubt their sharpness, however, and moved out of their reach.

Just as she went on the offensive she heard someone shout, "Ambrose is upstairs!"

Tom was caught off guard. She thrust her dagger at him, and just when she thought he'd move, he didn't. Her dagger made a gaping wound in his throat. Blood poured from his neck. He choked, dropped his swords, and tried to staunch the flow of blood with his hands as he fell to his knees.

Sven used his sword to finish him off from behind, slicing his head from his body, before jumping back into the fray.

Tom was dead.

She crumpled to the floor and dropped her dagger. Jesus, she hadn't wanted to hurt him. She had ... but she hadn't.

As if she were detached from the scene, she watched as Jess came to kneel by Tom's body. She had certainly recovered nicely from the last time Chris had seen her. Blood coated her white cardigan sweater and khaki pants. She held her hands over Tom's corpse, but didn't touch him as she wept.

Chris wasn't crying. She could only watch as Jess broke down. The same woman she had come to love, who had helped her plant forget-me-nots in the front of the house last spring. The same woman who patiently taught her how to sew and knit.

And Chris had just killed the love of her life.

Everything had happened so fast. "I'm ... I'm sorry. I—"

"Tom. Tom." Jess kept saying his name over and over. Her hands were shaking.

Clear as the morbid scene before her, Chris could see Tom walking over to her and taking the pool stick from her hands. "Let me show you how it's done," he would say, just to go on to lose to her.

She remembered him picking through Skittles and handing her the reds, keeping the greens.

God, there were so many memories.

Without any warning or outward indication, Jess became a blur of motion.

At first, all Chris saw was Jess's face only inches from her own. For a split second she thought Jess had come to her for comfort. Then her mind caught up with her body, and she felt a cold, sharp pain in her abdomen and chest.

Chris couldn't breathe as she looked down and saw the unbelievable. Tom's thick sword buried in her abdomen.

Her body jerked forward as Jess removed her weapon; the sound of the steel sliding

out of her made her want to vomit. Jess slashed at her throat, and all Chris could hear was the sword cutting through the air before a sharp ringing sounded through her ears.

Her right hand came down to the floor as she leaned forward. Pain consumed her entire body. She could focus on nothing but the steel that had punctured her chest. It felt cold and foreign. Blood poured from her neck, and she was too weak to stop it.

She couldn't support her weight as she let herself slide down to lie on her right side.

God, Jess. She loved Jess. Chris hadn't meant to hurt Tom.

Her sight was dimming. She could see someone standing at the bottom of the staircase. They weren't moving. Black hair framed a beautiful face she could barely see through the blackness.

"Gabe?" she choked. Why wasn't he coming to her?

She opened her eyes wider, trying to see better, trying to focus. It wasn't Gabe, but there was no mistaking who she saw on the bottom of the staircase.

Gabe looked just like his father, only stockier. Ambrose had come after all.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Jess fall. Someone had killed her.

No, God, no. That hurt more than the steel blade. How had it come to this? Nothing would be the same. Ever.

She couldn't hear the sounds of fighting any more. In fact, she couldn't hear anything at all. Even the ringing in her ears had faded.

Someone rolled her onto her back. The face that stared down at her belonged to Sven. He was talking to her, but she couldn't hear him. He looked worried. That wasn't a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

She let her eyes close, wanting to give into the urge to sleep, but still containing enough sense to realize that meant giving in to death.

I doubt we'd survive the chainsaw massacre...

Apparently, she thought as she slid deeper into the shadows, the same could be said of half demons.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gabe and Roger killed the last of the vampires in the west wing of the house. The silence that followed should have reassured him of their victory. As he stopped and wiped the sweat from his forehead, he felt an echo of pain in his chest. Something was horribly wrong. It wasn't the hum of silence after a victory. It was the suffocating silence before a storm.

Sven's voice rang through the house.

"Chris, CHRIS! Stay with us, honey."

Gabe concentrated on Chris's whereabouts in the house and flashed to her side. What he saw stopped his heart.

She looked dead.

He couldn't move as his father came to her side and took in the situation quickly, shaking his head. "She's gone. I can't help her. She's beyond my ability."

Which confirmed she was no longer alive.

Gabe made a noise between a cry and a growl. "Move!"

He didn't care what the others thought, and he didn't care of the consequences of his actions. She would live if he had to use every power he possessed.

He slid his hands beneath her shirt where one wound was located. Her throat had also been slashed.

"Gabriel, she is gone," he heard his father say.

He ignored his father and felt his hands warm against her skin. He knew how to heal a wound. His father didn't know that. His father wasn't aware of half the powers he had obtained from Lucifer.

He would now. Everyone would and he didn't give a damn. The only thing he couldn't do, the only thing he didn't know, was how to bring her soul back.

"I should not have allowed her to fight," he said, choking on the words. He healed the wounds on her stomach and went to work on the wound at her neck.

"She did well, Gabe. It was only when she let her guard down in the face of those she loved that she was caught unaware," Sven said.

"I *should not* have allowed her to fight!" Anger gripped him. He ached to unleash it. He closed his eyes and tried to rein it in. Aggression would not help this situation. He needed a clear mind.

"Let her go, son."

Gabe opened his eyes and straightened. "No."

He called out for her in her mind. *Chris? Chris, come back to me.*

Could she hear him? He didn't know, but he couldn't give up on her. *Come back. I need you here with me. I won't leave you. Ever.*

He would use his powers to keep her body alive, then he would go to Lucifer. He didn't care what he had to pay, he would bring her back.

You're strong. That's one of the things I love about you. He rested his left hand over her heart and willed it to beat.

It did.

His father put his hand on Gabe's shoulder, shaking him. "Gabriel, let her go!"

Gabe ignored him. Would his father let his mother go if their situations were switched? He knew he would not.

Gabe leaned forward and opened her eyes. There was no life in them. He'd only caused her body to start working again. Her soul was still gone.

"Her body will remain in a comatose state for as long as you'll allow her. Her soul is not something you can bring back. Lucifer will not help you."

What his father didn't know was Lucifer already had.

Gabe couldn't make himself give a damn about his father's concerns. It was his fault Chris was dead. He should have never allowed her to fight. Physically she had been ready, but this fight had been too close to her heart.

He'd been selfish.

Gabe placed a hand on her arm and turned to the men. "Sven, take Mike and Stephen back to Chris's place. I'll be there shortly. Father, will you help clear the house?" Gabe waited for his father to rant, but Ambrose merely nodded and left the room. "Roger, you handle the fire. Make sure nothing remains."

He bent down and picked up Chris's body, cradling her carefully in his arms. He vanished the blood from her clothes, not wanting to see the evidence of the carnage that had been done to her body.

Sven put a hand to Gabe's forearm. "Gabe, you need to—"

"Leave me be, Viking."

Sven dropped his hand and began walking upstairs just as Mike and Stephen were making their way into the basement.

Gabe wouldn't look at them, knowing the look on their faces would be his undoing. Instead of reassuring them, he walked by them without a word.

He ran into Naberius as he reached the top of the stairs. Behind Naberius stood Chris's biological father. He had a look of shock on his face.

Gabe wanted to kill him. "Do not mourn for the daughter you cast aside."

Balam tore his light green eyes from Chris's limp body and brought them to Gabe's. "I only meant to give her the life she wanted."

Gabe tightened his hold on her. "She was four! What could she have known about life to realize what she wanted out of it?"

"I couldn't take her with me. When her mother died I had no choice. She was better without me."

"Shut the fuck up!" Gabe's anger was going to snap his control in half. Balam had never known his daughter or he would have never given her up. He would have found a way to make it work.

"Chris would have never seen the light of day, not with my responsibilities."

"*She* was your responsibility." Gabe pushed past them. He flashed himself and Chris to her bedroom. He laid her on the bed and knelt down beside her.

She was pale. Though her heart beat in her chest, she was lifeless. He put his hand on hers and squeezed. "I will fix this. You'll have the family you've always wanted. You'll have everything you desire," he whispered. "Everything," he promised her.

"That is not in your power to give."

Gabe stood and faced Lucifer. He knew he had tears in his eyes, and he could not stop them. Demons frowned on men who could not control their emotions. They believed a man must be in control of himself at all times.

“You must understand. There has to be someone you are close to.” Even as Gabe spoke those words he knew they would be lost on Lucifer. Lucifer had tunnel vision when it came to the things he wanted. Nothing would stop him, especially not emotion for another soul. He would never have gone as far as he did if he had a conscience.

“You know there is not.” Lucifer studied him. “You have known her less than a week. Had I known she would be your undoing I would have handled things differently.”

Gabe shook. “Bring her back.”

“You know what I will require of you.”

He knew. It was the only thing he had not given Lucifer.

His loyalty in the final battle.

“You know that is the one thing I cannot give.” Gabe watched Lucifer closely, looking for any sign of emotion. Did the man feel nothing?

“It is the one thing I ask.”

“You ask that I forever damn myself!”

Lucifer stepped closer to him. “We can win. You know yourself the angels are not as impressive as legend would have them. They leave the humans to rot on this Earth, to crawl amongst the dirt and the stench of death while they wait in Heaven in their glorious bodies. Ask yourself who is right and who is wrong! He commands humans to bow down to him, to glorify his name and worship him!”

Gabe had heard Lucifer’s pleas for centuries. “Free will. It is not the curse you would have me believe. Without free will the human race would be controlled. They would be subjects, not spirits free to follow their own paths. He does not command their compliance.”

“I will ask nothing from you until the eve before the final battle. That could be millennia from now. You could spend all of that time with Chris before I called on you.”

“And then I would spend an eternity without her.”

“If we lost.”

“Which we will.”

Lucifer growled. “Make your decision now.”

Gabe turned to look at Chris. Her red hair was splayed out against her white pillow. Her usually plump, pink lips were dry and tight. She was dead, yet she wasn’t. It was his fault she was lying there without her soul.

He turned back to Lucifer. There was no other choice available to him.

“I will fight for you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

It felt like a hundred cotton balls were stuffed into her mouth. Her upper lip stuck on the edge of her gum line, and her tongue felt swollen and foreign. Her body ached as though she'd been run over by a semi. She flexed her fingers and realized someone held her hand.

She didn't need to open her eyes to know who it was. The large hand holding hers, providing warmth and comfort, was familiar. Strong.

"How bad am I?" she croaked, squeezing his hand. She really didn't want to open her eyes and see the damage done to her body. She'd always healed fast, but she'd never taken a sword to the gut before.

She felt a straw against her mouth.

"You're perfect. Not a scratch on you."

She opened her mouth and took a sip as she slowly opened her eyes. The light in the room forced her to squint. Gabe sat on her bed holding a bottle of water for her to drink. He looked tired and relieved. Tendrils of black hair fell in his face, his light blue eyes were glazed over. Almost white.

How could she not bear any trace of a wound when Jess had nearly cleaved her in two. "You healed me?" she asked, recalling when he had healed her at the top of the staircase when she had taken the hit for Naberius.

He didn't answer her as he placed the bottle of water on her nightstand.

He leaned down and wrapped his arms under her torso, shaking as he held her body to his. Her arms felt like lead as she brought them around him. She put her hand in his hair, trying to comfort him. Something about his demeanor had her worried.

Then it hit her.

He was leaving.

She took a deep breath, taking in his scent, the feel of his body. She never wanted to let him go.

"What is it?" She steeled herself for the inevitable. "You can tell me."

Don't leave me.

"You're fine. Don't worry about a thing."

His assurances were lost on her. He pulled away, his hand brushing her hair from her brow. The stubble on his face that normally made him look hot and dangerous now made him look old. Haggard. Something was terribly wrong.

She should have died. A sword to the gut and the cut at her neck would have killed her. The realization that he did more than heal her hit her. "Gabriel?"

All her life she had wanted someone to love her unconditionally. She had wanted laughter and children, a home and a family to call her own.

Without his having told her, she knew he loved her. His actions showed it. The look in his eyes proved it. The game was over. She no longer felt like the young woman who went to Tom's on Thanksgiving night. Nor was she the person who trained in the backyard with Naberius. So much had happened. Tom was dead. Jess was dead. Nothing could ever be the same. A part of her innocence had been lost.

She recalled when Jess had asked her when she would realize none of this was a

game. She realized it now as she looked at Gabe. She would do *anything* for him. It was the question of what he had done—or sacrificed—for her that scared her.

“What did Lucifer ask of you?”

He touched her cheek, taking a deep breath. “We’re all made up of experiences, both good and bad. We can’t control the problems we face each day, but we can control the way we solve those problems, if we have the courage to solve them at all. That’s what we will be judged on in the final days. We won’t be judged on a single act, but the total values of our actions.”

“Gabriel.” She stayed his hand with her own. “*What* did he ask of you?”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. “He asked that I love you until he calls upon my services.”

She closed her eyes and wept. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had known. Because of his love for her he had damned himself.

He took her in his arms again. “It will be okay.”

Why must everything come at a price? What she had wanted her entire life, what she had dreamed of, was holding her, just as she had always hoped. She should be happy. Ecstatic.

Instead, that same love she had always wanted was the very thing that had weighed Gabe down in his decision. It was her fault. She had known the fight would cause someone’s death. She had never thought it to be Gabe’s. She should have left him alone in the very beginning, when he’d told her they would never be a couple. He wouldn’t be damned if she would have just walked away like he’d asked.

He pulled away. “Chris, look at me.”

She opened her eyes.

“No one is solely evil, and no one is solely good. We don’t know what will happen in the future. I made my decision and it was mine alone. I don’t want you to feel any guilt over it.”

“How can I not?” she asked through trembling lips.

“Life is never perfect, and that’s what makes it worth living. Come on, you knew life with me would never be boring.”

She rested a palm on his cheek and fought the urge to break down. “You’re making light of the situation.” Just like she would have done if their situations had been reversed.

“It worked. I saw the hint of a smile.”

He leaned over and picked up the water bottle. She stopped him when he brought it to her lips. She reached up to his upper arm and pushed his T-shirt up to reveal a new tattoo she’d glimpsed when he had leaned over.

A tattoo she had never seen. “What’s this?”

“Take a drink.”

“*What is this?*”

“Take a drink, please.”

To mollify him, she did.

“It’s my seal.”

Every demon has a seal...

Chris suddenly wanted to throw up.

“Chris—”

“Chris, you should have never come here! You should have stayed away from me as

was your first intention.” God, this was all her fault.

“That’s bullshit and you know it. There is nothing bad about us, and this tattoo represents nothing but a reminder. You are a good person, Christine. And if God punishes me for loving you, and saving your soul, so be it.”

“And to think I was nice to that bastard!”

“Lucifer does watch out for his own. He didn’t do this to hurt you. Hell, he didn’t do it to hurt me. He wants the best fighters for the last battle. This is how he recruits.”

She tried getting herself under control. What was it Stephen had told her? Life wasn’t fair? How very true.

Gabe leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Can we speak of this later? There’s no rush. I’ll even let you rant at me until you run out of breath.”

He looked like hell. She nodded, too tired to argue. What was done was done. She would contemplate about it later.

She ran a tongue over her teeth. “I need a shower and some Listerine. Bad.”

“Mind if I join you?”

It finally dawned on her that he was wearing the same clothes he fought in. “How long have I been out?”

“Maybe an hour, no longer.”

She sat up in bed. Every nerve in her body on alert. Had everyone come out of the fight alive? “Mike and Stephen?”

“They are both well. I believe they are in the living room.”

“They weren’t hurt?”

“A few minor cuts and bruises. They’ll live.”

Scenes from the fight started trickling back. Her fear, her instincts, the blood. She recalled the sickening way Tom’s head had fallen from his body.

“My father. He was there. Did you see him?”

A dark look crossed his features. “I did.”

He was dead. Another death she would have to carry with her. “And?”

“And what?”

She sighed with frustration. “Well, I mean, what happened? What did he do? Did he ... die?”

“You can ask your questions to Balam after your shower.”

Panic rose up in her throat like bile. “He’s *here*?”

“He’s in this house.”

She pulled a hand through her hair. “Oh my God! I look terrible. We can’t shower together. Not if my father is here!”

“The hell we can’t.”

She jumped out of bed and went to her dresser. “What should I wear?” She fumbled through her clothes, hands shaking.

“I tend to shower naked.”

She whirled around to face him. “Gabriel! What if he can hear you?” Demons had excellent hearing, and he’d no doubt heard what Gabe had said.

He came over and took the clothes from her hand, placing them back in the dresser. “A half hour won’t matter after twenty years.”

“Gabriel MacPherson!”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re right. It’ll take at least an hour.”

She laughed, unable to remain serious. “You’re terrible.”

“Give me that hour and I’ll be changing that opinion of yours.”

“But wasn’t he fighting against us? Why is he here?”

“Once he saw you in the midst of the battle he commanded his demons to fight on our side. You were up there when he gave the order, didn’t you hear it?”

She recalled something about it, but that part of the fight was foggy. “What about Naberius?”

“He’s already gone home.”

“Your father?”

“He’s not exactly speaking to me at the moment. But enough of this. I thought I had lost you.” Without warning he scooped her up and headed to the bathroom.

So this is what acceptance felt like. Her father could wait. She didn’t feel alone anymore.

“What would I do if you hadn’t come into my life?” she asked as he set her down next to the shower.

He unzipped her pants. “That’s not something I wish to think about at the moment.”

“I would have nothing.”

He stopped undressing and met her eyes. “That is something I will never allow.”

After everything he had sacrificed for her, that went without question. “I know.”

He put his hand on the side of her face. “You do know that we’ll never have biological children. Being a half vampire makes me infertile.”

She nodded. She knew it hurt him, as he knew how much a family meant to her. She didn’t want to weigh the moment down with dramatic truths. “But we’ll have fun trying, won’t we?”

A seductive smile spread across his face. “They say practice makes perfect.”

After he said that he de-materialized their clothes with a devilish grin.

* * * *

Gabe stood back and eyed Balam as he greeted his daughter. Balam commanded more legions than Naberius did. He was also part of the First Angelic Revolt, making him a demon of the first fall—the angels who had fallen with Lucifer.

Balam had once wanted power so badly he had cursed God, vowing to follow Lucifer to the end. The First Angelic Revolt had been met with pure aggression and violence. Nothing like the Second Angelic Revolt, of which Naberius had taken a lead role. Naberius’s fall had been born of the envy of the human race. Envy for the experiences the humans had above the angels—and lust for human women.

Chris looked calm and composed as she met her father for the first time. She was surprisingly resilient, considering what she had just been through.

“He doesn’t normally look that way. He’s just ready to pounce if he feels you are hurting me.”

What had she just said? “Pardon?”

“I’m just telling Balam that you have an overprotective streak when it comes to me.” She smiled at him.

Overprotective didn’t begin to describe it. “If he hurts you again he will not live to regret it.”

She laughed and turned back to her father. “We’re getting married two weeks from

now.”

“What?” Mike asked from the kitchen. He and Stephen came into the living room.

Chris smiled. “We’re getting married.”

“As in a preacher, church and wedding gown?” Stephen asked.

“As in the whole white dress, flowers and tuxedo. Yeah. We’re getting married. Just because I’m half demon doesn’t mean I shouldn’t do this the right way. The wedding will take place in the main hall, though, to accommodate all the people.”

Gabe couldn’t help but laugh. When Chris threw him *The Look*, he quickly cleared his throat. “Everyone is invited. The wedding will be held in my native Scotland, so I won’t be wearing a tux,” he corrected her. “I’ll be wearing my kilt.”

“Why in Scotland?” Mike asked.

“Because he has more family than I do.”

“Soon they will be your family as well.” He watched as her eyes teared up, and a smile brightened her face. He would give her family, more than she had ever dreamed possible. Though she wouldn’t have children of her own, she would have plenty of others to spoil.

“Will you be able to attend?” she asked Balam.

Gabe tensed until Balam bowed. “I would not miss it.”

The tension remained between him and the demon. They didn’t know each other, and each had a vested interest in the same woman.

Gabe wasn’t sure he wanted a three-headed king of Hell as a father-in-law, but it appeared he had no choice. As Chris had so aptly put it, “Family is family. We never turn our backs on family.”

At least Balam remained in his human form while he was around them. Gabe was certain Chris couldn’t handle that particular vision right now. He was one of the few demons who could transform into a beast right out of the Book of Revelation.

Balam had in fact tried to give his daughter a better life than he would have been capable of providing at the time. That in itself deserved some respect, and Gabe grudgingly gave it.

“Mike, what’s going to happen to Dark Days?” Chris clasped her hands behind her back. Gabe knew that she was still nervous and uncomfortable, but her poise spoke of self-assurance.

“Stephen and I will hire from within the vampire community. It’s not something you need to worry about at the moment.”

Looking relieved, she turned to Balam. “Have you met my brothers?”

Balam shook his head. “We were not formally introduced.”

She took her father’s offered arm and led him over to Mike and Stephen. Without using words, she was asking Mike and Stephen if they accepted her. All of the ragging she had witnessed between them and Nabarius had left its mark, as Gabe had been afraid of.

“This is Mike and Stephen. They’ve been with me for seven years now.”

Balam shook hands with each man.

A sadness settled over Chris’s features. “I would have had more family members to introduce to you, but they chose the wrong path.”

Gabe smiled as she quietly scolded her father.

“It was a path my brothers and I were not willing to follow.” She slid her arm from

Balam's.

When he didn't respond to her chiding, she asked, "Why were you there?"

"I knew you would be there."

She looked surprised. Gabe himself was a little surprised, but the second he'd witnessed Balam toss his own demon into the wall, he'd known.

"You were there for me?"

"I have always been there to protect you."

She turned to Gabe, obviously not knowing what to say or how to proceed.

Gabe changed the subject. "Dave is with my father."

"His sentencing?"

"He's going through training right now. He'll be at the wedding."

A tear fell down her cheek. "Promise?"

Gabe nodded. "He will be there." And Dave would be happy for his sister, or Gabe would beat the living shit out of him.

"Thank you."

He smiled. If she only knew. Dave had wanted Gabe to kill him. While she had been training with Naberius he had checked in on Dave. He wanted nothing to do with vampires, demons or anything else that happened to be non-human. Gabe had asked Lucifer to flash Dave to Scotland, where he had promptly been made into a vampire by Gabe's father.

Dave was still pissed as all hell, and he still didn't know Chris was a half demon. That should prove an interesting conversation.

Not as interesting as it was going to be when Gabe introduced his soon-to-be father-in-law to his father, who didn't really care for demons from the First Angelic Revolt.

God, what a life they had ahead of them.

* * * *

"Are you happy?" Chris asked as she climbed into bed. She snuggled up to his side and kissed his cheek.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so content going to bed. "More so than I have ever been. You?"

"There is an underlying sadness from what happened, but concerning us and everything that's happening now, I can honestly say I have never been happier. Everything seems to have worked out. Except for your—"

"One day at a time. That's all anyone can hold on to. You promised you'd rage at me later."

"Well, it's hard to let something like that go. You've basically sold your soul to the Devil."

"Now remember, he doesn't go by that name."

She laughed. "Well, we'll never be apart. I'll fight with you wherever you go."

The hell she would. He'd never let her damn herself in such a way. He had to remind himself that she was speaking of her new job with the Alliance. Not Armageddon. Hell, he wasn't sure he would ever allow her on another case.

"So, how many vampires are employed by the Alliance?"

"About seven hundred."

"Demons?"

“My father is just now integrating demons into the mix.”

She was silent for a moment. “Do you think your mom will like me?”

“She’ll love you.”

“Your father took off without so much as a word to me.”

“That had nothing to do with you.” It had to do with the fact that his son had made a pact with his sworn enemy. Ambrose had left without saying a word to anyone.

“I’m nervous.”

He positioned himself on top of her, bracing himself up on his forearms. Their bodies fitted together perfectly. As though they had been made for one another.

He recalled the first time he had seen her. Flying by in her red Focus, flipping him off and calling him a jackass.

Now here she was. Soft, naked and enchanting. His fiancée.

He’d never met anyone like her before. He had to admit she was a bit quirky, but when she loved she did so with her entire being. She never held her love back, or gave stipulations on the giving.

And she was his.

“I love you.” He kissed her lips, her cheek, her neck.

There were tears in her eyes when he pulled back.

“Promise?”

In time he hoped to take away her fear of being abandoned. Her fear of being alone. She would never be alone again. “I promise. Always and forever.”

Epilogue

Chris stood at a window on the east side of the MacPherson castle, watching the sun set beneath the horizon. The sky was clear, the castle drummed with excitement, and her heart fluttered like the wings of a butterfly.

They were to have an evening wedding, for those like her brothers who couldn't be out in the light, and the festivities were to last for three days, beginning right after they said their "I do's." Sven filled her in on the way the Scots celebrated, and Chris had a feeling the next few days were going to be wild. Filled with drink and song, loved ones and joy.

The door to the bedroom opened. Sam, Gabe's mother, came in with the wedding dress draped over her arm. The same wedding dress she had worn when she married Ambrose. It was old, and had needed work done on it, but it looked beautiful.

"How are you feeling?"

Samantha was the sweetest woman. She'd been by Chris's side ever since they had arrived two days before.

"I'm nervous."

"I can imagine. I was a nervous wreck on my wedding day as well. It'll pass, and soon you'll be drinking and dancing, and having a grand time."

She held the dress out, and Chris took it from her. "I've always dreamed of a daughter wearing my wedding gown, but I was not to have that blessing. I'm honored that you will wear this when you wed my son."

Chris hugged her. "If I ever dreamt what my mother was like, you are exactly what I would have wanted her to be."

Chris pulled away to see Sam tear up. They'd spoken numerous times, and both had shared bits of their past. Of course Chris had to get the story on the whole Celeste, Hell, Keeper of the Cross madness. It still baffled her.

"How's it coming along in here?"

Chris stiffened slightly as Ambrose walked into the room. The man made her a nervous wreck, and she was already feeling the jitters without him here. He was nearly six feet five, black hair, blue eyes, with a stern disposition. He reminded her so much of Gabe, in action and in speech. Ambrose seemed much more intimidating to Chris, though.

"Ambrose, shame on you. Chris is about to marry your son, and you have her terrified of you."

Chris looked aghast at Samantha, shaking her head in attempt to silence her. They'd talked a little about Ambrose, and how he'd left without saying a word to anyone after the battle. Samantha ignored her plea.

"Your future daughter-in-law thinks you don't like her."

God, how humiliating. Why did this shit always happen to her? She could die on the spot.

"Chris, is that true?"

She felt like choking the life out of Samantha. What could she do? Lie in front of Gabe's mother? His son was marrying a demon, and Ambrose was not silent on the fact

that he didn't like her race. "Um, I might have said something like that, but it's fine. I understand."

"Honey, can I talk to Chris privately?"

Chris wanted to scream. Samantha merely nodded her blond head, gave that terrifying man a kiss on his cheek and left the room.

The air in the room grew heavier. She had to force herself not to back up from his icy, blue stare. She recalled the awe in Mike's voice when he had spoken of Ambrose, and now she knew why.

"Chris, my attitude these past few days has nothing to do with you personally. It has to do with the bad decision my son has made."

The decision that brought her back from death. A single reason strong enough to have Ambrose hate her. "I understand."

He placed his hands behind his back, likely trying to assume a non-intimidating stance for her benefit. It didn't work.

"I don't believe that you do."

She stepped out on a limb. "What would you have done in his situation, if it had been Samantha?"

"The very same thing he did."

She was stupefied. "What?"

"I would have done the same thing, but what kind of father would I be if I just rolled over about this? I'm happy I met you, and I open my arms to welcome you into this clan. I've never seen Gabe happier. I just wish it hadn't come at such a high price."

She nodded in understanding. She couldn't agree more.

"I still don't understand why Mike and Stephen are walking you down the aisle if your father is here. Don't you think that's an affront to him?"

She was sure it was. "Mike and Stephen have been by my side for seven years, protecting me and showing me what the meaning of family is all about. If anyone deserves to give me away it is those two men."

He seemed pleased by her answer. A small smile settled on his face. "And Dave?"

She let a laugh escape her. Poor Dave. When she had seen him he'd gained at least ten pounds of muscle, showing that his training was hard-core. Plus he was adjusting to being a vampire. But behind his façade of indignation, his new position had likely ignited something inside of him. She saw something in his eyes she hadn't seen previously. "He'll live."

Ambrose laughed. He moved to stand closer to her. "And Chris? I could never have picked a better wife for my son, or a daughter to call my own."

She lifted her hand to cover her eyes, knowing very well by the warm sensation that they had changed color. She'd never thought to hear such a beautiful statement from Ambrose. Family had been all she'd wanted. Acceptance. And for so many people to open their arms to her ... it was beyond her wildest imaginings.

To her complete humiliation she started to cry.

He hugged her. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I'm just happy."

He let go of her and took her hands from her face. She kept her gaze lowered.

"There is no need to be embarrassed of what you are here."

She dabbed at the tears on her cheek. He was right. It was just difficult to change

how she felt overnight. For so long she'd kept her secret so buried that even she hadn't thought about it much. "I hope they don't change color during the ceremony."

Ambrose laughed "Oh, I'm sure they will. Gabe's eyes have been white all day long."

* * * *

"Are you ready, Chris?"

The bagpipes had been playing for several minutes now, and Chris's feet were rooted to the ground. She was about to present herself to Gabe's entire clan. Hundreds of people sat in the great hall waiting for her, Mike and Stephen to walk down the grand staircase.

Her breath was caught in her throat. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Well, that's a nice visual," Stephen said.

Didn't they understand the significance of the ceremony? As much as she wanted this, she was nervous. "This is going to change everything. I won't see you two very often. I'll be with Gabe and the Alliance."

"Oh, I think you'll see us plenty."

She turned to Mike. "How?"

"Stephen and I joined the Alliance yesterday, a few days after you did. We begin training tomorrow. We have to wait to go on missions until we can go out in the daylight, but Ambrose said he'd give us some of his blood, which will speed up the process. He'll be doing the same thing for Dave." He smiled. "I can't wait to fuck with Dave."

"What?"

Stephen laughed. "It's rock and roll from here on out. We're rolling with the big boys now."

That was enough to sober her up. "Oh God. Sven, Roger, Dave, Gabe, you, me and Mike. All in the Alliance?"

"Yep," Stephen said cheerfully.

"Lord help us," she said as her brothers began descending the steps, taking her with them. She prayed she wouldn't trip and gripped their arms in a desperate plea for strength.

She caught sight of Gabe as they made the turn on the staircase. He looked magical in his Scottish kilt. She felt as though she were stepping back in time. Sven and Roger wore the same kilt, and stood at his side. Gabe hadn't been able to choose between the two, so he had two best men.

Ambrose and Samantha sat in the front of the congregation, with Dave sitting quietly beside them. Balam sat next to Dave. Hundreds of people filled up the seats on either side of the aisle. She didn't have much family to speak of, and suddenly it didn't matter. Those she did have were all she needed. Now Gabe's family would be added to those she cared about.

Tears welled up in her eyes. Everything would work out. No one knew their future, and she didn't know what she and Gabe would have to weather together. She would cherish every moment she spent with him, both good and bad. And her brothers. Sven and Roger. Dave. They were all family now.

She was pretty sure they felt the same. Every one of them had white eyes.

When her brothers gave her away to Gabe her hand trembled in his. He squeezed it, and that simple gesture calmed her nerves. They were together, and that was all that

mattered.

Standing next to him felt like coming home. With laughter and love, family and tears, she'd never dreamed life could be so fulfilling.

They turned to the priest and bowed their heads in prayer.

The End

About the Author:

I grew up in the busy city of Sacramento, California. I decided I wanted to see the world, so I enlisted in the Navy right out of school. Shortly after joining the Navy, I was stationed in Italy where I met my husband—a Marine who guarded the building I worked in. No one can convince me love at first sight does not exist. We have two beautiful daughters and now reside in his home state of Michigan.

I began reading romance at the tender age of twelve when I found my mother's stash of Victoria Holt books. I was instantly hooked on romance novels. It wasn't until I was in my twenties that I wrote my first romance novel.

Paranormal romance has always sparked my interest, and I found myself writing about vampires and demons. My stories revolve around finding redemption through love, and of course, that happily ever after we all seek.

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