



Hearts Afire: May

Nina Pierce and Julia Devlin

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Shadows Of Fire

Nina Pierce

Dedication

To firefighter Terence Keenan of Milford, CT who's one of those brave heroes we tend to take for granted. I appreciate all the time you took patiently answering my questions about firefighting however silly they may have been. And you did it all with that Irish charm and quick smile ... your wife Kristan is a very lucky woman.

Acknowledgement

I couldn't have written this book without the help of Rich Wark of the Presque Isle fire department and dear friends Pam Champagne, Jennifer Linforth, and Roscoe James whose hand-holding was invaluable. I would also like to note that any errors in firefighting facts are completely my responsibility. Because sometimes—no matter what you tell an author—we have to do it our own way.

Chapter One

It wasn't much of a noise, just a dull thud in the night, but it was enough to rouse Professor Paul Morgan from his slumber. With his head heavy, the arms of Morpheus still around him, and his blood thick with sleeping medication, Paul wasn't sure if he had simply imagined the sound. But when it came again—a muffled bang from downstairs, followed oddly enough by the sound of rushing wind—he knew he needed to investigate.

Swiping at his eyes, Paul tried unsuccessfully to push away the last strands of drowsiness still clinging to his mind. Something deep in the pit of his stomach told him what had woken him had nothing to do with Zeus, his mischievous tabby and only companion since his wife's death nearly thirty years ago. Swinging his feet to the floor, Paul stepped into leather slippers and grabbed his robe from the hope chest at the foot of the bed. Scurrying from the bedroom, fear and urgency pushed him forward.

The eerie orange glow emanating from his den at the foot of the stairs wrapped anxiety around his chest, making it hard to catch his breath. Everything near and dear to him was in that room; his wife's portrait, the marble Sphinx from their trip to Egypt, the antique bookcase she'd given him when he'd been awarded the position at the university—the bronzed baby shoes. His feet barely touched the treads as he rushed down the stairs, caution and prudence gone with the desperate need to salvage his memories.

He came up short at the threshold. Swallowing hard, he tried to dislodge the heart lodged in his throat. A fire crackled safely in the fireplace across the room, the dancing flames sending a ballet of mesmerizing shadows along the paneled walls and casting the room in an otherworldly radiance. Icy fingers of fear lifted the hairs on the back of his neck.

A quick glance at his desk in the corner reassured him his research was also safe, but did nothing to assuage his apprehension. The papers he'd left stacked neatly for the magistrate's office lay strewn about. The monitor of his computer silhouetted the head of a person sitting at his desk.

"Who are you? Wha ... wha ... what are doing?"

There was no response save for the clicking of computer keys.

"I'll call the police." Paul said.

A maniacal laugh rent the stillness, sending shards of Arctic terror and adrenaline surging through his veins.

"No, Professor Morgan. We both know you cannot do that." With a flourish, a hand came down hard on the keyboard. The monitor flicked rapidly through several screens before going black.

"What have you done?" Paul rushed to the desk. A chilling wave of nausea rolled over the tightness in his chest, bringing water to his eyes. *Everything*. Everything that mattered to him was on that computer.

"I didn't want it to happen this way." The words carried sadness, but the face that turned to stare at him was pure evil. A face he barely recognized. "You really shouldn't have been quite so diligent in your research, you know, Professor. I sent obvious warnings, hoping to push you from this foolhardy course for months. But you wouldn't heed the signs." A clicking tongue scolded him as if he were an obstinate child. Fingers

steeped in front of lips thin with hatred. “A shame really. I have no doubt your brilliant mind will be missed by your colleagues. But you and your work have become too much of a liability for me to allow you to live.”

“You can’t get away with this.”

“Oh, I think we both know I have, and I will again.” The monster slowly standing before him wasn’t the amicable person he knew from the university. This person had morphed into a heinous murderer—a murderer with no conscience and a moral compass that pointed straight to hell.

Paul threw back his shoulders. Though he understood he would not survive this night, he would accept his fate with dignity. “I’ve already sent a copy of all of that to my lawyer.” He waved at the papers on the desk. “He knows. He knows and understands *everything*. None of this will stop with my death.” Paul was pleased he could push the lie steadily past the panic clogging his throat.

“Please, don’t insult my intelligence.” The murderer gathered the papers on the desk and tapped them on its polished cherry surface, elegant fingers aligning the edges before setting them neatly in a pile. “We both know these are the only copies. And we both understand what is to come is inevitable. Preordained, if you will...” The smile was reptilian, as if Satan himself had taken possession of this wayward soul.

“You won’t get away with this.” Paul was repeating himself, but terror had stripped him of coherent thought.

“But I already have.” Something small flew from long fingers. Blue flames erupted in the fireplace. A ball of fire jumped to the leather chair next to the hearth. Another flew to the Aubusson rug he and his wife had bought on their honeymoon fifty years ago.

“Stop!”

“What you began, I will finish tonight.”

Paul lunged for the decorative throw on back of the couch, intent on pounding the growing flames into submission.

Another burst of evil laughter split the air and the glass vase on the hearth exploded in the growing heat. “That’s right, old man. Try to stop it.”

Paul brought the blanket down hard on the fire spreading like a sickness across the rug. The thick smoke choking the air filled his nose and burned his lungs. It was no use. The flames were spreading faster than he could control them. He needed to get out. Abandoning the blanket, he turned to run.

He saw the monster raise the small ottoman only seconds before it crashed down on Paul’s world.

* * * *

“Oh, screw you, Harkness.” Reese Colton threw five cards on the table as his friend collected the paper I.O.U. along with the pile of poker chips. Testosterone and laughter filled the fire station kitchen. “You all suck!” Reese crossed his arms over his chest.

His best friend leaned back in the wooden chair and flicked the scrap of paper with his finger. “Oh, you’ll pay up on this one, buddy.” Josh Harkness flashed his familiar shit-eating grin. Only braces and modern dentistry had altered its appearance in the two and a half centuries Reese had known him. “Not only do I have it in writing...” The chair banged down hard on the linoleum floor as Josh leaned over the marred table, shooting Reese a smug look of satisfaction. “I’ve got witnesses.” His outstretched arm indicated

the four other firefighters looking on with amusement.

Reese had never welched on a bet, especially if it was more along the lines of a dare, but there was always a first time. “You haven’t had anything better than a straight all night, Harkness,” Reese stated. “With a full boat, it was a pretty safe bet I’d be pocketing that piece of paper.” Reese lunged for the I.O.U., but Josh pulled it from his reach.

“Uh-oh, methinks he’s afraid of a wee Irish woman.”

Friendship, boredom, and the late hour made the whole situation humorous—at least to the other men in the room. “I am not afraid.” Reese paused, measuring his words. “I just believe slow and steady wins the woman’s heart.”

“He thinks he’s a friggin’ tortoise.” Timmons pulled the collar of his T-shirt over his head.

“No.” Ellsworth cupped his hands over his heart and batted his lashes. “More like Romeo. ‘Juliet. Juliet. Wherefore art thou?’”

“A million comedians out of work and you two—”

The shrill ring of the alarm speared through the firehouse, cutting Reese off in midsentence. Conditioning and quick reflexes pressed the men into action. Chairs scraped across the floor and boots pounded through the adjoining day room.

“Attention South Kenton fire.” The dispatcher’s disembodied voice filled the newly charged atmosphere. “Repeat. Attention South Kenton fire. Structure fire, East Brooker Road. Witnesses report potential occupants...”

Six men slid down the brass pole, donning their bravery with their bunker gear.

* * * *

Glenn Karr watched his partner and the co-owner of O’Malley’s Tavern sneak in from the kitchen as if she could keep her arrival from him. But from his position behind the bar, he could see everything, including the mirrored clock over the empty pool table in the corner. Midnight. Though Alexandra Flanagan hadn’t told him specifically where she was headed when she’d dropped the apron on the bar and gathered her purse, she’d said she wouldn’t be long. Three hours was longer than it took to run your usual Thursday night errand. Whatever the hell that might be.

“How about another glass of your best wine, Glenn?” Ronan Nason stared at the woman with the Irish pixie features sliding in behind the bar. “Hey, Alex, working the kitchen tonight?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Alex smiled apologetically at Glenn.

Glenn didn’t miss the wink Alex shot Ronan as she stepped up, uncorked the green bottle and poured burgundy liquid into the glass. Heat rolled in Glenn’s belly and some unidentified emotion tightened his chest. Both vampires were decades older than their twenty-something appearance, but babies in the grand scheme of immortality.

Ronan had shown up in South Kenton just over a year ago, as part of the solution to Glenn’s very desperate plea to the vampire tribunal. But Alex had become part of his family shortly after Glenn had settled in this Northern California mountain town three decades ago. Like so many others, she’d found her way to him—a stray in need of saving. Glenn had made it his personal mission, nearly a century ago, to help new vampires find their way in the mortal world. Countless numbers of young vamps came to him. Drawn by word of mouth, they sought explanations, training and—if possible—redemption.

Like so many of his protégés, Alex's parents weren't part of her vampire life. They believed her to be dead. She had nearly lost herself in the sorrow of that loss. Without anyone in this world and nowhere to turn, Glenn had broken his own codes, allowing her to live with him until she felt secure in her new life. Alex had crawled under his skin and burrowed her way into his heart. He loved her like a daughter.

That's why it upset him so that she'd taken up with a wanderer like Nason.

Their actions over the last couple of months weren't adding up and it had become painfully obvious they were keeping something from him. Since Ronan had come in less than thirty minutes before Alex, of course Glenn believed they had been together. The thought sat heavy on his heart. Ronan was brash, too cocksure of himself and a bit reckless for Alex's pensive personality. But he pursued her with a singular focus and Alex seemed to be warming to his machinations.

Glenn would rather see her hook up with Ronan's colleague, Reese Colton. The firefighter had been eyeing Alex for several months. Where Ronan rushed the courtship, Colton tempted with elegance and charm that came from years of seducing women. Obviously that technique did nothing for Alex. She was blind to the wisdom of a slow seduction, and didn't seem to see Colton as anything other than another vampire ordering wine. Glenn laughed at himself. *When the hell did I become a matchmaker?* Whatever.

He supposed he needed to face facts. Alex was an adult. He had no right to deny her the company of any young man. Glenn just wondered why she chose to do it behind his back.

Alex set the wine glass in front of Ronan and sidled up next to Glenn. "Sorry, it took a bit longer than I expected. Hope it wasn't too busy." Her short-crop of sassy copper hair bounced around her chin as she stifled a yawn.

"You needn't have bothered to come back," Glenn whispered, picking up a beer stein and polishing nonexistent streaks. "The usual crowd of firefighters went home long before you left. I told you I could close tonight. It's not like Thursday nights are busy." He shot a look over his shoulder at Ronan and the other two customers sitting on wooden barstools. They all seemed more interested in the television mounted over the bar than his conversation with Alex. "Obviously you had something or *someone* that was more important."

She grimaced at his implication. "I told you when I left I'd only be a few hours."

Alex swallowed hard and Glenn didn't know if it was guilt or sickness clogging her throat. She didn't look very good. He stared hard into her eyes, looking for something, hoping he wouldn't find the deception he expected to see. But he didn't know how to interpret the overly cheerful smile beaming up at him.

"I know what you told me, child." He set the mug next to the others and picked up another, continuing to polish in slow, deliberate circles. "But I have eyes, don't I? You look like someone ran over your dog."

*

Alex met his gaze with a steady stare of her own.

"I think you're being a little melodramatic." She hoped the statement came off as cavalier. Unable to withstand Glenn's scrutiny, Alex grabbed the dish bucket from under the counter and headed toward the kitchen. "I don't even own a dog."

Stifling another yawn into her shoulder, Alex let the swinging door to the tiny kitchen flap behind her, effectively shutting out the man's skeptical look. Though he

barely topped her five-foot-eight frame, the regal way he carried himself made people believe he was over six feet tall. Suspicious eyes had searched her face seeking the truth. Perhaps remorse had her misreading his furrowed brow. It was probably nothing more than concern lining his face and pursing his lips, but the intensity sparking in his eyes had churned the guilt in her belly.

Alex set the bucket in the sink and ran hot water over the glasses. One hour. Just sixty blessed minutes. A mere three thousand, six hundred seconds separated her from her bed. She shouldn't be so tired. It went against her nature. But then, she'd been doing a lot of things that weren't really in the vampire code of ethics, now hadn't she?

Co-owning a family tavern like O'Malley's that catered to humans as well as vampires was certainly one of those oddities. Thirty years was a long time to tend bar and draw drafts. A year longer than she'd spent being a creature of the night. Most vamps enjoyed the company of their own and sought the rowdier establishments in the valley. Not Alex. Solitude and quiet were more her speed. This tavern, nestled in the quiet hills, offered cover for her true identity. It was also remote enough to keep prying eyes from discovering her clandestine activities. With everything set in motion, she only needed another month, maybe two and then she'd move away without anyone—including Glenn—knowing what she'd been doing. Until then, she'd keep up appearances.

The suds ran over and Alex rinsed and set the glasses and peanut bowls in the dishwasher. She hoped her batting lashes had looked like innocence rather than deceit. She hated lying to the ancient vampire. Glenn had been one of the original clan who'd come over from Europe in the late 1700s. He'd settled in South Kenton around the same time she'd arrived. She had been a fresh-faced college kid from back east ready to find her independence and take on the world. But it hadn't quite happened that way. After her *accident* Glenn had been like a loving father. He'd nurtured her, helped her control the beast and taught her what it meant to be immortal. She in turn had bought an owner's share of the tavern and helped him perfect their wine. If Glenn knew what she was up to, Alex had no doubt it would break his heart.

Glenn's brown eyes had drilled her, but she refused to break. He knew she was lying, Alex could see his disappointment in the way he'd shrugged and turned back to the customers. The man had too much respect for her privacy to call her on it. Thorns of guilt stabbed heart, but Alex had no other recourse. No one—least of all an honorable vampire like Glenn—needed to know her whereabouts this night.

Chapter Two

Though everything around Reese hummed with nervous energy, including the adrenaline pumping through his blood in heavy doses, his bunched muscles remained still. Sitting in the back seat of Engine One as it screamed through the night, Reese slowed his heart and focused on the job ahead. He'd released the air tank from its storage area in the back of his seat and had secured the straps around his shoulders within minutes of closing the back door. Both the gloves and the mask in his hands would be pulled on at the scene. Even immortals couldn't survive the high heat and noxious fumes residential fires produced.

Josh sat beside him, working the thermal imaging camera out of its holding box and powering it on. Reese leaned forward and made sure the images were feeding to the monitor between them. If someone was trapped, they were assigned the rescue. Even after thirteen months on the department, no mortal had discovered the unique talents the two men possessed that made the job of pulling victims from burning buildings a simpler task.

Turning into the parking lot of the apartment complex, everyone in the truck evaluated the level of danger. Only the west side of the two-story building was engaged. Orange glowed from a window on the second floor, but no flames had escaped into the night. Probably a kitchen stove fire or a cigarette carelessly tossed into a bedroom wastebasket.

The residents of the building huddled in dazed confusion in the corner of the parking lot. Some clutched clothing, photos, or purses, like prized possessions, knowing it may be all that remained after the beast raging above them had been slain. A young couple comforted each other and a crying infant. Reese assessed all this in the seconds it took Timmons to pull the engine into place.

The firefighters jumped from the truck, each already knowing the role they would play in saving people and property. An older man broke from the crowd, running toward the engine, frantically waving toward the building and shouting. "She's still up there."

Deputy Chief Carden laid a beefy hand on the man's shoulder. Frantic victims didn't disseminate accurate information. Mere seconds meant the difference between rescue and recovery. "Tell us who's up there and where she might be."

"Mrs. Linscott. She's got Alzheimer's. Back apartment. Second floor. I tried—"

Carden turned to his men. "Harkness. Colton. Don't wait for water. They'll be right behind you. Fire appears contained on the west side."

Reese didn't need to look behind him to know Ellsworth was running a line from the hydrant to the engine while Timmons pulled the hose from the rack on the truck. The two men would work together to bring water into the building while he and Josh began the search. Their platoon was a finely tuned instrument, each move as synchronized as a Swiss watch.

It went against Reese's vampire nature to run toward fire, but that had been one of the reasons he and Josh had sought out this occupation when they'd come to South Kenton. Reese had pursued many careers since being turned in 1759, but he and Josh thought no one would suspect two creatures of the night to be firefighters. After a year in

the department, it appeared their secret was still safe.

With his bunker suit and the air tank strapped to his back, Reese had added no less than sixty-five pounds of gear to his one-hundred-eighty-pound, six-three frame. He barely felt the added weight as he donned his mask, flipped the switch at the bottom of his air tank and entered the building.

No smoke had made its way to the downstairs foyer—a good sign. As Reese leaped over the four stairs to the first landing in one bound, his gaze swept the darkness of the two lower apartments. No one here. Rounding the corner, he could hear the pull of air behind him as Josh followed. Both reached the second landing in two graceful leaps.

Reese turned another corner, looking up the eight steps to the second floor. The heart of the fire lay ahead of them and to the left. It pumped black smoke into the hall like blood through arteries. The light in Reese's hand barely cut through the dense air. If there was someone up there, they needed to move quickly. Fire. Smoke. A disoriented elderly woman. It was a sure recipe for disaster if they didn't act quickly.

Neither Ellsworth nor Timmons could see from this angle, so he and Josh jumped to the second floor hallway in two giant leaps.

Fed by furniture, carpeting, and wood, the fiery animal to his left mushroomed. Windows exploded in the burning apartment and instinct had them ducking away from the noise and flying debris. The heat intensified and the fire hungered for more nourishment. Tongues of flame licked across the apartment ceiling, but the fire wasn't Reese's concern. He could see Timmons and Ellsworth pressing up the stairs with the hose at the ready. He ignored the tempest and entered the apartment on the right.

No lights were on, but with his keen sight Reese didn't need them to see that only smoke but no flames rolled along the ceiling in this apartment. It hadn't yet come down to eye level. For the benefit of anyone who might be watching the monitor in the truck, Josh turned on the imaging camera and swept it around the living room.

"Clear." Josh's voice was tinny and hollow through the side speakers of his mask.

"Hello. Anyone here?" Reese called into the apartment. Nothing.

Josh moved through the living room toward the kitchen while Reese split off to search the rooms on the other side of the apartment.

"Clear." He heard Josh shout again.

Turning the corner into the hall, he nearly ran into her. The frail woman appeared unaffected by his presence. Veins glowed through the papery skin of her hands. Her nervous fingers laced and rolled over each other as her eyes searched the night. A cotton nighty ballooned on her frail frame. "Dark. It's so dark. Where is Benjamin?" Her pale eyes turned to him. He watched the soft expression of confusion harden to terror. "You're not looking for Benjamin. You ... you..." Her finger shook at him as her shuffling feet moved her unsteadily toward the refuge of the bathroom behind her. "You unholy creature. Don't come near me."

Damn. Reese had no idea if the bunker gear frightened her or if unconsciously she sensed something deeper. Animals, children and the elderly often sensed his true nature.

It didn't matter what spooked her. All he knew was that he needed the docile victim of a moment ago, not the frightened woman stubbornly backing away from him. Reese pulled off the helmet and face mask. Only the black *Nomex* hood covered his head. Not procedure, but he needed her calm or taking her from her apartment would not be pleasant for either of them. "Mrs. Linscott. I'm Reese. I'm a local fireman. You need to

come with me. Your building is on fire and you aren't safe."

"Benjamin!" she shouted for help as she backed into the bathroom and attempted to shut the door. Reese held it open with his heavy boot. The radio in his ear confirmed Timmons and Ellsworth were getting ahead of the fire next door. Still, they needed to find this Benjamin and get them both clear of the building in case it flared and the situation became more dangerous.

Josh entered the hallway and shot Reese a quick look and smiled. He left him to deal with the belligerent occupant and wordlessly went in search of Benjamin.

"Mrs. Linscott. Benjamin is outside and waiting for you." Hell if Reese knew if that were true, but he wasn't above lying to keep someone out of harm's way. He'd clear out this woman and let Josh worry about the other occupant.

"Benjamin? You know where Benjamin is?" Her death grip on the bathroom door relaxed.

Josh came out of the bedroom, the camera hooked to his gear. The heavy gloves on his hands protected him from the claws of a snarling cat. Animals—especially cats—didn't like vampires. Reese bit back a laugh.

"Benjamin." The woman gracefully pushed past Reese and grabbed the cat from Josh. With her attention on the animal, Reese replaced both his mask and the helmet and directed her to the door. He'd carry her if he had to. But at the moment there was no imminent danger and he could let her move at her own pace to safety.

White walls of steam had replaced the black smoke in the hall. The orange glow was gone, leaving only the heaviness of the night and the thudding sound of an axe against wall. A stove fire. Josh broke off to check on the charred apartment and help the others assess the walls for hot spots. The supply of water no longer needed, the hose lay limp and flat at their feet.

Reese led Mrs. Linscott and her feisty cat down the stairs and into the waiting embrace of her worried daughter.

Deputy Chief Carden was focused on the radio as Reese moved to the engine. "We've got another call," he said simply. Reese didn't need to hear any more; he'd learned to read the man months ago. Though his words were calm, tension sluiced off Carden in waves and Reese immediately ran to the building to help Timmons and Josh retract the hose.

"Colton, Harkness and Timmons with me in the engine." He heard over his radio. "We'll leave Ellsworth with the tanker. They're calling in everyone. Let's get moving. This one's big."

* * * *

Alex swiped at the sticky table, stifling another yawn with the back of her hand. Twice a week she suffered through this malaise. She hated the now-familiar ache, knew she could satiate it shortly and it was that knowledge that kept her moving. "Push through the next thirty minutes and the night is yours," she mumbled, trying to convince her body to ignore the gnawing in her gut and the throb at her temples. There was only one thing that pushed the nausea and dizziness back into the void—and sleep wasn't it.

She would hate for Glenn to discover how she suffered. So Alex kept her complaints to herself as he wiped up the dark marble of the bar. Next he'd cover the drink garnishes and move them to the fridge in the back. Their routine was a graceful ballet they'd

performed so many nights, the choreography required nothing more than the pulsing rhythm of the late night show playing on the corner television.

Before the last three patrons left, Alex had cleaned the small kitchen. The grease was scooped and turned off, the dishwasher sanitizing the last several drink glasses and the few dishes dirtied by the customers. On week nights they didn't serve anything that couldn't be nuked or deep fried. Chris, the short order cook, only worked Fridays and Saturdays, when couples frequented the establishment. Patrons coming to O'Malley's in the late evenings during the week weren't looking for their comfort to come from food. They searched for solace in the bottom of a beer bottle or shot glass.

"Alex?" Her name was spoken with persistence, pushing through the fog of self absorption. "Isn't that the guy who's helping with your dissertation? Professor..." Glenn snapped his fingers as if it that alone could conjure the name.

Alex stared at the television. The gentle face superimposed in the corner of the screen smiling down at the viewers was in stark contrast to the flashing pulses of orange, red, and blue that had replaced the long face of the night show host. Anxiety churned the acid in her stomach, sending bile into her throat. Alex worked hard to swallow it down. The local news anchor stood on the side of the shot while his cameraman zoomed in on the mansion quickly being devoured by hungry flames. Firefighters in heavy gear worked hoses spewing water that didn't seem to be slowing the progression of the fire. "Professor Morgan." Her voice clawed its way from her constricted throat.

"That's him, right?" Glenn turned to her. "Alex, you all right? You're ashen." He moved to come around the bar, but she waved him off. "I'm sure they got him out."

Dread spurred her to action. Alex had to be sure that whatever was happening at the mansion couldn't be linked back to her. "I've got to go find out if he's all right." Grateful the lie didn't trip her tongue, Alex removed the apron and left it balled on the bar. "The kitchen's done. You just need to lock up."

Glenn nodded, his brow furrowed in confusion or worry. She loved him for accepting whatever she said. "I'll see you tomorrow. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine," Alex called over her shoulder as she fled into the night, praying the fire had swallowed her secrets long before the fire department arrived.

Obviously, she should have lingered at the mansion after her visit with the good professor.

* * * *

The man staggered toward his car in the shadowed corner of a deserted parking lot. The cabbie the bartender called had dropped him off without a word. Enough money bought anyone's silence. Besides, he didn't intend to drive in this condition. His dinner, dessert and late night snack had been of the liquid variety. He'd sleep a few hours in the back seat of his car before returning home to his wife. She didn't like it when he didn't beat the sun home. She'd like it even less if she knew he was drinking again. Sobriety had been an infrequent guest in their marriage and every time the wagon arrived, she prayed he'd ride it into the proverbial sunset.

The pink slip crumpled in his front pocket had caused this particular fall. He wasn't sure he'd be able to pull himself back up from the depths this time. Right now it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except finding a quiet place to settle his tired bones. The alcohol rushing through his bloodstream made his head spin and his feet unsteady

beneath him. The car keys in his hand had a mind of their own as he attempted to slot them into the door lock.

"You need some help?"

Though it was no more than a whisper in the darkness, it startled him. He turned in circles, finding nothing but deep shadows and the hiss of the wind. A cold trickle of fear snaked down his back. "Christ, now I'm hallucinating." His heart pounded harder in his ears and he took great gulps of air, wishing it would clear his head. Focusing once again on the locks before him, he hoped the multiple keys swimming in his vision would miraculously find their way home. "Alone and hearing things, not a good sign."

The air pulsed oddly around him.

"That's where you're wrong." The long fingers sliding down his arm belonged to the hard body pressed firmly to his back. Soft lips caressed his neck behind his ear. "I'm no hallucination and you're definitely not alone."

He tried to turn, but strong fingers held his chin.

"Who are you? What do you want?" His questions slurred through pickled lips.

"It's not really what I *want*." The hand on his arm slid down his waist and across his hip before slipping between the car and his jeans, palming his crotch. "It's what I can *offer* you." The deep, sultry voice filtering through his drunken stupor, quivered down his belly, and settled in his cock. From the timbre he couldn't tell if the person unzipping his jeans was male or female, but he wasn't a queer, so the answer was obvious to him.

"People will see," he managed to croak as his erection shot from the confines of his boxers and bounced on the door. "We could get in the car."

"I like it just fine out here." The person behind him had a firm grip on his dick and expertly stroked the length, drawing a sigh from him. "There's no one near." A silken tongue ran liquid heat up his neck. "Besides, you don't really want me to stop. Do you?"

He canted his hips, making room between him and the car door. No, he didn't want the hand to stop. It seemed to know exactly how to work a cock. He looked down, staring at the strong fingers pumping him faster. The thumb and forefinger squeezed the mushroom head, bringing forth just enough pain to heighten his pleasure. Damn, this felt amazing. Of their own volition his hips moved in opposition to the up-and-down slide on his cock. Pressure built in his balls, pulling them snug to his body.

"You like what I'm doing?" The words were hot against his skin. Teeth grazed the tender pulse in his neck.

He grunted, wanting only to focus on the intense pressure building in his cock and the impending explosion of pleasure tingling in his spine and making his knees quiver. The stranger's masterful technique brought him to orgasm hard and fast, zinging sparks of ecstasy along every nerve in his body. The pain at his neck barely registered as cum shot from his cock and painted the side of the car.

The hand continued to milk him, spreading cream down the length of his shaft. He wanted to turn and thank the person who had jacked him off so competently, but loving hands suddenly became vice grips. One mercilessly squeezed his dick while the other reached up to tangle in his hair and pull. His head jerked to the side. Moans of pleasure were replaced by screams of agony.

The silken tongue that had laved his throat so gently now sucked and slurped, matching the throbs of agony radiating from his neck. Liquid ran down his shoulder and onto his chest and even in his drunken stupor, he understood his life was being drained

from him.

In a final attempt to save himself, he flailed his arms and legs against his tormentor's body, but it had become a solid wall. Muscles turned to steel and the iron grip of his captor's hands pressed him firmly against the car. He attempted to draw breath, but couldn't seem to completely fill his lungs. The world spun in dizzying circles, pulling him down into a deep vortex of black.

Chapter Three

Under the guise of looking for hot spots, Reese carried an axe through the charred remains of the second-floor master bedroom. Though most of the ceiling and the roof above him were missing, the pre-dawn blanket of stars winking through the thin clouds did nothing to illuminate the piles of debris littering the floor. He didn't need the light on his shoulder, but it wouldn't do for a fireman to search without it.

The exterior wall in front of him had been destroyed. The hint of dawn outlined the pines on the eastern horizon. Sunrise was only a couple of hours away. Not much time to find what they sought. Somewhere in the charred remains of the professor's mansion Reese hoped to find some clue to the fires that plagued South Kenton.

It was common knowledge the professor had been enamored of vampires. Glenn had taken his class on ancient myths and chemistry at the university. Reese had been impressed at the veracity of the professor's theories that Glenn had shared with him. Vampire artifacts and religious symbols lay in the burnt ruins of the professor's office. Reese had no doubt that Professor Paul Morgan had somehow attracted the attention of the rogue vamp committing these atrocities.

The how and why's of his—or her—motivation remained unclear. The fact it was a vamp had become obvious over the past few months when vamps in the South Kenton area began disappearing in alarming numbers. It seemed unreasonable to think humans could have discovered their existence after hundreds of years and taken such drastic action covertly.

Though he didn't expect anyone to be looking over his shoulder, Reese took a quick glance around before lifting a heavy beam with ease and moving it off of a file cabinet next to the scorched roll-top desk. Only Josh, Timmons and he were left to finish sifting through the mansion with the fire marshal. The rest of the guys had been called to a fatal car fire over an hour ago.

Just as well; he and Josh needed time to figure out what had tangled the professor in the web being spun. If they had the answer to that, they might know what—and who—they were looking for. The only thing clear was the fact that the number of fires and vamp executions in the South Kenton area was increasing exponentially. Whatever the vamp was up to, it was Reese, Josh, and Ronan's assignment to discover it and stop it—soon. Several innocent people, including the professor, had already been murdered and their deaths weighed heavy on the team. Reese had no doubt a common thread linked them all.

He and Josh had signed on five decades ago with an underground vampire military operation. Ronan Nason, a new recruit, had learned of the pair's prowess and had been asked to be assigned to their mission. It had given Reese a kick in the pants to know he'd developed such a rep among the younger recruits. The three of them were now trying to solve the mysterious vampire deaths in the California mountains.

The *Rogue Investigative Seizure and Elimination Network*, better known as *RISEN*, had been formed in the United States during prohibition. The acronym was tongue and cheek, but their mission was deadly serious. *RISEN* worked to help vampires blend in with the human population and when necessary, control rogues who broke the unwritten

code of conduct. Vampires across the country had learned how to live on animal blood or feed without killing or turning mortals into bloodthirsty creatures of the night. Reese himself hadn't touched human blood since joining the RISEN ranks.

The organization worked covertly, switching teams and locations every decade or so. It had been a long while since Josh and Reese had been partners. They'd been assigned to South Kenton over a year ago. Drawn by their own kind, the climate and vast forests, large numbers of vampires had settled in the hills of Northern California. RISEN kept a presence anywhere vampires congregated. But they hadn't come here on a whim.

Glenn Karr was a hero to many. Well known throughout the vampire population as a kind and gentle mentor, he had been there for Reese in the late eighteenth century. Pulled into a swamp and gorged on by several vampires, Reese had been near death when Glenn fought them off and took him back to his cabin. It had been Glenn's own blood that pulled Reese from the arms of death into immortality. And though the years had been dragging recently, Reese was happy to have come to his mentor's call.

Glenn had alerted RISEN to the rising number of vampire deaths, their bodies burned beyond recognition. There weren't many ways to kill an immortal, but searing the flesh from their bones certainly guaranteed a final end. It only stood to reason that he and Josh would join the local fire department to get a closer look at evidence.

Reese slid open the file cabinet drawer at his feet, finding only ash. The papers had combusted in the high heat. Though he hadn't expected anything more, frustration lashed out in the form of boot to metal. The singed cabinet flew several feet before settling next to the melted bed mattress.

"Not a smart move, Colton."

Josh stood at what was left of the doorway, peering into the room, his half-smile further irritating Reese.

"Fuck you, Harkness."

"Thanks for the offer, but I prefer the fairer sex myself." Josh stepped into the room and looked around. "Find anything up here?"

"Nothing obvious. You?"

"You saw the artifacts downstairs, but nothing that screamed '*I'm your answer*'. I suspect if it was our vamp, they took whatever they were looking for or simply burned any evidence in the office."

"Fire marshal come to any conclusions?"

Josh searched the desk, but apparently found nothing. "Accidental, like the others. Coroner's got the body now. Preliminary findings indicate the professor stumbled and hit his head. The fire definitely ignited from the fireplace in the office either before or after the man passed out. They suspect he may have been trying to extinguish it when he hit his head."

Reese looked at Josh knowingly. This fire had been set deliberately, but without evidence of an accelerant, the fire marshal would believe it was nothing more than an accidental death like the other eight that were still considered suspect and under investigation by RISEN.

"Is there a computer?" Reese asked.

"Melted. I'm sure there's no way to recover the hard drive. They'll be back to collect it regardless. You know, make sure it's totally hopeless."

"Another big, fat, nothing." Josh stepped over the debris littering the floor. "Looks

like we're finished here."

Reese stole a look at the eastern horizon. "I'm not really interested in getting caught here when the sun comes up. Not good for my complexion." He slapped Josh on the back as they made their way down the stairs and back to the station.

* * * *

Alex led Ronan Nason down the stairs of O'Malley's basement into the private wine cellars. Normally her mornings were spent reconciling the night's receipts and restocking shelves. But when Glenn called before dawn saying something had come up unexpectedly, it left Alex responsible for this morning's appointments. It wasn't the first time she'd filled in for Glenn; as co-owner, the duty fell to her. But the vampire behind her sent off an interesting mix of desire and danger signals in her brain.

"Aye, this is a nice setup." The heavy brogue of Nason's native land slid down her back like warm honey. "I didn't know until a month or so ago that the wine you serve upstairs could be bought by the case." Though the vampire following her had been an associate professor of chemistry at the university for a year and a half, the twang of Northern California had not yet ruined the lilting tone of his speech. "How long you been doing this?" He asked innocently, dragging a well-manicured nail across the stones of the foundation.

As if he had drawn it across her skin, a shiver snaked up her spine and left goose-flesh in its wake. Alex mentally shook off his hypnotic hold and unlocked the heavy wooden door. This man was not interested in her, only the product she had to sell. "Not quite as long as I've been partners with Glenn," she replied. The metallic smell of rusted metal and damp wood replaced the heady odor of Ronan's spicy cologne. Alex took a great gulp and refocused. While working on her doctorate in chemistry, she'd passed him a few times in the hall. Alex saw Ronan more often here at the tavern, where he spent a few nights a week. Confidence and sophistication surrounded him like a warm cloud and it was hard for her not to be drawn to its comforting embrace.

"I became partners with Glenn about twenty-five years ago. Glenn had been working on perfecting the blood wine long before I joined in the endeavor," she said, pulling the chain dangling from the light. The low-wattage bulb hanging naked from the ceiling barely chased away the darkness. Normally, that's how she preferred it, but something about being alone with Ronan in the shadows seemed a bit reckless. "Feels like only yesterday when I bought in." A nervous giggle escaped her lips.

Ronan stepped close to her; his mane of butterscotch hair fell across his face, but didn't hide the elegantly arched brow. "You are a fascinating woman, Alexandra. I am bewitched by your beauty." With a graceful wave of his wrist, his finger swept a short lock of hair behind her ear. "You don't worry about the locals wondering how a lassie can stay so young?"

His gaze roamed her face and settled on her mouth before slowly gliding back to capture her eyes. Hunger and need swam in the coffee depths of his eyes, reaching in to touch her soul. That knowledge pebbled her nipples and zinged lower to heat her tummy and clench her sex. There was an odd familiarity about this man, but she couldn't quite identify exactly why. She met his hypnotic gaze. Alex couldn't seem to push enough air over her vocal cords to answer his question. Yes, being alone with Ronan was definitely reckless, but at the moment, with his soothing words rolling over her skin, nothing felt

more right.

“Hello.” A male voice called from the tavern overhead.

Like a switch, the heavy footfalls coming down the stairs instantly broke their connection. Alex cleared her throat and stepped away. “I assume you’ll want your usual, Ronan?” Alex rifled through the stacks of papers on the heavy oak desk in the corner until she found the clipboard with the orders. Flipping a couple of pages, she worked to focus on the task at hand and not the pulse pounding in her ears. “Ah yes, two bottles.”

“Glenn, you down here?” came the voice again.

“In the wine cellar,” she hollered back. Alex didn’t need to consult the appointment calendar to know who belonged to that voice.

“Glenn, I’m in a hurry and I’ll take...” Reese strode around the corner, coming to a dead stop in the doorway. Time hung suspended. No one moved. Questions ricocheted over Reese’s features. Alex didn’t owe this man anything. He’d done nothing more than spend time at her bar with the rest of the off-duty firefighters. Perhaps he was a bit more flirtatious, and though she had wanted more, Reese had taken it no further. Regardless, the stab of guilt pinching her heart made her uncomfortable.

“Reese. You know Ronan Nason?”

“Um ... yeah, we met a couple of months ago at the university.” Reese removed his sunglasses with such deliberate precision, Alex was sure they would slice the heavy tension in the air. But he reached out to shake Ronan’s hand as manners would dictate.

Ronan’s smile trembled. “Aye, yes, the fire department. I remember.”

Alex didn’t know whether their confusion was an act for her benefit or real. The two men circled each other with a discomfort that telegraphed an obvious history between them. With no desire to become embroiled in any territorial wars, Alex would happily play into their little charade. “Reese responded to that horrible fire in the chemistry lab at the university that killed that young girl a couple months ago.” Nerves added a light tone to her voice that contradicted the gravity of the story.

“That was ruled accidental.” Both men spoke at the same time.

Her gaze flew between the men. “Yes,” the word dragged slowly out of her mouth.

“If I recall,” Ronan said. “The poor woman let the Bunsen burner in the chemistry lab get out of control.” He looked to Reese for corroboration.

“Really was a shame,” Reese added. “Perhaps the local fire department could come in and do a safety program at the beginning of each semester?”

What was going on with these two? If they thought this overly cheerful act covered their male posturing, they were sadly mistaken. Alex wanted to laugh at them.

“I think that’s a very good idea,” Ronan said. “I’ll suggest it to the dean at the next department meeting. Students are my top priority.”

“That’s what I hear,” mumbled Reese.

Alex bit back a smile. Everyone on campus knew of Professor Nason’s reputation of hitting on underclassmen of both sexes. Apparently it had seeped into the community. She shook the thought away. With both men ignoring her, if Alex didn’t do something soon, the testosterone flying through the air would likely wound them all. She cleared her throat to draw their attention back to her. “Reese, you mentioned you were in a hurry. Why don’t I just fill your order and—”

“No, I’m good.” He stepped back and casually leaned his shoulder against the stone wall. His eyes never left Ronan’s hostile stare. Crossing his sneakered feet at the ankles,

Reese tucked his sunglasses into the pocket of his chamois shirt and folded his arms over his chest. "Ronan was here first. It would be rude of me not to wait my turn."

Ronan's confidence evaporated in the glare of Reese's wilting look. "Actually, I am in quite a hurry. I would appreciate it if you would fill my order, Alexandra."

Relief flooded through her. Though it was flattering having two men preening their feathers over her, she just didn't need to deal with petty jealousies this morning. And despite what had nearly happened a moment ago, Alex wasn't really interested in Ronan.

"I'll be happy to get your wine, Ronan. Reese's order is a little more..." she paused and shot Reese a syrupy smile. "...complicated."

There was no confusion in the slow, smooth smile Reese offered her. He understood she hadn't meant a complication with his wine order. "Yes, well, a few minutes of your time, Alex, and I should be able to clear up *any* misunderstandings."

Alex's heart flipped in her chest. She'd spent months trying to get Reese's attention. If she'd known a little jealousy would make him territorial she would have tried it weeks ago. "Umm ... let me just get your two bottles, Ronan."

Ronan's hand shot out and stopped her. "Ah, no, Alexandra. I'm finding the transition a difficult one. I'll need double that amount."

Stunned, she looked at his fingers on her arm then up at him. "But this is your fourth order. You should have weaned yourself to a pint a day last week. A bottle should last you approximately four days. This week you should consume only half a pint each day. Didn't Glenn give you instructions?"

Ronan looked at Reese and then back to her. "I'd rather discuss my *difficulties* with Glenn. Obviously you don't understand how it all works."

Alex certainly did understand. It had been her contribution to the wine mixture that had finally made it work. But she had no desire to argue with Ronan in front of Reese. "Four bottles it is."

The number of bottles and vampire requirements was carefully monitored. Even two bottles could mean not filling the need of another vampire. But she couldn't worry about that now. She rushed into the back room. Getting rid of Ronan and finding out what Reese meant was her top priority.

Alex loaded eight bottles from the wooden wine racks lining the back wall into the small boxes on the floor. Each bottle held the thick elixir of pig's blood, vitamins, and a synthetic component of anti-coagulants and various other chemicals she and Glenn mixed themselves. The wooden vat in the center of the room, half filled with the chemical serum, was waiting for Glenn's weekly two gallons of pig's blood. It took four weeks to age the life-giving concoction in large wooden wine casks lying on their sides on the opposite wall of the storage room. The synthetic *blood wine* offered vampires a viable alternative to human or animal blood. For some vampires, not having to sink teeth into flesh for sustenance was a welcome gift.

At one time Alex had been proud that O'Malley's little side business provided nourishment for a couple dozen vampires. Of course, that had been nearly a decade ago when she'd worked closely with Glenn to discover the right formula. Within the last few months, she'd come to loathe being in this room, mixing and bottling the concoction. She wanted nothing more than to dissolve her partnership with Glenn and leave South Kenton, but she owed the man her life. If he found out what she did in secrecy, it would surely wound his heart more than any wooden stake.

Stacking the boxes, Alex hurried back into the other room, fearful she would see not two jealous males, but the teeth and eyes of warring vamps. Her fears were unfounded. Both men were where she had left them, their gazes intently following her. Setting the boxes on the floor next to the desk, she filled out the information on the clipboard and handed it to Ronan to sign. Their little winery was as precise as any pharmacy. "Here's yours for the week, Ronan. Don't drink it all in one sitting." Alex's attempt at humor fell flat.

The corners of Ronan's mouth lifted, but the pursed lips held no mirth. "Let Glenn know I'll be sending several others his way. Now that I've found your wonderful wine, there is no need to keep it from the world, now is there?" Ronan stood and brushed invisible lint from his blazer.

"Yes, well..." Reese pushed from the wall, his six-foot-plus frame dwarfing them both. "Why don't you pay the lady and be on your way? Obviously she's busy and doesn't have time to dally over customers."

Alex wanted to be alone with Reese, but it pissed her off just a little bit that he went all Neanderthal when he had no claim on her. "Actually, I'm in no rush." She forced her lips upward, hoping the smile wouldn't waver and expose her nerves.

"Though lingering here with you—Alexandra—would be enjoyable, I do have another engagement this morning." Ronan fished money from his pocket and threw it on the desk. "As always, I appreciate the product you and Glenn provide." He grabbed his box and left quickly.

"Don't forget to bring back the bottles," she called to his retreating back. Alex ran damp palms down her jeans. The musty room had suddenly become stifling. She didn't speak until Ronan's footfalls had receded. "So, four bottles? Two each for you and Josh?" She smiled at Reese and held a bottle up in each hand.

He grabbed one and ripped open the cork, taking a long pull of the thick liquid, some of it pooling at the corner of his mouth. She had no idea why he was acting this way.

"Nice vintage. It appears this was bottled in a very good week. Care for some?" He held the bottle up to her and she tried not to gag at the smell. She'd found the odor of the synthetic blood less and less agreeable over the past several weeks. She hoped her queasiness didn't show.

She shook her head. "I ... I'm good."

He slammed the bottle on the corner of the desk. "Mind telling me what I walked in on?"

"Ronan's a customer. Like you. Like Josh." Though her head tried to convince her otherwise, Alex's heart quickened with the thought that he actually had feelings for her. "What do you care?"

Reese stepped up to her, the wall of his chest brushing her breasts. She had to crane her neck to look into the jealousy sparking in his eyes, turning them a deeper shade of emerald. Her amusement warred with indignation. The man had no right to get angry with her. Alex belonged to no one.

"I care a great deal about your safety," Reese began. "Being alone with hungry vampires is *not* a good idea, Alex. Where's Glenn this morning?"

"That's none of your concern." She threw back her shoulders, but instead of portraying confidence, it only thrust her breasts against Reese. "It doesn't matter anyway. As co-owner I can deal with the winery just as well as Glenn." Alex stepped back only to

be pinned against the cool stone of the wall. Reese followed her, not allowing her space. She refused to be intimidated by him. “Need I remind you, vampires can take care of themselves? I’m no exception, Reese.”

Though sexual hunger warred with the jealousy straining Reese’s features, it wasn’t fear tingling in her belly and making her nipples strain against the lace of her bra. The stench of copper rode on the hot breath washing over her face, but it didn’t override the elemental odor of Reese—a powerful aphrodisiac.

“I don’t need you defending my honor or coming to my rescue,” Alex said, pleased her words didn’t quiver like her knees. “I’ve done a good job of taking care of myself,”

“I have no desire to be your guardian, Alex.” Reese’s voice dropped to a sultry whisper that heated her blood and sent her heart racing. “Perhaps Josh was right and my interest in you hasn’t been as obvious as I thought I’d made it over the last several months.” His gaze roamed slow and hot down her face and neck to rest on her heaving bosom before searing a leisurely path back to her mouth. “But I’m thinking your body has been aware.”

Alex searched his face, reading the intention only seconds before Reese’s mouth slanted over hers. The heat of the kiss obliterated the overwhelming taste of the blood. Alex couldn’t have pulled from him if she wanted to. His hand reached up to cup her neck, his thumb grazing her chin as he changed the angle and invited her to deepen the kiss. She opened for him, the silken heat of his tongue darting in to tangle with hers. He pressed her against the stone, his knee pushing between her thighs, begging her to offer everything for him. His erection pressed firmly against her hip. She wanted this, had been hoping all the months of flirtation would become something more. But Alex had given up hope Reese would ever act on his feelings. Amazing how a little jealousy could put a man in the game.

Chapter Four

A bet. It had taken a stupid bet at a poker game to make Reese realize this is what he wanted; Alex's warm, supple body writhing against his. Well, the bet and sensing he'd interrupted something between her and Nason. The kid had obviously been moving in on his woman. Jealousy was a powerful motivator. That brought Reese up short.

"Alex." Pulling back, he stared at her lips, swollen from his assault. Her ragged breaths feathered across his chin. "I haven't even taken you on a proper date. I could at least buy you some lunch."

"Did it look like I was hungry for wine, Colton?" She snaked her fingers in his hair and nipped her teeth along the stubble on his chin. "I've been wondering what's taken you so damn long to notice me."

"Oh, I noticed everything about you, Alex." He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her nose. "This cute upturned nose." His lips fluttered over her lids. "The honey color of your eyes and how they darken to amber when someone pisses you off—or turns you on—though that I didn't know until now." He wasn't sure if the blush creeping up to paint her cheeks was from embarrassment or the sexually charged air. Whatever caused it, he liked it and continued. "The sweep of your long lashes when someone compliments you." Reese lifted Alex's arms above her head and hooked her fingers on the edge of a stone. "The way your breasts look in these little T-shirts when you reach for a bar glass." His palms skimmed down the soft flesh of her arms, leaving goose bumps trailing behind. He brought his hands down her torso, eliciting a sigh as he grazed the swell of her breasts. His fingers curved around Alex's narrow hips and he gently pulled her tight to his body. "The way your jeans ride low and show off that flower tattoo on the small of your back." Reese's hands finished their exploration by palming the mounds of her ass. "The sweet curve of your bottom when you bend to get extra napkins."

"I just thought you were unusually messy." Alex smiled at him, her eyes growing darker, communicating desire she didn't verbalize.

"Nope. Calculating."

His teeth grazed along Alex's neck and he realized the sexual energy had lengthened his fangs. She seemed unfazed by their appearance. It had been a long while since Reese had allowed himself this freedom with a woman. His last liaison had been a one-night stand nearly a year ago with a human female in the city after too many hours fighting a fire. Hopped up on the adrenaline rush, he'd been unable to keep the beast under control. As they'd fucked like horny teenagers in the backseat of his Buick, his fangs had lengthened, his body screaming to be satiated by her blood. In fact, if Josh hadn't called his cell just as they'd finished the deed, Reese wasn't sure the woman would have survived the night. The experience had kept him from sleeping with another human.

But vampires. That was another story all together. Long-ago promises squeezed the breath from his lungs and Reese pulled back, staring at the desire clouding Alex's honey eyes. He *wanted* to take this chance and enjoy the feeling of a female vampire in his arms, her teeth piercing his flesh, without dredging up painful memories.

"What is it?" Alex whispered.

"I don't want you to get hurt."

“Let me worry about my heart, Colton.” Alex sucked his bottom lip into her mouth.

She’d misunderstood, but he didn’t think now was the time to elaborate. His lips melted against hers again and he licked at her canines. “Let go. I like it rough,” he said against the heat of her mouth.

“Not this time.” She fluttered kisses up his jaw and pulled his earlobe through her teeth. “I want you to take me. Vampire or no, I’m yours. You don’t frighten me, Reese. I trust you.”

Her words were like a soft aria serenading his heart. He’d kept that part of him sheltered for far too long. Reese wanted to be with Alex more than he needed his next breath and she’d just given him permission to give in to his beastly desires. What more could a man want?

With his cock straining painfully against his jeans, he pulled her into another deep kiss and groaned. Alex tasted like liquid sugar and the heat pulsing from her straining body melted the last of his doubts. He tugged the flimsy cotton tee over her head. With her hands high above her head, her breasts jutted proudly. He fumbled with the front clasp of the lacy bra, relieved when it fell away and he could fill his hands with the fleshy mounds. He pinched and teased the steepled peaks of her nipples before his mouth focused on first one and then the other. Her moans vibrated straight to his dick, driving him to a frenzied pitch of need.

She kicked off her tiny sneakers and he shucked off her jeans, throwing them in the growing pile of clothes. The vision standing before him stole what little breath filled his lungs. Naked, save for a lacy purple thong that matched the bra hanging from her shoulders, Alex was miles of unflawed alabaster skin, nearly luminescent against the dark gray of the stones. Her flat belly rose and fell with her chest as she worked to slow her breathing. He couldn’t tear his gaze from her beauty.

“Like what you see?” Alex asked. As if bound by an invisible force, her arms were still high above her head. She didn’t seem interested in moving from his intimate inspection.

His head bobbed up and down. “No.”

The chime of her laughter invited him back into her arms. Their mouths fought for control as tongues darted in and out, meshing and clashing. Alex’s hands fumbled with the buttons of his shirt while he wrestled with his jeans. The need to couple with this woman overrode all other thoughts as hands worked to free their bodies from the restriction of clothing. Then they were there, naked, his erection pulsing painfully between them. Reese wanted nothing more than to fill her and satisfy their lust, but he would not rush her.

“You make me so wet, Reese.” Alex spoke the words through ragged breaths, guiding his hand to her slit, she dragged them through her cream. Bringing her honeyed fingers to his mouth, Alex slid them along his bottom lip. He greedily sucked them into his mouth, savoring the salty tang of her desire.

“Please don’t make me wait.” She lifted her leg, draping it around his hip, opening herself, begging him to claim her. Her arousal wafted between them, wrapping around his senses, driving him crazy with desire. At times like this, he was grateful he wasn’t human. Vampires could neither sire nor carry offspring, so human birth control was of no consequence to them.

He guided his shaft to her slick opening, willing himself to go slow, but she would

have none of it. Alex angled her hips, pressing him into her, both of them moaning as his cock dove deeper into her silken channel. He grabbed her ass and picked her up. Alex wrapped the other leg around his waist and squeezed until he was buried completely in her hot depths. Her muscles pulsed around him, but he waited to give her time to adjust to his girth.

“Fuck me, Reese. I’ve waited a long time for this.”

With her pinned to the wall, her legs and arms wrapped around his body, he only needed to hold her tiny waist for leverage. He canted his hips back, gliding out along the wet heat of her pussy, then flexed his ass and rocked forward to fill her channel. The sublime friction sent hot currents of fire straight to his balls. He dragged his teeth along her neck and tasted the sweet trickle of blood where he’d opened her flesh.

Alex threw her head back, exposing more of her throat to him and he greedily sucked the coppery liquid oozing from her skin.

“Yes. Oh, like that. Take me hard, Reese.”

It had been a long time since a woman begged him to enjoy every part of her. The words echoed in his ears along with the rapid tattoo of her heart. Her blood lay heavy on his tongue and her arousal scented the air. Every nerve of his body was filled with her. Still he wanted more.

He moved faster, pistoning his hips in time with her cries. He reached between their sweat-slick bodies and found the hard nub of her clitoris. In small circles he teased the fleshy spot with his thumb. The grip of her legs and arms tightened around his neck and hips. Her nails raked across his shoulders and he pushed himself faster, harder and deeper into her heated core.

Reese could feel the quiver of her muscles as flesh slapped flesh in rapid succession. Her pussy tightened, pulling him deeper and his balls snugged tight to his body. The warm tingle built deep within his sac and pulsed to the tip his cock. He climbed rapidly and circled the precipice of release, straining to hold on until the first shudders of Alex’s orgasm seized and convulsed her body.

Then her internal muscles contracted and flexed around his cock and the cries of Alex’s orgasm echoed off the rock walls, sending Reese headlong into his own spasm of pleasure. His seed shot from his body, dragging feral cries of ecstasy from his throat and filling her with the heat of his release. He continued to pump into her until her groans of bliss slowed to small hiccups of satiated satisfaction. Reese breathed in the scent of their coupling, burying his face in the silky strands of her hair.

He wasn’t sure why he had waited so long to claim her.

* * * *

Glenn took the stone steps into the chemistry building two at a time, looking every bit like a student or professor who belonged there. The only way to hide your activities was to do them out in the open. And though he despised being out during the day, he needed to finish what Alex and Ronan had started—whatever the hell that was. He’d much rather be in the cellar of the tavern or in his own quiet cold chamber at his farm, but fatherly concern pushed him to this recklessness.

Instinct told him Alex was in trouble and once again, she had no one to save her. He’d be damned if whatever was keeping her out at night and making her ill would cause her harm. Glenn wasn’t sure if Ronan had anything to do with her problems, but he

figured that would all become clear as he worked through this mystery. Somehow Alex was tangled up in the fire at the professor's house. He'd seen the guilt on her face last night as plain as her short brown hair and lying smile.

Like the dark chill in the foyer Glenn entered, cold fear weighed heavy in his gut. Alex was like a daughter to him. He'd found her battered, drained, and left for dead in the woods behind the tavern thirty years ago. A faceless vampire had raped and sucked her nearly dry. He hadn't been sure he could save her. He'd taken her to his farm and only weeks of constant attention and blood he'd taken from well-paid prostitutes in the valley—who had more than willingly given him a pint instead of sex—had brought Alex back to the world of the living dead.

He'd taught her how to survive on animals and she in turn had found the missing combination for the synthetic *blood wine* they now offered to a small portion of the South Kenton vampire population. A population that was waning with each passing month. He prayed Alex wasn't part of the trouble, but suspected she probably had some hand in what was happening.

Glenn removed neither his sunglasses nor ball cap as he scanned the building's directory in the marble foyer. Alex had certainly been acting odd the last couple of months. He'd seen how queasy she'd become when they'd bottled the last batch of blood wine. Hoping it was a figment of his imagination, he'd tried to ignore the signs right in front of him.

Quickly, he found what he was looking for: *Dr. Paul Morgan, Head of Chemistry Department ... Room 308*. Glenn headed down the hall. Though it was a weekday, summer sessions left the halls empty and he found the stairs, leaping gracefully up the three flights without fear of discovery. He found the door and scanned the hall before sliding a credit card into the doorjamb. He heard the snick of the lock and smiled. Sometimes even vampires could learn a thing or two from crime shows.

Educators, Glenn suspected, ran in two flavors; neat to the point of obsessive order or systematic clutter. Professor Morgan fit the latter category. Files, periodicals and books were strewn about on the floor, chairs, and shelves. The desk in front of him was cluttered as well with a mess of notebooks and papers surrounding a computer monitor. The only organization seemed to be on the bookcases standing on either side of the window on the opposite wall. Textbooks and—he assumed—research materials, marched neatly across the shelves. His cheeks puffed as he exhaled in frustration. The proverbial needle lay somewhere among these stacks.

The answer had to be here. Glenn only wished he knew the question.

What he did know—aside from the fact that man knew a hell of a lot about vampires—was that he'd found no evidence of wrongdoing by Alex in the charred remains of the professor's mansion. Glenn had sifted through the debris throughout the morning and the better part of the afternoon. But passionate people like the professor didn't go through life without a mission. And though Glenn didn't know the man well enough to know *what* it was, he had no doubt it *existed*. He also suspected that the professor wouldn't chance leaving the only copy of his work to be destroyed. Somewhere there was more evidence and he would find it himself and obliterate everything that might indict Alex. Then Glenn would help her fix whatever damage she'd done and restart her life. He'd done it once before, he'd do it again.

Glenn stared at the computer. Over the years he'd become a master hacker, but it was

a time-consuming venture at best and not something he wanted to deal with at the moment. He had the burnt hard drive from the computer at the mansion. Even though he didn't have the expertise to deal with that, Glenn had simply not wanted to make it available to anyone else. If he couldn't find anything in this mess, he'd take this computer with him and hope the answers revealed themselves in Morgan's computer files.

Removing his sunglasses, Glenn stared at the office, trying to think like a professor. Of all the professions he'd had in the last century, teaching had not been one of them. But scientists were linear thinking creatures, surely he could manage logic. Surveying the cramped quarters, Glenn tried to see consistency in the randomness. The books on the shelves were the only ordered part of the room. He'd start there.

Leaping over four stacks of magazines and the desk, Glenn wondered how the professor had navigated the crowded space. With a careful eye he read the bindings of the books. Twenty-five minutes later, as the waning light of day was drawing long shadows in the room, Glenn found what he'd been searching for all day. Three quarters of the way through the second set of shelves, a couple of feet above the floor, it glared at him like a neon sign in the forest. It was so cleverly hidden in the open, if he hadn't been searching with an eye to inconsistencies, he wouldn't have tripped upon it.

Pulling out the new copy of the John Grisham novel, tucked neatly among well-worn chemistry tomes, Glenn ran his fingers reverently over the embossed title—*The Innocent Man*. He had no doubt the title held not only irony, but some dark secret. He inhaled, praying it wouldn't lead to Alex, but deep in his gut, knew it would.

Glenn opened the cover, finding nothing but a generic inscription from the author himself. But several pages in, right at the end of Chapter One, the story stopped and so did his heart. Lying neatly in a ragged hole sawed through the pages of Chapters Two and Three were a key and a Greyhound bus ticket.

He shoved both into his pocket and replaced the book on the shelf, careful not to make it stand out. Glenn had no delusions in believing he was the only one searching for the professor's secrets. Obviously the man had been killed trying to keep them hidden.

* * * *

Glenn Karr bounded down the stairs of the science building, looking like an angel of mercy awash in the golden light from the setting sun. The man didn't even bother to look around to see if anyone was watching. *Stupid fool*. Things hadn't progressed this far without this vampire paying attention to every little detail. The search of the professor's neatly ordered office had turned up nothing. And though the space had been left in chaos, there was no doubt Glenn knew nothing of the professor's compulsion for order. For anyone who didn't understand Paul Morgan, the office would not have appeared to have been searched. Now, watching Glenn's confident stride, there was also no doubt the ancient vampire had found success in *his* exploration of the office.

Whatever he discovered was of little concern.

It had taken months to figure out what was going on, but with the information gathered at the professor's mansion, the end was near. Soon everything would be as it should be. The purity of the vampire population would once again be guaranteed.

Guilt squeezed and a sigh escaped. Killing Glenn Karr, savior of many lost vampires, had not been part of the original plan. But watching the man since last night left little

doubt another killing was necessary. Unfortunately sacrifices had to be made.

It had taken a better part of the day to set it in motion. But there was no turning back.

Chapter Five

Glenn pulled the truck around the dirt drive and parked in back of his farm house. Though he'd driven well over the speed limit from the bus station straight home, darkness had beaten him here. Night and its shadowed secrets now reigned over the farm. A full moon hung eerily over the trees, its blood red color a harbinger of death. Glenn refused to acknowledge the cold weight of fear pressing in his gut.

He stared at the battered leather briefcase sitting on the passenger seat. The search that had led him to this discovery seemed almost too easy and he wondered now if he'd been set up. Pulling the key from his pocket, Glenn examined the thin slip of metal hanging from a pink numbered fob. A bus locker had held all the secrets. Secrets that had led to a man's murder.

No doubt, Dr. Paul Morgan, dear friend of Alexandra Flanagan, had given his life protecting research that had taken Glenn nearly an hour to sort through. The chemical formulas and scientific theory made no sense to him. But there was no denying Alexandra Flanagan was up to her dimpled little chin in this deadly crap. As he'd read through each piece of evidence against her, the fog surrounding her late night excuses and mysterious illness had lifted and he saw with absolute clarity who—or what—she was now. It sickened him to think she'd done it under his nose and without his knowledge.

The recent fires in South Kenton no doubt centered around someone's knowledge—and hatred—of the professor's dirty experiments. The information contained in that small leather satchel would, without a doubt, blow the RISEN investigation wide open, which is exactly why they couldn't get their hands on it until he'd purged Alexandra's involvement from the pages.

On the one hand, Glenn wanted to protect the impish woman who held his fatherly heart captive. But what Alex had done was unethical even by vampire standards. If only she'd told him perhaps he could have helped before it had gone this far—but she hadn't. On the other, he wanted to help Reese and his RISEN operatives avenge the needless executions of the vamps and more recently, the innocent humans. And he wanted to do both without Reese or Alex falling off the short end of the pier into a quagmire of shit.

He fell back against the seat. The paradox sucked beyond belief.

Hanging the key on the shifter, Glenn grabbed his cell phone. He'd call Tony to help Alex with the Friday night crowd, feed the animals, then read through the research and identify the most damning evidence. After closing, he'd bring the pig's blood to the tavern and confront Alex. If he was satisfied with the explanation of her actions, they would sort through the papers together and cull out the details implicating her. Tomorrow they'd deliver the briefcase and satisfy RISEN with a sanitized version of the facts.

He hadn't come up with any other solution.

Of course Glenn didn't even want to consider the train wreck scenario if Alexandra had no explanation for the most recent deaths. At the moment, blind with worry, he couldn't even see down that track.

Glenn slid the briefcase under the seat, punched the tavern's number into his cell, and got out of the truck, heading down the path to the barn just as the answering machine

picked up. A person also answered and Glenn listened to Alex's melodious voice give a sales pitch about O'Malley's hours of operation before he could speak. When it stopped he heard the raucous sound of firefighters and the Friday night pool tournament.

"Hey Alex, it's Glenn."

"She's not here. This is Chris."

Their short order cook only tended bar when things were really busy. He felt guilty telling them he wasn't coming in. "Busy night?"

"You could say that." Frustration colored his words. "Where are you?"

"Let me speak to Alex, I'll explain to her."

"I just told you. She's not here. She waited until Tony got here around seven, then left like a bat out of hell." A heavy sigh filled Glenn's ear. "Listen, we could really use another bartender and waitress. It's a regular night at the fire station around here. When you coming in?"

Glenn wasn't sure when O'Malley's had become the hangout for the local boys on their off hours, but he rather enjoyed their humor and their rowdy manner. Firefighters were definitely a breed all their own.

"I'm not coming in tonight either." Worry quickened his steps. It wasn't like Alex to call out on a Friday night. Something was up. Glenn strode faster along the path to the barn. He needed to feed the poor animals before he could figure out what the hell was going on with Alex. "Call Rachel and Bob." Glenn had been weaning both vamps onto the blood wine and training them to tend bar. He figured they owed him.

"They're already here."

The wind shifted. The sweet smell of budding lilacs couldn't mask the copper odor of death. "Then put them to work, for chrissake." He didn't mean to lose his temper, but both his impatience and the vampire rose within him. Glenn's fangs pulsed as his feet lifted off the ground and moved him to the side of the barn. "Rachel and Tony can handle the bar. Get Bob to help you out in the kitchen." He scanned the darkness. Nothing except creatures of the field scurried in his vision. "Something's come up and I can't make it in." Glenn tuned out the tavern's jukebox and focused on the breath of night surrounding him. Only the sound of the wind sighing through the trees filtered through the forest. "And damn it all, if you hear from Alex, tell her to call me." Glenn pulled the phone from his ear and pushed the off button, effectively cutting off Chris's litany of complaints. He'd deal with his cook later.

Moving with the stealth of a shadow, Glenn followed the scent of blood into the woods behind the barn. His fangs lengthened and even after all the years of living off the wine, Glenn felt the beast clamoring to share the carnage. The goats bleated out calls of hunger from the barn, but he ignored their summons. Stalking deeper into the forest, Glenn caught the unmistakable essence of vampire. Someone was feeding on his property.

"I know you're here. Show yourself," he called into the darkness. "If you've come for sanctuary, I will give it." This wouldn't be the first time a vamp had sought refuge, bringing their last victim to him as a sacrifice. The nearly imperceptible whoosh and swell of movement vibrated the air and Glenn wanted to follow it. But a low keening of pain garnered his full attention and forced him down the hill. A young man lay rolled in on himself, his heart barely pumping blood to his organs. Puncture wounds at his neck were raw and swollen. Fresh blood still covered his throat and chest.

Only with great effort did he force his fangs to retract. Picking up the young man like he weighed nothing, Glenn threw him over his shoulder and headed back to the barn. He had no idea if he could save him, but leaving him to die was not an option. Cursing him to immortality was just a sad consequence of saving his life.

Glenn flipped a switch as he entered the barn. Large lights, covered with wire cages and hanging from the wide-beamed ceiling, flicked on. The muted wash of yellow light flooded the wide hall and numerous stalls. The sweet grass and animal odors replaced the tempting aroma of fresh blood. Glenn dumped the kid unceremoniously in a pile of hay in an empty birthing stall and ran to the cooler in the back office. Grabbing a bottle of blood wine, a couple of packets of pig's blood he kept on hand for these types of situations, a syringe and bandages from the medicine cabinet, Glenn prayed it wasn't too late.

When he returned to the stall, the kid's skin had visibly paled. Blue veins marked roadmaps of death on his face. There wasn't time for the syringe. Glenn dropped the packets of blood and bit into his wrist, gashing the vein. He held it over the kid's face, letting the thick fluid drip on his mouth, painting his lips a syrupy scarlet.

"Drink," Glenn implored the young man. "Help me save you, damn it. Drink."

Prying the youth's lips open, he let the life-giving blood fill his mouth. The boy's tongue moved and he began to swallow. Glenn threaded his fingers into the tangled mat of blond curls and lifted the kid's mouth to his wrist. The boy, barely passed the pimply stage of adolescence, finally latched on, sucking greedily. He would survive.

Though Glenn hadn't been the one to rip open the boy's throat and carry him to death's door, he understood his generosity condemned another young person to a never-ending night. Even though genetic evolutions in the vampire DNA over the century had made sunlight bearable, it wasn't like the kid would ever again feel its rays warm upon his face. Glenn would wean him directly onto the blood wine and at least make his survival humane. But no matter how you sliced it—it was still a crappy life. The thought of what he'd done sickened Glenn. He'd lost count how many humans he'd pulled into his world. But letting them die seemed a worse fate.

"There. Lie back and sleep." He eased his wrist away from hungry lips. Rest and intravenous pig's blood would complete the rescue. Glenn watched his own skin close and repair itself as if the flesh had never been ripped open.

"It's all right now," he murmured to the boy and smoothed back his hair. But it wasn't and Glenn knew it. There was still so much explaining and teaching ahead of him. The responsibility rested heavily on Glenn's shoulders, making the task of pulling together the rest of the supplies difficult. When would it all end? How much more did he have to give to a new generation of vampires?

Focusing on his melancholy and the effort of threading the syringe into the boy's frail arm, Glenn didn't feel the push of air or smell the stench of vampire until the beast was on his back. Sharp nails and fangs dug deep into his flesh. He stood and turned, trying to dislodge his opponent, but the vamp's legs had a vice grip around his waist. Glenn reached up, tangling his fingers in its hair, intent on flipping his adversary to the floor. But hatred, rage, jealousy or some combination of the three made the vampire stronger. With a growl that echoed through the barn, the beast swung a wooden stake, coming down hard in front of Glenn's disbelieving eyes.

Like lava pouring from a volcano, pain seared through Glenn. It erupted from his chest, scorched down his stomach and arms, oozed slow paths of torture along his thighs

and finally buckled his knees. There weren't many things that could take down a vampire, but the wood protruding from Glenn's chest definitely did the job.

He went down heavy on his shoulder, his head slamming onto the wooden planks of the barn. Gasping for air, Glenn's mouth filled with a sickly mixture of straw, dust and his own blood. He only needed to rid his chest of the stake and his body could repair itself. But when his brain tried to engage his hands, they wouldn't move. Nothing moved save for feet pacing in small circles.

Glenn ignored the darkness creeping along the edges of his vision. He focused on the cowboy boots in front of him, the curl of the toe and the elegant sweep of the leather around the ankle. He'd seen them before and he had every intention of using the information to identify his attacker. The vamp wouldn't get away with another murder. Anger welled until his vision pulsed red, ebbing and flowing as if it were breathing inside of him and filling him. It continued to grow and consume him until Glenn's skin tingled from the heat of it.

He fought for control, but the blackness rolled like a tidal wave, tumbling him into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Reese dragged ass out of the tanker, already feeling used up after only one call. Not that he was tired, just out of sorts after his *meeting* with Alex—yeah, like that's what he should call it. The alarm had rung out minutes after he'd arrived at the station for the night shift. It had been nothing more than a diesel fire on a farm tractor. One fire engine. One tanker. Five men. Routine. He'd volunteered to stay behind with Ellsworth and the tanker when the engine was no longer needed. He had no reason to feel as heavy as he did.

But as he pulled off the bunker gear, rolling the pants over the boots, hanging the jacket and stowing his helmet on the rack above him, readied for another call, he couldn't help but think of the pixie-haired woman who'd opened up to his passion earlier in the day without hesitation. He hadn't expected her to be so responsive to his touch. Reese could still taste the salt of her satin skin on his tongue, smell the fruity aroma of her silken hair as he grazed his teeth over her neck, and feel the heat of her legs wrapped around his waist. His cock jumped at the memory.

His body's reaction hadn't surprised him. After all, his hand wasn't quite the same as a woman's velvet heat. But it was how his emotions had tangled in their love-making that had thrown Reese completely off-kilter. His mind kept reminding his heart that they'd made a solemn vow never to fall in love again—especially with a vamp—it was just too damn dangerous. But it appeared months of innocent flirting had broken his resolve and the woman had wiggled her way into his heart. That thought shook him to his core.

Shit. He needed to get Alex out of his head. There were lots of hours between now and when he would see her again. The only question was whether they'd be hours spent lounging in the rec room or out in the community battling dragons. It's how he'd come to envision fire—a living, breathing beast, devouring for sheer pleasure and enjoyment. For himself, he hoped the alarm would continue to send them screaming into the night and keep him busy until the morning arrived so he didn't have to contemplate how this new development would impact his life. But for the residents of South Kenton, he hoped this Friday dragged by sitting around the station talking trash, lifting weights, and playing

cards. That thought darkened his already foul mood.

“Hey, Colton, Carden said to head up to his office as soon as you got in. Harkness and Timmons are already up there,” the dispatcher called from her office. “He didn’t sound happy.”

Reese lumbered up the stairs one at a time. Hearing Carden’s voice long before he got to the office door, he was in no hurry to listen to a tirade. He had no idea what he’d done and would gladly have heard it secondhand from Josh and Timmons, but they were a team. They fought fires as a team. They broke bread as a team. They hung by their balls as a team. *Go team.*

“...I have no fucking idea what you three were doing at the professor’s mansion, but I’ve got the fire marshal chewing me a new asshole saying someone tampered—”

At Reese’s soft knock on the smoky glass, the Deputy Chief’s rant stopped.

“Colton, that better be you!” The door swung open. Frank Carden’s normally placid features were taut and glowed a sickly red. His thick moustache twitched in time with the fingers pulsing in and out of a fist. “It’s about time.” He waved him into the small office. Timmons and Josh sat in the two chairs across from the deputy’s desk, which left only the door to lean against.

“What the hell did you three do after we left?” Carden stalked behind the desk, but didn’t sit.

“Harkness and I already told you,” Timmons said. “The body was transported to the morgue. We pulled down what was left of the walls and soaked the hotspots.” Timmons turned to Josh and Reese, who nodded in confusion. Reese was fairly certain, though he and Josh had been thorough in their search, they hadn’t disturbed anything that would have the fire marshal upset enough to call their boss. Every firefighter understood the scene was only theirs until the fire was out, then possession returned to the owners or in the case of a death—the fire marshal.

Though it happened, firefighters weren’t supposed to return to the scene.

“Didn’t they get the photos and collect everything they wanted last night?” Josh asked.

Carden stared him down. “Obviously *not*, Harkness. They went back this morning to scour the scene one more time. Imagine their surprise when the place was torn apart. And not just from axes and water. The only obvious people on the scene were you three.” He paused, his narrowed eyes probing for guilt. “The fire marshal returned this morning to make sure he hadn’t missed anything and to double check for accelerants. Someone had gone in there and pulled apart the office, the master suite, a guest bedroom and the living area. Beyond what would have been done to check for hotspots.” With serious deliberation, he laid his palms on the desk and leaned forward. “Seems some things he wanted were missing. Not the least of which was the computer from the office.”

“What the hell would we do with a piece of melted plastic?” Josh asked.

The alarm was his only answer.

“Attention South Kenton fire.” The dispatcher called. “Repeat. Attention South Kenton fire. Report of structure fire. One-seventeen Chestnut Hill Road, a tenth of a mile past Goughan’s bridge...”

Reese took the shortest route to the bay, pounding down the stairs in front of Josh, Timmons and Carden. Stepping into his boots, he pulled up his bunker pants, sliding the suspenders over his shoulders in one sweeping motion. He shrugged into his bunker coat,

grabbed his helmet and lumbered toward the engine. *Routine*. His thoughts focused on what lay ahead, not the motions of his muscles. He pulled the lanyard, releasing the air tank tucked in the seat's back before his butt ever hit the vinyl. His seat belt and air tank straps snicked into place as adrenaline filled his veins and sharpened his senses.

He'd get through this long night one fire at a time.

Chapter Six

Ronan pressed harder on the gas pedal of the Volvo, sending it hurtling faster along the mountain road. This section leading up to Glenn's farm was treacherous. Weaving in and out of the forest, rising and falling with the rocky Californian terrain, it made keeping the car on his side of the road difficult. His headlights bumped along the low-hanging trees, the shadows opening only long enough for him to pass, then closing quickly behind him. Obviously, this section of forest held tight to its secrets.

The car bounced over the rise on the picturesque bridge and the chassis came down hard on the tar. The Volvo screeched with the impact. Ronan didn't care. He pushed the needle of the speedometer to a chilling angle. All he wanted was to find Alex and assure himself that she was safe. He'd been waiting for her at the tavern when the call about the fire at Glenn's had blared over the firefighters' pagers.

When every off-duty man at O'Malley's jumped at the rescue, he'd left with the surge. There was no doubt, if Alex wasn't at O'Malley's, she had to be with Glenn.

Ronan had wanted, no—*needed*—to talk to her about their morning exchange in the winery. He had been so close to breaking through her tough exterior. Ronan slammed his fist on the steering wheel, imagining it was Reese Colton's face. In his opinion, the man had terrible timing. But then again, he hated Colton and everything he did. Hating his boss wasn't good for his career with RISEN, but Ronan didn't really care. He'd stay with the organization only as long as it suited his needs.

It had pissed him off to kowtow to the older vamp this morning. But he needed to stay in RISEN's good graces until something better came along. Competing for a woman's attention—even if he only wanted to use her—was just bad politics. Still, it raised his hackles. It was obvious Colton was sniffing around Alex, looking for more than wine and friendly banter. Ronan had been trying to gain her trust for the last several months, but she barely gave him the time of day.

As he came over the last rise before the farm, the forest glowed with a sickly orange fog of smoke. The drive from O'Malley's was no more than fifteen minutes, he hated to think he was too late. Ronan's heart pounded rapidly in his throat as he rounded the final corner and saw the conflagration in front of him. His stomach fell when he pulled into the drive and saw Alex's black Honda parked behind Glenn's truck.

Throwing open the door before the Volvo had completely stopped, Ronan shoved the car into park and killed the engine. Jumping out, his eyes scanned the destruction in front of him. Flames lapped out of the broken windows on the side of the barn, reaching up to taste the siding and lick the sill of the roof. Sparks danced in merry wonder upon the black smoke billowing into the night and shadowing the fat disk of the moon watching from high above. The doors were thrown wide, frightened animals spilling from the barn and scattering in fear.

"Alex!" Ronan yelled, running toward the building. His voice was swallowed by the fire as it roared out its power and shook something within the building. It was all happening so fast. "Alex!" he yelled again. Someone was here. Below the thunder of the devastation, like a steady drum beat, Ronan felt a heart pounding hard and steady. He hoped it was Alex. He still needed her. Nausea clawed at his throat and threatened to

bring up his last meal, but he swallowed it down. He was still one hundred feet from the blaze and the heat pressed angrily against his skin, snatching his breath.

Ronan registered the sound of sirens. Help was on its way. It might be too late for Alex if he didn't do something, but he was hesitant to run into the flames—even for her.

Relief flooded through him as the silhouette of a person ran from the woods along the side of the building. Lumbering and clumsy, she stumbled and went down. He'd watched her far too long, not to know that lithe form was Alex. He was upon her before she could recover. Liquid fire dripped into the grass around them as the metal of the roof fed its hunger. Grabbing her arms, he hauled her weak form upright, surprised the vampire within her hadn't taken control.

Her wide eyes searched his face in confusion. "I can't find Glenn. I think he's in there. I don't think we can save him." Her fingers dug into his arms, but her voice was deadly calm.

* * * *

Reese jumped from the engine, assessing and evaluating even as he pulled his face mask over his hood and settled his helmet in place. The shadowed sight of Ronan and Alex locked in a protective embrace against the backdrop of the fire hinted at an intimacy he didn't want to consider. Jealousy rose up and drew his fangs long and he worked to tamp it down. One romp in a wine cellar didn't make Alex his, but he'd thought it had meant more to her than it seemed to have. Working on remote control, all this skipped over his synapses even as he pulled the hose from the truck.

The two vampires moved as a unit toward them. Ronan broke from Alex only long enough to yell over the roar of the fire. "We can't find Glenn Karr. I suspect he's in the barn."

"We'll get him." Carden spoke with a conviction Reese didn't feel. The fire had chewed through the back half of the barn and danced in victory along the roof shingles. Carden turned to his men. "Harkness, Colton, the fire's too advanced. You'll need to take water and do your search. Timmons and Ellsworth, vent the roof and attack from there. We'll have someone else go in with the imaging camera and more hoses."

Reese and Josh ran toward the blaze, the empty hose in their hands an extension of their bodies. Reese knew two tankers and a second engine had been called in when they'd reached the scene and Carden had assessed the fire. Off-duty firefighters had poured into the station when they found out it was Glenn's place lighting up the night. They stood by waiting to be called in to help. Despite the number of firefighters ready to do battle, they would be hard pressed to save any part of the structure, let alone lives.

Pulling back on the lever on the hose, Reese let the water spew forth in a great plume as he entered the barn. Josh leaned into him, his gloved hands holding tight. Though one of them could easily overpower the bucking hose, for appearance's sake, they followed protocol. With giant sweeping motions Reese fought back the tempest. Flames crept up the wooden walls, hissing at them as they aimed the water and reclaimed small portions of the building. The firefighters pushed forward at a steady pace, their gaze cutting through the inky smoke, searching for any signs of life.

In the center of the barn, they found their first victim. The fire had consumed the stalls along the walls and was working its way into the hayloft, but the floor remained nearly unscathed. A quick glance confirmed the body, drained of blood and lying before

them, wasn't Glenn. Josh bent to check for signs of life, but they both knew the heart had stopped beating long before the young man had been staked spread eagle to the floor. His head was contorted to one side, the bruised and swollen puncture marks at his neck further evidence of the gruesome ending to his life. Even in the shimmering light, the pentagon painted on the wooden planks was visible. Reese had no idea if the elaborate setup was a hoax or a warning to other vampires. He detested leaving the body, but Timmons and Ellsworth had already broken through the roof above them. Tampering with evidence of murder, even if it seemed to point directly to a pagan ritual and a vampire slaying, would be criminal.

Josh lifted the mic off his shoulder, held it to the speaker of his face mask and spoke to Carden. "One body. Center barn floor. Dead. Send recovery team with video. Harkness and Colton moving to back of barn to continue the search."

Their boss' confirmation crackled in his ear. Reese took a quick glance at the light display in his face mask. Three lights marching across his nose from left to right indicated the air level of his tank. One red. One yellow. One green. Two green lights had already dimmed. Depending on how shallow he kept his breathing, Reese still had fifteen or twenty minutes of air left in this tank. Plenty of time to battle their way to the back of the barn. Already another team had hoses working on the blaze behind them. Until he and Josh finished searching the barn, their hose would only clear their way. Battling the blaze would come later.

Josh nodded and Reese pushed into the belly of the beast. Back here, where the fire had most likely begun, it had eaten through the rafters. A portion of the hayloft on the right side of the barn had already fallen victim to its heat. It lay crumpled in on itself, the thick smoke and flames lifting in triumph toward the night sky. The fire had burned its way across the ceiling and birthed droplets of flame that rained down around them. But the water was slowing its progress. The thunderous roar of the fire and the hissing sound of defeat ebbed and flowed in Reese's ears.

"Over there."

Reese followed the direction of Josh's finger. The last couple of stalls of the barn in the back left corner had been walled off. Probably a tack room or an office. Smoke poured from the closed door. Even if the fire hadn't worked into the space, there was little chance of a human surviving the heat and toxic smoke. But Glenn wasn't human.

They aimed the hose at the door and pushed back the flames slithering down the walls. Reese swept the water, allowing Josh access to the door. Josh shoved it open and jumped back as fire leapt from the space. Reese didn't need the thermal imaging camera to see the burned body on the floor, its torso propped against the wall. The stake protruding at an angle from the center of Glenn's chest would have only paralyzed him, but the ferocious heat had singed off his hair, melted his clothes, and blackened most of his skin. Even an ancient vampire couldn't recover from those wounds.

What the hell was happening in South Kenton?

"We've got someone. We need more water." Reese called into his mic.

Reese shut off the water and knelt next to Josh. Reese was breathing hard and his face mask began to vibrate as the green light dimmed, leaving on the warning glow of one yellow and one red light. His air was running out. He didn't care. Glenn was the unofficial head of vampires in the mountains of California. The vampire's death would be felt across the population. They needed to save him. Splaying his gloved hand over

Glenn's chest, he looked at Josh who simply nodded. *To hell with protocol.* No one needed to see Glenn broken this way. Reese pulled the stake from the vampire's heart.

Glenn arched and the edges of the wound fluttered. The faint pulse of blood echoed in Reese's ears.

"We need to get him out of here," Josh's alien voice filtered through the speakers of his mask.

"Hold on Glenn," Reese shouted over the din of the fire. "You're going to make it. We've got you."

Josh called over his mic for an ambulance as he hefted Glenn's legs and Reese gingerly scooped his hands under the man's shoulders. Two guys arrived with water, pushing back the flames that had continued to claim the walls. Josh and Reese left the others to battle the fire and ran out the back door with Glenn's still form. Laying him in the deep grass under the pretense of doing CPR, they watched to see if his body could repair the gaping hole in his chest before putting him in the ambulance.

Nothing happened. The chasm remained. Glenn's life hung by a thread pulse that was barely audible to Reese's acute senses. He didn't want to think it was too late to save the ancient vampire and he ripped off his mask and gloves and dug his fangs deep into the tender flesh of his wrist. Reese didn't care who saw him. Bringing the life-giving liquid to Glenn's mouth, he urged his mentor to drink, but the blood spilled over Glenn's blackened lips and down his chin.

"Fight, Glenn. Dammit all! You can do this." Reese could barely speak past the emotion burning his throat. He squeezed his wrist harder, blood pouring forth. Hope rose as the vampire's mouth opened, the fluid flowing across Glenn's tongue.

But Glenn wasn't drinking. He was trying to speak.

"Don't talk. Focus on repairing your body."

Glenn lifted his hand, his eyes imploring Reese to hear him.

Reese pulled away his wrist and leaned in close to the death rattle bubbling from Glenn's lips.

"Don't. Blame Her..."

The last word gurgled out with the blood frothing from the ancient vampire's mouth. Like a hammer to a gong, Glenn's heart pumped for the last time, echoing painfully in Reese's ears. His friend's clouded eyes rolled back in their sockets searching for redemption as Glenn's taut muscles relaxed into the waiting arms of death.

Chapter Seven

Emotional exhaustion replaced the marrow in Reese's bones, making his limbs unusually stiff and heavy. The fingers of his left hand hung loosely over the bottom of the steering wheel and his right was slung over the top. He drove like an old man on a Sunday drive, his foot muscles too lethargic to exert more force on the gas pedal. Josh sat mutely in the passenger's seat of the old Buick, his body slumped against the door. It had been a long night for both of them. Reese just wanted to get back to their log cabin in the woods, close his weary body into a sleeping cooler, and shut out the world—and the pain.

The fire at Glenn's had taken hours to extinguish, and he had been on auto-pilot since the lifeless body of his mentor had been spirited away in the ambulance last night. The pieces of Reese's shattered heart lay scattered in the back field where Glenn's life had tragically ended. There had been nothing left to feel the sting of jealousy when Alex leaned on Ronan for emotional support. But as he watched her climb into Ronan's car, a sudden stab of suspicion kicked him full in the gut and Glenn's final words echoed in his head. He'd told Reese not to blame *her*. In Reese's book that could mean only one person.

The anger that had kept him going through the night rose fresh and raw again. If Alex was responsible for Glenn's death, Reese would hunt her down and eliminate her himself. Fuck the tribunal. Fuck a fair hearing in front of RISEN. Fuck his heart. There was no reason to murder an ancient vampire like Glenn, who had saved so many from self-destruction. If she were the cause of all his pain, Reese would kill her with his own hands. He made himself that promise as Ronan's taillights had receded into the night.

The car steered itself down the rutted dirt road toward their cabin. The wipers slapped away the early morning drizzle and he was grateful for the heavy blanket of clouds obscuring the sun. Everyone should feel his dampened spirit and the deep gloom permeating his muscles. Reese wasn't sure anything would penetrate the heavy coat of sorrow and guilt he currently wore. He should have solved this case months ago. Glenn had died because he had lost focus. Well no more. Everything, including Alex—check that—everything, *especially* Alex, would take a back seat to finding the fucking rogue vamp.

The pines opened to the tiny clearing. Morning fog hung heavy over the river running placidly behind their cabin. Normal men would have found tranquility and sustenance fishing in its icy depths, but in the year they'd lived here, he and Josh had barely spent time on its banks. That's why it surprised Reese when his eyes immediately fixated on the figure hunched on the boulder. He stared, not sure she wasn't a mirage.

He shoved the car in park and shut off the engine.

"You don't know what Glenn meant." Josh stared straight ahead, his voice monotone. "She's here for a reason. And I suspect we need whatever explanation Alex is here to give." He turned to Reese, his gaze hard and steady. "Just be sure you're listening with the right head."

Reese didn't respond. He couldn't have spoken if he wanted to.

He wanted to follow Josh's advice and still be impartial at the same time, but Alex's presence filled him, beckoned him to close the distance between them. With slow, steady

movements he got out of the car and slogged through the thick grass to the rocky shore. A thin veil of smoky aroma permeated the air. Reese wasn't sure if it drifted through the trees from Glenn's farm up the road, rode on his clothes or simply filled his nose as it did for days after an ugly fire. He didn't want to think about the fire and the tragedy.

The woman curling in on herself on the boulder looked so small and alone. Her wet clothes molded enticingly to her shivering frame. The anger filling him only moments before was cleansed by the steady wash of rain on his ball cap. He wanted to take her in his arms and have her fill the emptiness.

He came up behind her, squinting against the early morning light. Reese's sunglasses barely kept the daylight at bay and he could already feel the tingle of its touch on his face. He couldn't help wondering if exposing herself to its rays was some form of punishment. Even in the rainy gloom, the dawn burned bright.

"Alex?" He didn't know what else to say. But when she didn't respond he wondered if he'd actually said it out loud and he repeated her name. "Alex?"

She turned, the short strands of hair slashing darkly across her china doll face. Her eyes, usually sparking with life, were red and raw with sadness. "Why?" Her lips formed the word, but only a choked sob filled the air. She fell into his waiting arms, her long fingers fisting in the wet cloth of his T-shirt. She buried her face in his neck as he carried her like a child back toward the cabin. Alex's sweet essence filled his nose and his body reacted immediately. His cock urged him to forget everything he'd come to suspect about her in the last twelve hours, but his head reminded him to remain cautious.

"Glenn. Why Glenn?" The keening sound of Alex's anguish ripped through him. Sobs wracked her body, shaking him to his very core. Reese didn't want to believe she had anything to do with Glenn's death, but until he had some answers he didn't want to trust himself. Still, when her torso wrapped around his, he couldn't help but pull her tight to his heart.

* * * *

"I'm not sure, Reese. I already told you that." Alex sat in the dark kitchen, her head pounding with a pain that exploded behind her eyes. "Nine or ten. Maybe eleven. I don't know what time it was." The details of last night were blurred and ran together in a sickening haze. She suspected things were only going to get worse as the day progressed. "Does it really matter?" Her voice grew loud. Alex could only hope Josh had found a way to drown out their heated discussion from the confines of his bedroom.

"Yeah, Alex, it fucking matters." Reese's words were punctuated by his bare heels pounding in circles on the kitchen floor. "I explained in great detail why Glenn called RISEN and everything Josh, Ronan and I have been investigating since coming to South Kenton. These fires have buried evidence of humans sucked dry and more recently, have escalated to vamps being burned to death. And now the guy who started the ball rolling to bring a rogue vampire to justice has died. I think any information you have about the fire that killed him fucking matters."

Her hand came down hard on the table. "I told you all this already. Glenn didn't show up for his shift at the tavern. Since he was supposed to bring the week's supply of pig's blood for the winery, someone needed to get it." It was a lie, but one she'd concocted last night when she'd run from the tavern. Reese didn't need to know why she'd gone to Glenn's. "When I got to the farm the barn was on fire. I panicked and went

in to see if I could put it out.” Her voice grew weak with exhaustion. “But it was too late. It was spreading fast. I dialed 9-1-1 and went looking for Glenn.” She looked at Reese with renewed hope. “Dispatch should have the time of my call. That should help piece everything together.”

Reese’s eyes didn’t reflect her optimism. “They do. Ten fifteen.” He paused. “According to Chris, you left the tavern a little after nine. I checked with him this morning.”

He’d already talked to Chris? What the hell was going on? Alex swallowed hard, hoping her nerves wouldn’t tremble through her words. She wondered how much he already knew. “I don’t see why that matters.”

His feet stopped and his brow arched. “Because that’s a hell of a gap in time, Alex.”

“So I did a couple errands on the way. Sue me. It wasn’t like I knew Glenn was in danger.”

Reese laid his palms flat on the other side of the table and leaned over as if she were being interrogated. The realization churned cold in her belly. “You don’t understand, Alex.” His voice, smooth and thick as blood, dripped with bitterness. “The fire marshal is likely to wonder the same thing.” Hard lines creased the corners of his eyes and mouth. “Two men died last night in that fire. I’d like to know how you came to be the first one on the scene.”

That did it. He’d been grilling her for the last half hour about the events of last evening and now he was accusing her ... of what? A switch clicked and pushed away her confusion. He was accusing her of killing Glenn? She may not be telling him everything, but to think she’d bring any harm to the man who’d loved and protected her dropped indignation over her wounded heart like a shield. Alex jumped to her feet, the metal legs of the chair scraping loudly. She barely noticed. “What the fuck, Reese?” Her hand pointed in the general direction of Glenn’s farm. “Do you think I shoved a stake through Glenn’s heart and started that fire?”

His eyes grew dark, the corner of his mouth curving in a malicious smirk. He straightened and held his palms out, inviting her to rebuke his theory. His silent recrimination filled the air and Alex could hardly draw breath.

She had come here thinking Reese was one of the few people who would understand the pain burning through her veins. She hadn’t expected him to accuse her of murder. “Fuck you, Reese.” The whisper was barely audible through the tension. “I loved him like a father.” Sorrow ripped open the raw wound, bringing a fresh sting of tears behind her eyes, but she refused to give in to them. Alex didn’t need this. Didn’t need him. And she sure as hell didn’t need his accusations—or pity. She’d come seeking solace in Reese’s arms—and his bed. She’d wanted one day of lust to take with her when she left. That had been something else Alex had decided on her way here. She needed to leave and take her secrets with her. “I thought you knew me. All these months ... yesterday...” The last word choked out with a sob. Alex turned, intent on leaving the cabin, leaving South Kenton. She’d been mistaken thinking there was something left for her here.

Reese’s hand was on her shoulder before she took more than a few steps. He turned her and pulled her tight to the solid plane of his chest. His mouth came down hard on hers. No soft exploration. No gentle probing. Just raw male lust devouring her mouth. His hands fisted in her hair and she opened herself to him, wanting to fill the void Glenn’s death had left in her heart. She needed to feel alive in the midst of so much death. Her

lips parted and welcomed the heat of his tongue. It tangled and danced with hers, teasing and tasting.

“Alex, I’m sorry.” Reese whispered in her ear. “Glenn ... the fires ... you ... it’s all too much.” His lips wandered her face, kissing her lids and her nose, trailing fire down her neck.

She felt the scrape of his teeth as his fangs drew across the tender flesh of her throat. The sensation sent sparks of desire straight to her sex. Despite what he might believe of her, the anger couldn’t keep her heart from wanting this man. “Reese, I’m yours. Take me.”

Her world spun and shifted as he lifted her into his arms and covered her mouth with his. She was dizzy with need and had no idea where he was taking her until his body shifted and his foot kicked closed a door. Without preamble, Reese laid her on the soft mattress of a bed and came down heavy on top of her. Reveling in the sensation of his hands on her body, she didn’t open her eyes. The essence of him permeated the air. The pillows around her head were filled with the thick male scent of him. She wanted to drown in its heady aroma.

Their hands were everywhere at once, tugging at clothes, ripping away buttons. The desperate need to have flesh searing flesh was all that drove them until they lay naked and gasping in each other’s arms. Their lips, teeth, and hands moved in frantic hunger to taste and touch. She couldn’t get enough of him.

Alex’s palms slid down the hard muscles along his spine, pressing into the well of his low back before curving up the rounded arch of his taut ass and digging her nails in deep. Air hissed through Reese’s teeth, a low moan vibrating through the heat of his mouth at her neck. His teeth dragged down her throat and his lips replaced his hand at her breast. His mouth suckled and bit first one aching nipple then the other. The sharp thrill of pain shot straight to her core, clenching her muscles. The thick heat of lust leaked onto her thighs. No man had ever made her so wet.

His erection pressed against her hip and she arched into it.

“Take me, Reese. Fill me.” The words came out on rasping breaths. He acted as if he hadn’t heard her so she fisted her hands in the thick curls of his hair and pulled his head from her breast. His eyes were clouded with lust and heavy lidded, searching her face. His fangs long, and white, jutted from the deep red of his full lips. “I need you now,” she whispered. Rolling slightly, she reached between their bodies and ran her palm down the considerable length of his cock. “Fill me.”

As if emerging from a sexual fog, his eyes brightened to the aquamarine of a summer ocean. A slow smile slid across his mouth and his fangs retracted. “I’m acting like a horny teenager.” He kissed between her breasts. “What am I thinking?” He scraped his teeth down her breastbone. “We have all day, Alexandra.” Several slow kisses dragged down her tummy. “Silly me. There is...” His tongue stroked her belly button. “No rush.”

She couldn’t seem to fill her lungs.

“I wouldn’t really be a gentleman if I didn’t please my lady first.”

Reese came up on his hands and knees and kissed just above the small strip of dark hair at the apex of her thighs. “This is nice.” His lips pulled a few strands of pubic hair and the tingle made her gasp. “Shame on me for not taking time to notice yesterday.” He lifted her leg and maneuvered between her quivering thighs. “Or enjoy the satin heat of your skin.” His fingers trailed embers of pleasure from her hip bones, down the creases of

her thighs and gently urged her legs apart. Reese closed his eyes and inhaled the thick fragrance of her arousal. “*That* I definitely noticed and enjoyed.” He opened his eyes and stared at her. “But I’ll never get my fill of how wet I make you.”

She knew what he intended and wasn’t sure she wanted this amount of intimacy with him. “You don’t have to...” Her voice trailed off as he settled himself between her legs and blew gently over her weeping slit.

“Oh, but I *want* to,” he whispered.

Alex sank back in the pillows as his thumbs spread her lips wide and his velvet tongue leisurely explored her folds. A thick finger probed her pussy. His lips found her clitoris and he suckled on the bundle of nerves, sending tantalizing shocks of electricity to her womb. Alex’s fingers tangled in Reese’s hair as she sought to find an anchor against the waves of bliss rolling through her body. His mouth taunted and teased her clitoris, timing the pulses of his fingers with her gasps of pleasure. The tension built, lifting Alex up to levels of ecstasy she’d never experienced.

His thumb replaced his tongue at her clitoris, circling and teasing the nub with just the right amount of pressure, strumming her body until her muscles vibrated with expectation. The fingers of his other hand dragged her sticky moisture down her ass and rimmed the tight muscle. She was helpless against his talented assault. The sublime pressure tingled out from her sex, sending frissons of pleasure straight from the flicks of his masterful tongue in and out of her channel to the tips of her fingers and toes.

She bucked and writhed against him, but he never lost contact with her body. With her fingers still tangled in the thick curls of his hair, she pulled him closer. The ecstasy built and she soared with him on wings of heavenly bliss. Lightning bolts of rapture exploded inside her, quaking her body with each detonation. Reese’s finger broke the rosebud opening of her anus and she gasped out his name at the unexpected pleasure that rippled through her. She had never experienced this kind of release and through the fog of ecstasy a tingle of anxiety rippled through her, making Alex all too aware that Reese had been the one to bring her here.

She heard herself beg him to stop. He eased back, but his fingers didn’t cease their ministrations. The tension flowed from her muscles and she melted into the comforter, floating slowly back to earth. Her hands fell limply at her side, her body too exhausted to even lift her lids. Reese’s head lay on her thigh, his fingers teasing the spongy tissue of her G-spot in her pulsing channel. His breath feathered across her slit.

“Alex?”

“Hmmm?”

“I’m going to do that again.”

“Tomorrow.”

She felt the bed bounce as he shifted. With great effort she lifted her head to see he was up on all fours, peering at her with a sheepish grin that crinkled the edges of his eyes. “I’m not that patient.”

He bent and laved up her slit, sucking the pearled bundle of nerves into his mouth and teasing it with his talented tongue. Pleasure speared straight through her and she gasped at the sudden reawakening of her body. His thumb took over for his mouth and his lips and teeth nipped their way up her torso. He stopped to gorge on her throbbing nipples. She had no idea how he could make her want so quickly.

Alex reached between his arms and ran her palms up the hard length of his cock. One

hand cupped the furry sac of his balls and squeezed playfully while the other milked his veiny length and smeared pre-cum over the mushroom tip.

His moan of pleasure vibrated straight to her heart.

“Make love to me.” The words came out unchecked and Alex held her breath, hoping he hadn’t heard the emotion behind the statement. But Reese simply nibbled his way to her mouth and plunged in greedily, stealing her breath. This was only sex to him. That was fine. It would make leaving so much less complicated. Alex pushed the thought from her mind. The heat of Reese’s body surrounded her and she wanted to remember every detail of his glorious angles.

She guided the tip of his cock to her opening and canted her hips, offering herself to him. Though she was well lubricated, he entered in slow, measured pulses, giving her time to adjust to his girth. With gentle rocking motions he pulled out and pushed a little further in with each thrust. When he was buried to the hilt he ground his pubic bone against her clitoris, jolting her system with sparks of delirium. Alex wrapped her legs tight around his thighs and dug her nails into his ass, pulling him deeper. Her body drawing her toward another climax.

Reese released her mouth and she stretched her neck long, offering him another piece of herself. Yesterday he’d only grazed her flesh. It hadn’t been enough. She wanted his fangs to bite deep and drink of her soul. His hips moved faster now, in and out, skin slapping skin. Her body matched him thrust for thrust. Her muscles quaked, her orgasm building to a crescendo.

“Take all of me Reese,” she whispered just as her body fell headlong into the wild abandon of release.

He bent his head and sunk his fangs deep. She gasped out his name. The tidal wave of ecstasy rolled through her body, quaking her body. She writhed beneath him, not in pain, but in total surrender. Sharp tingles of electric fire burned through every muscle. Alex felt the hot surge of Reese’s seed fill her as he gave into his own release. His cries of pleasure muffled in her neck.

This is what Alex had wanted. One last chance to feel Reese buried inside her and to know she’d fed every part of the man.

Chapter Eight

Reese inhaled, filling his lungs with the heady mixture of Alex's shampoo and their lovemaking. She lay comfortably in the crook of his shoulder, her hand over his heart. He speculated over when exactly she'd taken possession of it. Despite the fact they had done little more than flirt, he suspected he'd given it to her long before their romp in the wine cellar. A man didn't live for two centuries without knowing what he found appealing in a woman. Of course all the other women he'd ever allowed to come into his life had been temporary—save for one.

Kissing the top of her head, Reese ran his fingers over the bruised and raw flesh on her neck. She'd given herself and he'd hungrily taken that part of her. He couldn't figure out why the holes hadn't healed. Though they'd spent the afternoon in each other's arms, he'd offered himself to Alex, but hadn't been able to coax her fangs to lengthen enough to pierce his skin. Maybe she found it too intimate to share that part of herself with him.

Reese shifted and stretched. He'd like to stay this way; Alex's silky leg snaked around his, her breasts pressed softly into his ribs, the sweet scent of their lovemaking filling his nose. It would be so easy to ignore everything outside this room, his job...his assignment...Alex's possible connection to both. His body stiffened at the thought.

"Reese?"

"Yeah?"

"You regretting this?" Alex's hand slid down his stomach, the wet heat of her lips caressing his nipple. She leaned on her forearm, long fingers combing through her silky strands of hair that had tickled his thighs earlier,

"Regret is the farthest thing from my mind, Alexandra." He kissed her upturned nose.

"Then I was just wondering why?"

"Why what?"

"Why now? Why me?"

The sincerity clouding her eyes made him ache. He'd been asking himself those same questions over the past two days. Unlike Alex, Reese knew the answers. After all they'd been through, perhaps she deserved the truth. Stacking her fists on his chest, Alex's eyes searched his face and he wondered if she could see the painful memories flooding over him.

"I mean it's not like you owe me an explanation," she murmured. "But why has it taken you so long to notice me?"

He laughed. "Oh, I *noticed* you a long time ago."

"Then why? Why didn't you try something before yesterday? I mean it's not like I wasn't sending out signals." She swung to a sitting position, her knees against his ribs and her fingers teasing the hair on his chest. "I was pretty sure I made my interest clear."

"Flares couldn't have been more obvious." Reese came up on his elbow, brushing the hair from her face and she kissed his palm. It was time to let it go. Someone besides Josh needed to understand the guilt he had carried for nearly seven decades. "It was about a promise." He inhaled against the agony squeezing his heart.

Alex's hand soothed down his arm, linking her fingers in his. Her touch grounded

him, gave him strength to endure re-opening the wound. Perhaps she was the one who could help him heal.

"I loved a vampire once," he said. "She was beautiful. Brilliant. A veterinarian ahead of her time." Reese swallowed the anguish pressing hotly in his throat. "She owned a farm. Treated the local livestock in the area. It was during my cowboy phase when ranch hands with a good horse and a strong back could find work anywhere—and a vampire had an unlimited supply of lost pioneers." A cold snake of revulsion slithered over his muscles. Alex bent and tenderly kissed his cheek, her breasts brushing his arm, bringing him back to the present.

"She'd only been turned a decade earlier, but she'd learned how to live on the blood of animals. She sought out other vampires and taught us. Helped us become more human." He closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment to remember her. "I have no idea why she chose me, but she did. We were married. Ran the ranch. Vampires came from all over under the guise of ranch hands and we continued to teach. For nearly a decade our life was idyllic."

Agony ripped through Reese's heart as the memories tumbled over themselves. "They came one night. A group of vamps who believed we were eroding the true bloodlines. Without warning they slaughtered the vampires in the bunkhouse. They staked me to the ground and tortured her. In front of me, when I could do nothing for her, they raped her over and over, slicing away small pieces of her and—"

"Reese don't." Alex pressed her fingers to his lips. "Don't relive that part." Pain—his pain—shimmered in her eyes. "I understand. It's why you're part of RISEN."

He nodded.

"And why stopping this rogue vamp is so important."

Reese pulled her into a soft, slow kiss, love washing over him. It had been a long time since his heart had felt this full. Pulling back, he let his gaze roam hotly over her body. Damn, she made him want. Alex had no idea how sexy she looked, her love for him softening her face and her body marked by his teeth. "You are beautiful." He kissed her again, his hand sliding down to fondle her breast.

"Oh no, you don't." She slipped from his arms. "We don't really have time. You're going to be late." Alex swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. "And I'm thinking calling in sick so you can spend the night having wild sex probably won't fly with Deputy Chief Carden." She bent to gather her clothing.

The fat tabby he'd rescued at the professor's mansion pushed into the bedroom and meowed loudly. The poor thing seemed so lost since he'd brought him home. Whiskers, ears and tail were singed by the flames. But miraculously, it had survived.

"You have a cat?" Alex's ass swayed seductively as she padded to the door, dropped her clothes and gathered the orange feline to her breasts. Right where he'd been trying to nuzzle. Even from this distance, Reese could hear the loud purr as the cat rubbed his face along her chin. For two days, the feline had been avoiding both him and Josh, seeking them out only when he required more food. Reese assumed it sensed the beast just below the surface, but here it was snuggling with Alex like a long lost friend.

"This is..." She looked at him puzzled. "You rescued Zeus?"

"You know the cat's name?"

The embarrassment spread from her neck to hair line in a quick wash of red. In an instant, alarm rippled over her face, contorted to introspection and finally her features

softened, her lips lifted and her expression settled on cavalier. “Professor Morgan had dinner parties at his house. I used to help waitress. He hired several grad students a couple of times a year.” Alex casually lifted a shoulder. “I’ve been to the mansion a few times in the last year.” She set down the cat, shooed it out the door and crawled across the bed. “I just happen to like animals.”

After what he’d just shared, he’d like to think Alex wasn’t keeping secrets. But as she trailed wet kisses up his belly, he wasn’t sure he had enough blood going to his brain to make it function and contemplate her reaction to his question. He wound his arm around her torso and rolled her on her back, covering her mouth with his.

She giggled and spoke through tight lips. “The time?”

He refused to be deterred. Reese held her gaze and suckled her bottom lip. Sliding his hand the length of her body, he felt her relax under his fingers. She opened for him and his tongue swept her mouth and tangled with hers. The ballet was as familiar as if he’d been kissing her his whole life. Pulling back, he stared at her heavy-lidded eyes. He couldn’t get enough of this woman. He scooped her hair from her neck and kissed the bruises. “Sorry about that. I seem to have lost myself.”

“I liked it,” she whispered, a blush spreading across her cheeks. The flush of sexual pleasure—not deceit.

“It should have healed by now. It wasn’t that deep.” Reese searched the amber pools of her eyes. A man could drown in their sweet honey.

“I haven’t been feeling well. They’ll be fine. I thought it was very sexy.” She licked his teeth and laughed before rolling away from him. She stood, found her T-shirt and pulled it over her head. The flimsy turquoise material only accentuated the delicate curve of her breasts with their puckered nipples. “Really, we’ve had our fun, but I think I should probably go.”

How had they gone from foreplay to cold shoulder in two seconds flat? A man could live ten lifetimes and still never understand a woman. Reese rolled and sat on the edge of the bed. “Alex.” He snagged her wrist as she grabbed for her jeans. She straightened and stared at him with doleful eyes. The sad resignation lining her face tore at his heart. The woman thought the afternoon had meant nothing to him. “I’m not like most men, Alex.” The words burned in his throat. He couldn’t let her leave without making her understand how much he cared.

“You’re a vampire, Reese. And I’m...” Her gaze raked over his face. “Well, let’s just say, I’m not happy with who I am.”

He pulled her between his legs. Her bare thighs brushed against his and he worked to control his cock. She’d never believe him if his dick stood up and begged for attention. “Alex, I love who you are.” It wasn’t exactly what he wanted to say, but it would do for now. He didn’t want to frighten her. She hadn’t lived long enough to trust fate.

Alex laughed, a brittle sound that rasped across his ears. “Right.” Her fingers brushed hair from his face. “You know nothing about me. You can’t even name my favorite color, Reese.”

“Green.”

“Lucky guess.”

It was, but he’d take it. “Alexandra Flanagan. A young vampire of a quarter century. Co-owner...” He wasn’t sure he should go there. They hadn’t really talked about Glenn. He chose to ignore the obvious *faux-pas*, cleared his throat and continued. “Co-owner of

O'Malley's Tavern and vampire winery. Cutest pub mistress in Plumas County and the best damn mixologist in the state of California. I know who you are. Hell, every vampire within one hundred miles knows you, Flanagan." He brushed his knuckles playfully across her chin.

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Every firefighter trying to get into my pants uses those lines." Alex winked and pulled on her jeans. "Reese, you don't have to worry about me. I'm a big girl. I came here this morning knowing exactly what I wanted. I'm not holding you to anything." The pull of her zipper sounded almost angry. "Except maybe a ride to my car." She turned around and gathered her bra and thong from the floor and shoved them into her pocket. "I left it at..."

He saw it dawn on her face. The hurt pressed down hard and she fought to keep control. But the tears welled and her chin trembled and questions filled her eyes. Reese stood and filled his arms with her, pulling her tight to the pain stabbing his heart.

"We're going to find the person who started that fire," he stated, not at all sure he wanted to know how she was tangled up in all the mess. And though she'd only given her body to him, Reese knew without a doubt that she wasn't capable of murder. But Alexandra Flanagan *definitely* held some clue that would blow his case wide open. He just needed to find a way to convince her to share it with him.

* * * *

"Well, no there's plenty more..." Josh jabbered in the back seat of the Buick, but Alex was too upset to really listen. She'd been lying so long, she couldn't remember the truth anymore. This afternoon with Reese just confirmed how badly she needed to run from this town and never look back. Now that Glenn was dead, she didn't even really need to make up an excuse. She could just leave. She *needed* to leave.

Glenn.

She and Reese hadn't talked about the man they both loved. Alex wasn't sure she could witness the destruction that had taken his life. When she'd left last night with Ronan, the fire had still been raging. Ronan hadn't wanted to, but he'd reluctantly left her outside the tavern. She had no doubt he would have liked to comfort her with more than the friendly hug and peck on the cheek she'd allowed him. But she had thought only of Reese and how badly she needed him.

Alex waited until Ronan had driven off before she'd started moving. Blindly her feet had carried her into the darkness, back the way she'd come. She'd intended to walk back to Glenn's to get her car, but one turn and a slight detour and she'd found herself at Reese's cabin. Obviously her heart had a destination even if it hadn't informed her head.

This day had turned out just as she'd hoped. Alex couldn't have asked for more tender memories to take with her. She touched Reese's bandana tied around her neck. *Stupid.* Who was she trying to hide the truth from?

"...so anyway, Timmons said the fire marshal is working to link all of the fires and deaths to Glenn," Josh said.

"What?" both Alex and Reese shouted.

Josh held up his hands. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger. I didn't say people believe it. I'm just bringing you up to speed. If you two hadn't—"

"Josh," Reese warned, frowning at him in the rear view mirror.

"Hadn't been sleeping away the afternoon," Josh said in a measured cadence. "You

would have heard the phone ringing off the hook. The whole department is going crazy over the accusations.”

Alex turned in the seat. “How the hell could they think that? He died in that fire or has the fire marshal discounted that fact?”

“They’re figuring he got caught in his own fire. The kid? The pentagram? The bite marks? It seems several of the victims had discernable bite marks on their necks.” He pointed to her scarf. “You might want to lose the accessories or they might think you’re part of the whole vampire conspiracy.”

“Watch where you’re going with that, Josh.” Reese’s voice sliced into the tension.

“I’m just saying. Your girlfriend here seems to know an awful lot of the people dying.”

“We all knew the vamps that died. It’s not like we’re a huge community.” Alex narrowed her eyes at Josh. “It’s not as if you have to be a firefighter to see that someone’s gunning for immortals in South Kenton.”

Josh leaned forward, his nose only inches from hers. “Yes, but it seems you, Miss Flanagan, were intimately involved with *all* of them. I’ve been doing some checking and it seems all the humans were affiliated with the university where you’re a student and every single one of the vamps was a client of the winery.”

“Drop it, Josh.” Reese spoke through clenched teeth.

Falling back against the seat, Josh crossed his arms over his chest and stared out the window. “Obviously your dick is doing all your thinking these days, Colton.”

The car screeched to a halt, throwing Alex hard against her seatbelt. Reese whipped around and glared at his friend. “Fuck you, Harkness. I’d be happy to let you out here and let you walk the fifteen miles back to the station.”

“Fine.” Josh unclipped his seatbelt and bolted from the car. “And if they find you burned in the ditch, I’ll know where to send the fire marshal.” He slammed the door.

Reese dropped the Buick in drive and stamped on the gas. Tires squealed and gravel pinged off the rocker panels. “Asshole.”

Alex looked from her side mirror to Reese’s hard expression and back again. “You can’t leave him to walk. Even with the cloud cover, sunset’s another hour away. He’ll be burned before he gets halfway to town.”

“I’m not leaving the prick. I’ll drop you at your car and go back and get him. He’ll be fine for ten minutes.”

She fell into the seat. Now she had caused a rift between two friends. Would her good deeds never end? “Mind telling me what that was all about?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, you’ll tell me or yes, you mind?”

Reese pulled into Glenn’s driveway and shoved the car into park. “Listen, Alex. There’s a bunch of stuff that isn’t public.” He raked his hand through his hair and blew out a long breath. Reese didn’t meet her wounded gaze. “I’d like to tell you, but I already shared more than I should have when I told you about RISEN. What Josh is alluding to is part of the ongoing investigation into the fires.”

“But he intimated you think I’m involved.”

“Circumstances can warp the facts when viewed from the wrong angle.” He looked at her, the corner of his mouth lifting in a sad attempt at a smile. “He’s overreacting. Glenn’s death has shaken everyone up. He was one of the good ones.”

Alex leaned back in her seat and stared at the burnt remains of the barn. One side lay crumpled in on itself, a defeated warrior unable to stand against its hellish foe. Half moons of soot marred the red siding above the windows. Rain dripped from the charred roof, making the barn look as if it were weeping over Glenn's passing.

Guilt stung the back of her eyes and burned hotly in her throat.

The information she had would likely help the fire investigation. What had she been thinking getting involved with Reese Colton? He'd never forgive her when he discovered her secrets. Josh had been right in one aspect... the man was blinded. But she didn't think it was his groin blocking his vision, she suspected it was his heart.

She couldn't do this to him, not after he'd admitted he hadn't loved since losing his wife. "You need to go." The words clawed their way out of her throat. Leaning over, she kissed Reese on the cheek and hurriedly left his car. He didn't try to stop her.

Perhaps he also understood they had nothing more to give each other.

* * * *

Clouds shrouded the moon as the vampire moved through the abandoned field. Some caring neighbor had probably come in today and no doubt sheltered the wayward animals. Just as well. After tonight, pig's blood would no longer be needed for that heinous concoction that passed as vampire sustenance. Glenn's death had solidified that.

Vampires were nocturnal creatures, born of blood, they lived by blood. To hell with modern views to the contrary. Ridding South Kenton of the contemptuous vampires who had weakened themselves had been necessary. Though the professor's death should have been the end, the realization that one more fire would complete the purification spurred the beast forward.

Under the cloak of darkness the vampire searched Glenn's house, but found nothing. Obviously, Glenn had hidden whatever he'd found in the professor's office well. Had there been more time last evening, it would have been a pleasure to coax the information from his bloody lips. But misdirection required precision. The setup left in the barn fire could not have been more perfect. Killing the kid after Glenn resurrected the poor bastard had been an added pleasure. Staking the body to the pentagram was nothing short of pure genius. Already gossip of Glenn's occult practices had begun to spread. Small towns survived on grist from the rumor mill. The lies had been whispered in the man's own tavern tonight, for chrissake.

Now, the murderer needed to finish destroying the professor's work. But the evidence Glenn had stolen from the man's office—information that would no doubt spur others to follow in his footsteps—needed to be found and destroyed. Time was running out.

Standing on the back steps of the farm house, the monster listened to an owl cry a victory song in the darkness and its prey scream a death wail. It was a haunting sound that called to the vampire heart. "Life taken to give life." The creed rode on the gentle breeze.

The rain had slowed around midnight and now, nearly an hour later, had finally stopped. It would make the long walk back to the bridge where the car was parked a pleasant stroll. The heavy boots clomped down the stairs and across the driveway. Clouds skittered across the sky and opened. The full moon beamed in all its glory upon the blackened barn, the rays of light stretching to illuminate Glenn's vehicle. An obvious

sign that couldn't be ignored.

With a gentle push of air, the vampire stood at the cab of the truck. The moon glittered off a metal ring hanging on the shifter. Opening the door, the vampire leaned in to retrieve the key, and found the leather satchel hidden beneath the seat.

Fate had smiled down once again.

Chapter Nine

Alex's muscles seized, her teeth gritting against the pain. Like a junky in desperate need of a fix, her shaking fingers barely gripped the steering wheel. With relief, she pulled into the shadowed corner of the nearly empty tavern parking lot and shut off the car. Only Chris's Jeep remained. It was unlike Chris to stay longer than it took to clean out the deep fryer and scrub down the sinks. Closing time had come and gone. She had no idea why he hadn't left with it.

Well, she'd just have to wait him out. Hugging herself tightly against the bone-crushing chill, Alex wondered why she was sweating. Damn, she'd screwed her life up. Her decisions and unfortunate circumstances had turned her life into a living hell.

Alex turned and rummaged through a gym bag in the back seat. Finding a washcloth, she mopped her brow. The sporty Honda held everything she owned. She'd cleaned out her furnished apartment last night, left enough cash on the kitchen table to cover the month's rent and a little something for the sweet landlord and walked away. She'd had every intention of confessing her secrets to Glenn before running like a coward, but he'd died in the fire before she'd gotten to the farm. Now she'd never have a chance to explain. Sadness ripped at her heart and caught in her throat. She couldn't hold back the flood of tears that streamed down her cheeks. If ever she needed her mentor, it was now. Instead of cleaning up the mess she had made, she was turning her back and walking away from it—and the only man who had ever truly loved her.

But it was too late to fix things. Now she just needed to get into the tavern one last time undetected, grab some blood wine—which she hoped would relieve the tremors and nausea—and leave. She'd be several states away by the time they gathered for Glenn's funeral day after tomorrow.

Lights flicked in the kitchen window in the back corner of the building. Finally, Chris was shutting things down and leaving. Alex narrowed her eyes and looked closer. The lights hadn't gone out, they were pulsing, a sickly yellow-orange—a kitchen fire. Without thoughts for her own safety, Alex ran into the tavern. The muted glow behind the bar wrapped the tables and chairs in a soft blue haze. Even without the light her feet would have known the way to the kitchen.

"Chris!" she yelled frantically.

Pushing through the swinging door, she saw the pan flaring on the stove. Fire cracked and popped as the flames rose over the ventilation hood. Burning oil sent black smoke rolling up the wall. Pulling the fire extinguisher from its brackets near the sink, she yanked out the pin and squeezed the handle. The first shot of chemical agent splattered liquid fire. Chaotic bits of flame flitted along the counter and floor. Alex feared the flames would spread faster than she could control them. But with steady sweeping motions, the dry chemical fought back the fire. Without oxygen to feed its hunger, it sputtered and died.

She leaned her hip against the island, trembling and gasping from the surge of adrenaline. Putting out the fire had zapped what little energy she had left. Her knees buckled, but Alex held on to the counter and didn't fall. Blood boiled through her veins, burning its way into her muscles making her shaky and weak. Each nerve shouted

protests and her stomach heaved. In the months since this began, no episode had ever taken such control over her.

“Chris!” she called again. There was no answer. Maybe he’d gone home with Tony and carelessly left the pan on the stove. It didn’t make sense. But at the moment, nothing in her confused mind made any sense. Alex could only hope some blood wine would help get her back to some semblance of normal. But the way her skin crawled with unseen bugs, she suspected it wouldn’t help. Without Glenn or the professor, there was no one to turn to. After tonight, she’d be on her own and that thought frightened her more than all others. With her life in ruin, she’d rather die than be turned back into the animal she detested.

On trembling legs, Alex made her way to the cellar and flicked on the lights. Cautiously, she descended the stairs. Tight bands of trepidation wrapped around her stomach and squeezed. She was being foolish. She’d been down here countless times by herself, hauling up cases of liquor or other supplies. It was her own guilt sitting in the shadowed corners, tickling the back of her neck, and clawing along her scalp.

“Get whatever wine is here. Get out and don’t look back.” Hearing her own voice helped press away the gloom. Pulling keys from her pocket, Alex worked it into the lock of the wine cellar, but the handle turned with ease. “Chris, what the hell?” she whispered. Despite numerous reprimands by both she and Glenn, the kid left it unlocked all the time. She supposed it no longer mattered since neither she nor Glenn would be around to keep the winery going. Few humans had been trusted with the secrets behind these doors, but Chris was one of the good ones.

Light from the stairwell speared into the tiny office. Her sneakers squeaked across the damp cement floor as she sought out the string. Her foot kicked something soft and she stumbled, coming down on a body. Slick and wet, Alex tried to push away from it, but arms and clothing meshed with hers, making it hard to get away. Her screams echoed off the stone wall as she untangled herself and crab-walked back toward the door.

“Alex?” A voice called from the kitchen. “Alex, is that you?”

Feet pounded down the stairs.

Her throat grew raw, but she couldn’t stop screaming for help.

“Alex! Are you all right?” Ronan ran into the office and knelt beside her. She gripped the lapels of his coat as if they were lifelines anchoring her sanity.

“He’s dead.”

“My God, Alex. What happened?” His gaze searched her face.

She saw Ronan’s lips move, but his words didn’t penetrate the fear. “Chris. It’s Chris.” She knew it without seeing the face. “I think he’s dead.”

“Let me turn on the light.”

“No, don’t leave me.”

“I’m not leaving you. Just standing to turn on the light.”

“He’s there, under the light. Don’t step on him.” Her face fell into her icy hands.

“Don’t step on him. Oh, Chris.”

Light filtered through her fingers, but she didn’t want to look. A vice grip of pain held her head while a blanket of needles wrapped around her body. Seeing Chris would just bring on the nausea she’d successfully held in check.

“Alex. What have you done?”

She forced her head up. Blood pooled on the floor around Chris. Splashes of it

painted the walls and the ceiling. The sight and smell roiled the acid in her stomach and she worked hard to keep from puking. “Me?” The word came out weak.

“We can clean this up. No one has to know.” Ronan was looking around, his mind calculating. “These things happen.”

“But I—”

He stepped to her and pulled Alex to her feet. “It’s okay. It’s our secret. The killings. The fires. I understand why you had to do it.” The words tripped out of Ronan’s mouth. “Blood wine is an insult to the vampire’s nature. It had to be destroyed.”

“No, I—”

“Don’t you see? I can keep this from the tribunal.” Ronan held her face in his hands. “Alex. I’ll protect you. No one has to find out it was all you. We’ll go away where no one knows us.” Madness sparked in his eyes. “We’ll start a new life together away from South Kenton. We’ll feed together and bring new humans into the fold.”

The thought of sucking someone’s blood gagged her and she couldn’t stop the rising bile. Her stomach lurched. Bloody vomit splattered on the floor and mingled with Chris’s blood. Alex collapsed against the stone wall.

Ronan stepped back, revulsion contorting his face. “What part of that sickens you, Alexandra?” He continued to move toward the desk, putting distance between them. “The thought of me making a life with you or you living like a vampire?” Nothing but anger rode on his words.

“Your accent? What happened to your accent?”

“Grow up. We’re all playing parts here. With Glenn and the professor both gone, I don’t need that foolish masquerade.”

“Please help me, I’m ... I’m not well.” She swiped a shaky hand across her mouth. “I just need some of Glenn’s wine to make me feel better.” Truthfully, she no longer believed it would help. Alex hung suspended between worlds, no longer able to process blood, incapable of digesting food. She would surely die of malnourishment. She wondered if this was how the other vampires felt before their death. Death would be a welcome relief to the slow torture twisting her insides like cords of rope. Ronan swam in her vision and Alex held on to consciousness by a thin thread.

“Drink from Chris. As you can see, I already had my fill.”

She looked down at her dead co-worker. His neck bore the slash marks of Ronan’s feeding. Her stomach heaved. “You did this? Why?”

“Because he’s a weak human. He was in my way. And like everyone—he was expendable.” The chill in his tone froze her heart.

A small pop sounded above them. As if something had fallen to the floor.

“And so the end begins.” Ronan’s smile held no mirth.

“What else have you done?”

“A small fire to finally finish it all.”

“Finish what?”

Ronan leaned casually against the desk and crossed his feet at the ankles. “What began long before you became *this*.” His hand swept the length of her. “With everything gone, do you really think you’ll survive?”

“I’m not dying. I have some sort of flu. People rarely die from the flu.” She wrapped her arm around her torso, pressing her forearm against the pain.

His demented laugh echoed painfully through her throbbing head. “Please don’t

insult me,” he said. “Look at you. Sweat beads on your brow, but you shiver as if it were December. Your eyes are bloodshot. You puke at the sight of blood. I have no doubt your head is throbbing like the percussion section of the orchestra. Your muscles are so weak you can barely stand up. I know the signs. Tell me. Have you tried eating anything but the chemical gruel he makes for you? A nice juicy steak perhaps?”

She gagged again, unable to process how Ronan knew what she needed.

“Ah, not quite there are you?” He opened a briefcase on the desk and pulled a vial of yellow serum from its folds. “This look familiar?”

Alex clenched her teeth against the wave of agony burning over her nerves. She wanted to beg him to let her inject it, have it sear through her veins and wash away the agony and nausea. But Alex was afraid. “I don’t know what that is.” Lifting her chin, she met his accusatory stare.

“Then this isn’t a problem?”

Ronan sent the vial crashing to the floor. She lunged, but was too late. Her life’s blood lay puddled at his booted feet.

“You sad, pathetic woman.” He hauled her to her feet. “The good professor didn’t happen to mention that his cure has never worked ... did he?” Angry spittle sprayed her face. “I didn’t know until recently that he continued his research. But I’ve destroyed it all.” Ronan shoved her away from him. “This briefcase, that Glenn so graciously found, holds the last remnants of the professor’s formulas for both the serum and the gruel. And it shelters one other document,” Ronan pulled a piece of paper from the satchel. “It seems you were helping him with his research. Tell me Alexandra, how many vampires did you turn back when his *cure* didn’t work?”

“I ... I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, please, don’t insult me with your doe-eyed-innocent act. It’s all right here. How he brought them to the brink of death trying to make them human and how you offered your vampire talents saving them from the human frailty of death and restoring their immortality.” He snapped his finger on the paper. The noise echoed like a clanging cymbal in the stillness. “And it seems you were busy helping him burn those that didn’t survive.”

“I didn’t know about the fires,” she yelled, but the effort drained what little energy and will to survive Alex had left and she crumpled to the floor. “But that was in the beginning. He assured me he had nothing to do with the fires the last couple of years.” The words winded her and she inhaled deeply, trying to catch her breath. “He wouldn’t share the complete formula with me either. Professor Morgan didn’t want me to be held liable if someone discovered his work.”

“Yes, my father was an honorable man. It’s such a shame it had to be me who guaranteed an end to his heinous research.”

“Your father?” Alex’s question came out trembling and weak.

“Professor Morgan.”

“But Paul had no children.”

With a feral cry of frustration, Ronan picked up the desk chair and shattered it on the floor. Unshed tears glistened in his eyes when his angry gaze locked on hers. “I was his dark secret. An abomination! Neither human nor vampire, I got dealt the crappiest of hands.”

“I don’t understand.”

The heels of Ronan's boots clicked along the cement as he paced from wall to wall like a caged animal. She heard another muted explosion and wondered why the smoke detectors hadn't engaged. Ronan had probably disabled them. He seemed unaware of what was happening above them.

"Of course you don't understand. No one understands. How could a human sire a child with a vampire?"

"That's not possible." Her statement stopped him cold.

"It is if your father is trying to make your mother human." Ronan thumped a fist on his chest. "So here I am. Despite everything. I live!" Long fingers pushed the blond hair from his face. "And thanks to *him* I walked between the worlds. Too weak to be considered a vampire. Too aberrant to be considered human. I couldn't eat food, but I had worthless fangs. Barely formed, they weren't strong enough to tear flesh. I had to live off my mother's kills. She brought woodland creatures home for us to feed on together. Woodchucks, rabbits, and deer." He laughed derisively. "I gotta tell you, it was a helluva a childhood."

Alex felt her strength seeping from her. She hadn't expected to be so dependent on the serum ... or the gruel. She knew of the side effects, had seen them on several occasions before convincing the professor to try the cure on her. He'd believed he'd made a breakthrough with his last formula modification. She'd had her last injection and batch of gruel the night of the fire. Of course, the man hadn't expected to be murdered by his own son. Another bout of nausea filled her throat. Under the guise of retching, she shifted closer to the wood scattered on the floor. She couldn't let the man get away with all the killing. She had to stop him. "Your parents loved you."

"My mother loved me. My father loved my mother." Ronan was lost in his reminiscences. Obviously, he needed to purge his family history from his soul. "My mother was loathe to let him experiment on me, but she continued the treatments, dreaming of making us both human one day. My father worked tirelessly to discover what made vampire blood different. He took samples upon samples, injecting her with serums he hoped would work." Tears ran unchecked down Ronan's face. "He took everything from her and never got any closer to finding anything. Still she let him experiment. Over and over he stuck her. Until she became incapacitated and could no longer get out of bed. I was a teenager by then. I was forced to hone my hunting skills so I could feed her. I was so angry at what he was doing to her. My father and I argued. I wanted him to stop, but he insisted it was what she wanted."

Alex moved again, the splintered chair leg now resting beneath her thigh. "She wanted to save you from the hell of immortality."

"Immortality?" He laughed at the ceiling. "I wasn't given that power. I couldn't heal. I had no superior senses. I was weak like my father. I hated him for creating me. I hated him for killing my mother."

"She died?"

"She was *murdered*!" Ronan's frustration echoed off the stone walls.

Alex could barely breathe. "Your father was a kind and gentle man. He offered vampires salvation."

"Look at you? You call the life you have salvation?"

"I didn't want to be a vampire. I was pulled into this world without my consent. Glenn saved me from the monster who left me for dead. I will never blame him for

completing the transformation. But I never wanted this life.”

Ronan squatted in front of her and stared into her eyes. “Look at me, Alexandra. *Really* look at me.” With a vicious growl, the vampire within him was unleashed.

This close, with his fangs hanging in her face and the fires of hell burning in his eyes, she recognized the vampire that had possessed her dreams for thirty years. “You? But that can’t be. The monster that attacked me was no more than fifteen. You wouldn’t have aged.”

Ronan squeezed her chin. The unexpected spike of pain burned hot behind her eyes as he dragged his tongue up her cheek. With a sharp hiss of air, he filled his lungs with her scent. “The night my mother died I ran from the house.” His voice was hot in her ear. “I was angry and alone. I wanted to kill. To feel the power of the vampire. You were a student of my father’s. So young and weak. I recognized you in town and I followed you to the tavern. I waited patiently until you left and I took you. Dragged you into the woods and drank greedily. You were my first. A vampire never forgets his first.” His fangs grazed her neck just above the scarf. “I figured I’d killed you. Imagine my pleasant surprise when I returned to South Kenton and found you alive. My sweet Alexandra.”

He had turned her. She no longer thought about the professor or Glenn. Ronan needed to burn for bringing her into a world she hated. Alex let the hatred fill her and with all the years of rage behind it, she swung the splintered leg of the chair up toward Ronan’s chest. With explosive reflexes, Ronan wrenched it from her fingers and threw it across the room.

“Stupid woman. You have no idea who you fight.” Ronan stared down at her, his features easing back into a mask of human contempt.

“No. I don’t know.” Alex closed her eyes in apparent defeat. She would not let Ronan get away with what he had done to her—to the others. Keeping him in the cellar while the tavern blazed above them and left him without an escape route was her only chance to make him pay. She inhaled slowly. “Tell me how.”

“How? How did I age? Why didn’t you recognize me? Why didn’t my *own father* recognize me when we worked together at the university?”

Alex nodded and forced herself to meet his evil gaze.

“I went high into the Rockies. They live there, you know. Small clusters of them feeding. Living as pure vampires are meant to live. I trained with them. Nearly six years I learned their ways, aged and grew strong. The night of my twenty-first birthday, when the moon was full, she came to me. The leader of the clan. A female vampire so ancient and powerful, no man challenged her position.” Ronan’s long fingers splayed across Alex’s cheek. “Her skin was white as ivory, glowing in the moonlight.” His hand slid down her chest and squeezed her nipple with such force she gasped. “With tits so ripe and full I greedily filled my hands.”

Ronan ground his erection against her thigh. Disgust rolled the acid in her belly.

“I took what she gave me. With the ardor of a grown man I loved her. And as my pleasure filled her, she took me. With great fangs of power, she sucked my blood. Then offered me hers and made me a full vampire. Have you ever loved a man that way, Alexandra?” His thumb dragged across her lip, slicing it with his nail. “Your teeth buried in his flesh, giving him power while his cock is buried in you?”

Alex’s eyes narrowed and she frowned, cold revulsion shivering through her body.

“Oh, don’t look so disgusted.” Ronan grabbed her hair and wrenched her neck to the

side, tugging the scarf away with the other hand. "Reese has done it to you. I smelled him on you the minute I entered the room. And the scarf was just a little too obvious." He pulled her to her feet as he stood. "Does he know what you are?"

"What I am?"

"A two-bit tramp who is neither human nor vampire?" He shoved her away and she landed hard on the floor. "Won't he be surprised when he finds your charred remains here in the cellar?" Ronan lifted his nose, the smoke filtering down the stairs. "And now the final fire is set. The professor. Glenn. Now the winery. Months of work are finally finished." His hand absently churned the air. "Fires are such wonderful things. They bury so much evidence." He began pulling papers from the briefcase. "This is the last of my father's research. Glenn found it when I could not. My father ruined my mother's purity by convincing her to become something less than the powerful vampire she was. You and Glenn did the same with your blood wine. After tonight, these blights will be eliminated and balance will be restored to the vampire population." He held the paper up with the evidence of her involvement. "I thought about giving this to Colton. But it really does absolve you of any culpability. We can't have that if we want him to believe you started the fires.

Something above them exploded. Surely the fire department had been alerted. Reese would come, run into the flames and rescue her, like he had done with Glenn. But once again, it would be too late. At the thought of him, sadness poured into Alex's hollow chest. She wasn't sure when the man had stolen her heart, but it belonged to Reese as surely as the reaper was whispering her name. Alex refused to cower at his beckoning. "You won't get away with this. Reese will hunt you down and destroy you."

"Colton and his team from RISEN?" Ronan laughed. "They will never suspect the one they seek is hidden right beneath their stuck up noses. I came to South Kenton to finally avenge my mother's death. Imagine my surprise when I discovered vampires who did not feed. I killed them." He knelt beside her, running his hands over her body. She was too weak to fight the intimate touch. "But your winery is a closely guarded secret, Alexandra. Many are loyal to Glenn ... and you." He palmed her crotch and lifted his fingers to his nose. "I couldn't infiltrate their ranks until I joined RISEN. Imagine my surprise when I found it was you fermenting the blood wine."

"What makes you think I won't tell Reese all of this?"

Ronan pressed his mouth to hers, crushing her lips against her teeth before pulling back with a sigh. "Because, my sweet love, you won't be alive when he arrives. Anymore than the puny humans I fed upon. Fires are wonderful creatures. And since there is no one else to save you..."

Ronan was right, of course. Both the professor and Glenn had each tried to save her.

She wondered if Paul Morgan had known his son was the cause of her tortured life. The questions at her initial interview for his drug experiment would have corroborated the timeline. After all Ronan had shared, Alex suspected the professor had specifically chosen her. Perhaps Paul believed saving Alex would atone for his son's brutality. Glenn had simply pulled her out of death's arms, believing a vampire's life was better than none at all. Now Ronan had taken them both from her. Tears welled in her eyes and slipped down her cheek.

Ronan stood and walked to the doorway leading into the cask room. Blue light flashed from his fingertips. "I understand you don't actually burn to death in a fire. The

smoke and heat will kill you long before the flames reach you.” A loud rush of wind came from the adjoining room. “My father’s education actually came in handy. The chemical combination I have developed ignites in air and burns wherever it lands. There will be no evidence of an accelerant when the fire marshal investigates both deaths.” He looked at Chris on the floor and then at her. “But of course I will tell them you died in your own fire.” He snatched up the broken chair leg. “Now, now, there is no reason to cry, Alexandra. It will all be over shortly.”

Ronan misunderstood her tears. She didn’t weep for her own life, but for those whom she had loved and he had stolen from her. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. Alex was too weak to move. In reality, it was her desire to become human that had killed her. Whether she died at Ronan’s hands now or in six decades, her mortality had been her choice.

Ronan arched the wooden stake high over his head. She refused to flinch from this final blow to her heart. Without those she loved, there was greater pain he could inflict upon her. She would not beg Ronan for her life. Alexandra Flanagan intended to die with her dignity intact.

In disbelief she watched him shatter the bulb above her. Without a word Ronan strode out of the room. He slammed the cellar door. The thunderous snick of the lock was the last thing she heard before the fires of hell erupted from the cask room.

Chapter Ten

The engine's lights pulsed through the streets of South Kenton, barreling into the night toward another structure fire. And not just any structure—tonight it was O'Malley's Tavern. No way this wasn't somehow connected with the professor, Glenn, and the rogue vampire. Reese's knee jumped. He was unusually wired tonight.

When the alarm rang a little after two AM, he'd been laying on his bunk trying to work through the puzzle. Pieces were clicking into place, but some key element was missing—and he knew it involved Alex. Their afternoon of mind-blowing sex had ended with her walking away. There had been something final in the way she had kissed him, turned her back to him and gotten into her car. He'd been too pissed at Josh and his outburst to analyze it when it happened.

When he'd driven back down the road, Josh had climbed into the car wet and angry. His friend had said nothing more about his suspicions. Josh had gone out of his way not to be alone with Reese at the station tonight. Obviously, Josh believed Alex was guilty of something.

Alex knew the professor—had even been to his mansion enough times to recognize the cat. All the vamps killed, it turned out, were regular clients of the winery. The humans who had died, save for the prof—had been sucked dry. Glenn was dead, his house burned and now the tavern blazed. There was no doubt the fires of the last three nights were related and the missing connection lay in adding up all the common denominators. Maybe Josh was right and his hormones were blinding him to the obvious answer.

The engine pulled into the dirt lot of the tavern, the tanker close behind. The fire had eaten up the right side of the building. Flames and smoke rolled out of the broken windows, sparks dancing in the freedom of the night. Liquid fire dripped down the side of the building and lay unfed in the dirt lot.

Reese jumped from the engine, gloves, mask, and helmet donned before he turned to grab the loops of the hose from the side of the engine. One car stood alone in the lot, but he didn't recognize it. It was well past closing time. The place should be empty. The dispatcher hadn't given them any information about possible victims.

"Colton, Harkness," Deputy Chief Carden called to them. "Rescue. Water will be right behind. With a car in the lot we need to see if anyone's in there. A quick sweep."

Wordlessly, he grabbed an axe, Josh the thermal imager, and they ran into the building. Flames engulfed the paneled walls to his right and twisted up along the ceiling. Thick smoke rolled just above their heads. The mirror behind the bar swam with the reflection of the fire. Bottles of liquor lining the wall behind the bar cracked in the intense heat, spilling their contents down the wall. The building was more involved than they'd first believed. There wasn't much time before flash over would occur and the whole room combusted.

"You start here. I'll search the back. If we need to, we'll both head down cellar." Reese's voice had that astronaut quality coming through the speakers of his mask.

Josh nodded and Reese strode purposefully toward the kitchen.

"Hello?" he called as soon as the door swung open. Flames hadn't yet reached this

corner of the tavern. Only smoke and heat warbled along the ceiling. Reese scanned the room, curious to see the charred markings on the wall. A kitchen fire he could understand, but the fire hadn't started here or it would be burning out. Someone had evidently doused the flames before the fire spread. He walked around the prep island, getting a closer look.

A body lay face down in front of the stove. Reese dropped the axe and rolled the man over. The wood protruding from Ronan's chest held him suspended in death. The kid had probably been following up on leads Reese had told him would best be left to him and Josh. *Stupid shit*. Obviously the rogue vampire, whoever the hell he was, had caught him unaware.

Without hesitation he pulled the stake from the guy's chest. Reese pushed off his face mask and helmet while he waited for the wound to close. Ronan's eyelids fluttered and he coughed. Air rushed into his lungs. "Ronan, it's Reese. You're going to be fine."

The fog of death receded from Ronan's eyes and he focused on Reese. "She's here. Watch out, Reese. She's dangerous." Ronan's fingers dug into the sleeves of Reese's bunker coat as he tried to pull himself to a sitting position.

"Stay put. Rest. We have a minute." Reese tried to calm the trembling kid. "Who? Who's here?" he asked, though Reese already suspected he knew the answer.

Ronan's gaze flew wildly about the room. Ronan coughed up blood while his body continued to heal. "Alex," he finally managed to choke out.

The name slammed into Reese's gut as solidly as a mule kick. Josh had been right. His erection had stood between him and the obvious truth. "Alexandra Flanagan?"

"I ... suspected her ... wanted to confront her." A coughing fit seized Ronan.

Reese rolled Ronan on his side. Coming back after death was a bitch. As annoying and reckless as he found Ronan, Reese felt bad for the guy.

"She ... she killed Chris," Ronan continued when he caught his breath. "I caught her in the cellar sucking him dry. Reese, I tried to stop her. But she's too strong. Too powerful." Ronan took a great gulp of air, his lungs filling without spasms. "She tried to kill me. Like all the others. She's the one. The rogue that's been burning the vamps..."

"Alex? You're sure?" Reese could barely push the words over his dry lips.

"You think I'd make something like that up?"

Reese supported him while Ronan struggled to sit up.

"I'm no liar. For chrissake, Colton, open your eyes! Put it all together like I did. One..." Ronan shoved a fist in Reese's face and lifted his index finger. "She was working on her doctorate with the professor. Two..." He thrust another finger in the air. "All the vampires killed and burned were her blood wine *clients*." He spit the last word out with venom. "Three. Obviously, she couldn't finish this without killing Glenn and burning down the winery. Damn it all, Colton!" Ronan slapped his hand down hard on the linoleum. Reese got the feeling he would rather have slammed it into his face. "You've obviously been fucking her, but you shouldn't let it get in the way of doing your job!"

Reese's hand shot out and fisted in Ronan's shirt. He yanked the man's face an inch from his nose. To hell with Ronan's pain. "My private life away from RISEN is none of your fucking business, Nason." He shoved him away, gathered his gear and stood. He couldn't bring himself to admit Ronan had a point. Hadn't Josh said the same thing? Was his heart blinding him to the facts laid out in front of him? "We'll get the job done. If Alex is the one, the tribunal will see to her trial."

Ronan jumped to his feet. "The woman needs to die! *You* need to finish this."

The effort brought on another coughing spasm, but Reese only stared incredulously at the kid. There was no way in hell Reese could mete out that kind of justice without a tribunal hearing—especially against Alex. Focusing his energy, Reese clenched his teeth against the angry vampire rising within. Ronan had pushed a little too hard. "I will get the job done." He replaced his face mask and helmet and headed for the tavern. "Chances are she's long gone by now."

"No. I'm sure she's down in the cellar." Ronan's declaration came out hard and clipped.

Reese turned back to him. "Why would you think that?"

"She spouted things about Glenn and the professor and distilling the blood wine ... something about tainting true vampire blood ... and breaking the code. How the hell would I know? She stabbed me! But I'm telling you, she's down there." His shaking finger pointed toward the cellar door. "You have to go down there."

If Alex was guilty, she needed to be brought to justice, that was true. What Ronan said needed to be weighed, measured and taken into careful consideration. But Ronan had wrapped Alex and the crimes into a neat package a little too quickly for Reese's taste. The vampire before him had definitely morphed from weak victim to impassioned juror at lightning speed. *Something* wasn't adding up.

The room next to them rumbled as the fire roared in victory. Instinct had Reese throwing Ronan to the floor and laying over him protectively.

"Harkness, you there?" Reese asked into the mic.

"The bar flashed over. Roof came down." He heard in his headset. "We can't get to you. Two hoses battling here. You need help?"

"Negative. Kitchen's clear. No one's here. I'll make a quick check of the cellar and head out the back."

"Ten four. We'll be there when this is under control," Josh said.

If Alex was indeed down there, Reese needed Ronan out of the way so he could talk to her alone. He stood and offered Ronan a hand up. "You're a stupid shit. You know that Nason?" Reese pushed the words out with laugh, hoping Ronan would think he believed his story. "Lucky, but stupid." He flicked the vampire's ripped shirt. "No one approaches a rogue vamp alone. You'll have a good story to tell at the next tribunal." He scooped the axe up from the floor. "Why don't you head out the back door and wait with the trucks? Things are heating up in the other room."

Ronan nodded and slogged out into the night.

Turning back to the cellar, Reese studied the scene again. Everything looked as it should. Walking down the stairs, he worked to focus on his job and keep his mind off Alex. He didn't want to think about those honey eyes searching out victims or that sweet smile luring vampires into traps. He couldn't believe those talented fingers could be used to drive stakes into their hearts or set fires. He hadn't been able to coax her fangs to graze his skin, let alone suck a human dry. No. Reese couldn't quite wrap his head around Alex doing anything but tending bar, arguing with customers, and warming his bed.

Training stopped him at the door to the wine cellar. Every muscle drew taut. A year of fighting the beast had honed his skills. Instinct told him it lived and breathed behind the barrier. He took off his glove and touched the door with the back of his hand. Hot. He checked the lights in his mask. Only one green light had gone out. Plenty of air to go

back for a line. But did he have the time? Getting water involved Josh pushing through the bar or dragging a line around back. If Alex—or Chris for that matter—were in this room, they had only him to save their lives.

The decision was made. Lives first. Structure second.

Reese hefted the axe and came down hard. The flimsy latch splintered under his strength. Dropping the axe, he barged into the office, thick smoke disorienting him for a moment. Fire roared from the back room, bottles of blood wine exploding as the flames devoured everything in its path. Chris wouldn't survive this, but if Alex were here, as long as she hadn't been burned, forcing air into her lungs would save her. She would be his priority. Reese convinced himself saving Alex was the only way to get answers, but deep in his soul he knew it wasn't the real impetus for wanting her to live. She'd crawled into his bed and wormed her way into his heart for chrissake. He deserved to know if he'd been used.

Dropping to his hands and knees, his eyes cut through the murky smoke. He saw the silhouetted forms tucked under a heavy canvas tarp beneath the desk. He pulled it free and found Chris cradled in Alex's arms—neither of them moving. Deep holes cut through the pallid skin of Chris's neck. Lucky shit. He had died mercifully at the hands of a vampire. He hadn't suffocated in the toxic fumes of hell that had consumed Alex.

Chris was beyond saving. But if he acted quickly Alex still had a chance.

He rolled Chris away and gathered Alex in his arms. For someone who killed without remorse, Alex's face still showed the tears that had streamed through the soot on her cheeks. It made no sense. If she had killed Chris and plunged the stake into Ronan's chest, why would she be locked in the wine cellar? Pieces of the puzzle clicked into place in rapid succession. The picture formed in quick, methodically steps.

Ronan had joined RISEN shortly after the killings had started. He'd been transferred to Reese's team at Ronan's request. Ronan had been present at the university fire and Glenn's fire for sure. Reese suspected when he went back through the records, Ronan would be connected to all the victims in some way, including some association with the professor. He'd bet his balls Ronan had called in the fire and somehow staged his own murder.

The kid had been goading him upstairs. Knowing Reese cared for Alex, Ronan had tried to get him to strike the final blow that would finish whatever hellish mission Ronan Nason had begun. Alex had been his final target. Reese processed all this in the time it took him to stand.

Ronan had tried to take Alex from him. Anger rose and filled him with heat, pulling the vampire from his slumber. He needed to get Alex out of the fire and give her air. Ronan would not claim another victim. "To hell with you, Ronan Nason."

"No, Colton. The fires of hell are waiting for *you*."

Reese turned to see a fireman swinging his axe at his throat. The move was intended to decapitate him—a sure kill for a vampire. But Reese dropped to the ground with Alex, somersaulting into a shoulder roll to move them out of its path. The axe grazed his shoulder, cutting through the bunker coat and sheering away his radio. It had come close to Alex's head. Hatred pushed rational thought aside. He shoved Alex's body against the far wall and came back up with lightning speed. Fangs long, eyes piercing the darkness, Reese spun and roared above the clamor of the fire. "No more vampires will die."

"The traitorous bitch is human, you idiot." The axe swung and missed again. "You

can't save her." The helmet and air tank read Harkness, but the voice coming through the speakers on the mask wasn't Josh's. It belonged to Ronan Nason. Reese had no time to wonder what the crazed vampire had done to his friend or what he meant about Alex. He simply needed to stop him.

"She's vampire. She. Will. Live." Reese jumped high, intent on tackling Ronan, but the vamp anticipated the move and flew at the same time. They clashed in mid-air, coming down hard on the cement floor. "You've done something to her." Reese pushed the mask and helmet off Ronan's head. Even a vampire couldn't breathe toxic smoke for long.

An explosion from the cask room sent hungry flames through the door. The fire leapt and tasted the beam on the ceiling above. Happy to have found new fuel to feed its voracious appetite, flames ran in wild joy along the old wood.

In the confusion, Ronan swung his fist and connected with Reese's ear. "I had nothing to do with it."

Sparks of pain shot through Reese's head, disorienting him. He loosened his grip and Nason scrambled for the mask.

"My father turned her human," Nason yelled.

Reese grabbed his foot and pulled. Ronan's fingers grazed the edge of the mask, but didn't quite connect. He kicked out in anger, but found only air. Nason flipped the air tank from his back and hurtled it at Reese, who deflected it easily. Heat and smoke were stealing Ronan's strength.

Poisonous air filled Nason's lungs and he shook in fits of coughing.

Reese stood and retrieved the axe, letting his anger fuel the hatred. If what Nason said was true, and Alex was human, the vampire had added the woman he loved to his list of victims. Reese stared down at the vampire, grateful the man had left him without a choice. There was no doubt Nason was the vampire they hunted; the one who had been killing his own kind and infiltrated the RISEN ranks in order to stay one step ahead of the investigation. The vampire tribunal would sanction the killing.

"I should not kill you so mercifully." Reese raised the axe.

"Taking my life will not save hers. Alex is dead to you, Colton."

With a mighty roar of contempt, Reese brought the axe down, ending the murderous reign of the rogue vampire.

Exhausted, he dropped the axe. Alex looked so lifeless curled against the wall. Flames fluttered above them. In moments, everything would combust. Without thought, he scooped up Josh's helmet and flung the air tank over his shoulder. Leaving them would be like leaving Josh in the fire. And no firefighter ever abandoned a comrade.

Gathering Alex close, he stalked from the office, slamming the heavy wooden door behind him. It might buy him the few precious moments he needed to save Alex's life. He laid her unresponsive body on the floor next to the stairs. If air would revive her, Reese couldn't chance taking the time to get her outside.

The yellow light in his mask flicked off, vibrating as the alarm screamed in protest. Still, he pulled it from his face, flipped the purge valve on the regulator to push the air out and pressed the mask to Alex's face. She didn't move. Didn't stir. Could Nason have been right? Had she somehow become human? Reese pushed back the fear and leaned into her ear.

"Breathe, Alex. Don't leave me alone." The vibration stopped and the alarm cut off

in mid wail. The fucking tank was empty. In desperation, Reese detached the hose from his tank and attached the mask to Josh's. Gently he covered her angelic features and waited. But even with the air flowing, pushing into her lungs, Alex didn't awaken. The air should have allowed them to heal. She wasn't burned. It should have been enough to revive her.

Reese fell back on his haunches in defeat. Alex needed something more from him.

He simply needed her.

Reese knew with absolute certainty he could not live another decade without her by his side. Hell, he wasn't sure the pain piercing his chest would allow him to draw his next breath.

He had no idea if she'd chosen to become human or—like her vampire self—it had been thrust upon her. At the moment it didn't matter.

Leaning over, he filled his nose, not with the smoke permeating her hair and clothes, but with the pure essence of Alex. The beast rose and Reese sank long fangs deep into her flesh, gorging on her sweet nectar.

Chapter Eleven

Six months later

"A little to the left." Reese yelled up to Josh from the dirt parking lot. A talon of moon hung high in a sky filled with stars. The chill autumn breeze ruffled his hair, carrying the earthy scent of the surrounding forest.

"Here?" Josh shifted the cumbersome wooden sign and centered it on the front of the newly renovated tavern roof.

"Yep, right there." Reese jumped to the roof with ease. Grabbing the power drill, he began to set the bolts. "We should be able to open the doors next week, right before Halloween like we planned."

"Guys at the station have been bugging me about getting the old watering hole back."

"Yeah, well, they're being a little impatient. It's not like I've ever renovated a demolished building. Let alone two. A little more help from them would have been nice."

Josh slapped Reese on the shoulder. "Right, like you really wanted people nosing around while you modernized the wine cellar downstairs. Somehow I'm thinking they wouldn't think much of your recipe."

Reese laughed. "Shut up and screw." He pointed to the pile of bolts beside him and the other drill. "With the barn finally finished, I moved in another load of pigs."

Josh looked at him thoughtfully. "You get weirded out being up at the farm?"

"Nah. Something about moving in there felt right. Like I was continuing the work Glenn started." Reese shrugged. "Besides, I've been enjoying experimenting with the blood wine mixture. I figure the new mix should yield a hundred bottles every couple of days. The tribunal's looking into setting up several more wineries." Reese set the last bolt. "By the end of the year every vamp in California will be able to live off Alex's blood wine."

They gathered the tools and jumped to the ground. Standing in the wash of the angled spotlights on the roof, they stood a moment and admired their work. "You think Glenn would have approved?" Reese asked quietly.

"Flanagan's Tavern," Josh said, reading the sign. "Yeah. He would have approved."

"You fools going to stand out there all night? There's plenty more work inside."

Reese stared at his wife standing in the open door. The lights from the new dining room silhouetted Alex's beautiful figure.

"Pull out the whips, why don't you?" Josh joked.

"You'd enjoy it too much, Harkness, and I'd never get you to finish anything."

Reese jumped over the three stairs and kissed her sweet lips. "You actually tell him about the flogger?" he whispered.

Alex swatted his arm and nuzzled his ear. "He was kidding, you idiot."

"Enough." Josh joined them on the porch. "Haven't you figured out that's the kind of stuff that got you in this condition in the first place, Alex?"

Reese splayed a hand over her protruding belly. If Josh weren't there, he'd fill his hands with her swollen breasts. "Shh, don't tell her that. She still hasn't figured it out."

He swept Alex into his arms. He had no idea the prospect of being a father would make him so happy. Obviously, Alex had been human enough to conceive. And though they had no idea how the smoke from the fire or her transformation back to vampire had affected the fetus, they were choosing not to worry about it.

“I was hoping to get lucky tonight.”

The End

About the Author:

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A Walk on the Wild Side

Julia Devlin

Chapter One

Abby Simmons slammed the door to her Honda Civic and started the depressing trek to her front door. Home on her thirtieth birthday by seven-thirty. Well, didn't she just live an exciting life?

"Hey Abby," Luke Marlow's gorgeous head shot up over the bushes separating their houses and she about jumped out of her skin.

"Don't scare me like that!" she exclaimed, while trying to calm her pounding heart.

From behind the shrubs, her neighbor rose to his full six-four. She gulped. Of course, he was shirtless, his toned firefighter muscles gleaming in the fading evening sun. He gave her a wide smile and the deep dimple on his left cheek winked at her. "Sorry."

Unbelievably good-looking, the big jerk had thick dark brown hair and hypnotic, matching eyes. She practically salivated every time she saw him. He'd lived next door for a year and it had taken her six months of run-ins before she could talk to him without stammering like an idiot. To make matters worse, he always treated her with the utmost respect and pathetically like a kid sister. While Luke may be a menace to other women with his bad boy ways, he was nothing but nice to her.

Dimple still on full display, he asked, "How was the birthday dinner with your parents?"

She wrinkled her nose. What was there to say about dinner with the folks? "No big deal."

"The big three-o—you stopping home before heading out on the town for a wild night?"

Ha! Her wild nights consisted of watching *Lost* followed by *The Daily Show* before heading off to bed. "Nope, I've got to work tomorrow."

He gave her a grin he probably reserved for returning lost kittens to their elderly owners. "Saving your celebrating for the weekend, huh?"

If the women she'd seen traipsing down Luke's sidewalk in the early morning were any indication, Abby was fairly certain Luke's weekends consisted of non-stop sex romps with a couple of orgies thrown in just to keep things interesting. So conveying her boring weekend plans of going to a movie with her best friend Jane tomorrow night was out of the question. As a birthday bonus she got to pick the movie, big friggen whoop. With considerable sarcasm, she said, "You know me, one party after another."

He ran his hands over his washboard stomach, wiping away the dirt that clung to his perfect body. *Hell, if she got to touch that, she'd cling too.* "Good for you, but remember what I told you."

"Yeah, yeah..." She parroted his favorite line back to him. "Stay away from guys like you." At thirty-three, Luke treated her like a much older and wiser brother. It made her want to jab him with a sharp object, just to get him to pay attention. They were practically the same age for God's sake.

The second he'd moved to the quiet tree-lined street, nestled on the outskirts of Chicago, she'd known he'd never give her more than a passing glance. The treatment she received was exactly the treatment she expected from a man like Luke. Still, the knowledge grated. She began walking up the steps, wanting to get as far away from this miserable conversation as possible.

"Good girl," he called after her. "Happy Birthday."

If she could flip him off without looking like a lunatic she would, instead she just waved and shut the door behind her. Slumping against cherry wood, she sighed with relief. With her fantasy man blocked from sight, if not from mind, she shook her head.

This sucked.

Here she was, a thirty-year-old accountant, bored and dissatisfied with her life and no clue how to fix it. She threw her purse on the foyer table, kicked off her sensible pumps, and padded into the living room. From the front window she could see Luke attacking his bushes with a weed whacker. Her breath caught at the sight of him. The man was to die for. She hated him. Based on the woman he dated, one thing was crystal clear—he went for wild, and she wasn't it.

Sick of her own thoughts, she walked from the window to the refrigerator to get water. When she peered inside, a bottle of readymade margarita mix caught her eye and she stared at it. What the hell. She pulled it out, grabbed the tequila hidden way back in her top cabinet, and a glass with ice. She'd have her own party.

An hour later, her muscles loose, she felt pretty damn good. Tequila did wonders for your mental perspective.

Thank you, Jose Cuervo.

So she was thirty and destined for a life on the straight and narrow. Who cared? There were worse lots in life. Acceptance was the key. And she'd be fine with it, really she would, but just once she wanted to be wild, to have a little adventure. Didn't she deserve something fun and exciting? Some fond memories to relive in her old age?

An idea pricked at the back of her mind, and she sat up straight, her heart pounding in her chest. Luke Marlow would be fun. The man looked like he knew his way around a woman's body. Didn't she deserve one wild fling with a man who knew what he was doing before she settled into life with a guy that kept his socks on during sex? A flutter of excitement, mixed with hope, licked in her belly. This could work.

As immediately as the thought came, she dismissed it. He'd never go for it. She'd never be able to seduce a man like him in a million years. Feeling deflated, she settled back on the couch and took another un-lady like slug of margarita.

Wait a minute... her mind insisted. With her limited experience she didn't have the skill to seduce him, but propositioning him might work. Appeal to him as one friend helping out another. Like asking him for a neighborly cup of sugar, but with orgasms. He liked sex. He had enough of it, and why not with her? She was tired of sitting back and letting life pass her by. She'd turned thirty today. The time had come to get what she wanted. And she wanted a wild, no-strings attached fling with Luke Marlow. The worst thing that could happen was he'd say no and she'd never be able to face him again. Big deal.

The liquid courage racing through her blood in the form of tequila spurred her to action. Before she could change her mind, she hopped off the couch only to glance in the mirror across the room. She frowned at her reflection. She couldn't go over there like this. With her brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, no makeup, and dowdy work clothes, she looked more like a candidate for librarian of the year, instead of a sex kitten. If she waited, she'd lose her nerve and her buzz. With no time to lose, she'd make do with the meager clothes in her closet.

Time to take action.

Downing the rest of her drink, she slammed the empty glass on the coffee table, and

raced up the stairs, giddy with excitement.

She was going to proposition Luke for sex.

And she didn't plan on taking no for an answer.

Chapter Two

Luke plopped down on his couch, beer in hand, and pressed the power button on his remote. *Sports Center* on ESPN filled the flat screen and he stretched out, ready for some R and R after the war he'd had with the weeds. Just as he was getting comfortable, the doorbell rang. He shot an annoyed glance at the door. Not in the mood for a solicitor, he ignored it, but the damn thing rang again. Persistent sons of bitches. Screw 'em, he shifted his attention back to the screen.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

What the fuck? Pissed now, he sprang up off the couch ready to give his unwelcome visitor hell. He stalked over to the door, and flung it open, eager to tell the person off.

The words died on his lips. Abby Simmons stood before him, a bottle of margarita mix in one hand, *Jose Cuervo* in the other. *Ah hell.* He couldn't yell at sweet little Abby, he'd scare the poor girl to death. He plastered a friendly smile to his face, determined to be polite, despite the intrusion. "Hey Abby, what's up?"

"Hi, can I come in?" she asked.

He frowned. Never, in the year he'd lived here, had she stopped over. It was one of the things he liked best about her. He studied her, thinking her eyes looked a little glassy. Alarm bells rang in his head, but he pushed them aside. She must need something. He stepped aside, gesturing her in with a wave of his arm. "Sure, come on in." As she walked she swayed a little. His frown deepened. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's great. I brought drinks." She weaved a little more as she made her way into the foyer and he narrowed his gaze on her. *Shit, she was drunk.* Great, just what he needed—an intoxicated female on her birthday. When she'd gotten home, she seemed a little depressed, but it never occurred to him she'd end up here. She must want someone to drown her sorrows with, and since she'd already started on those margaritas, he was the closest person within walking distance. That was Abby for you, responsible even while liquored up.

What harm could it do to humor her? She'd always been a good neighbor. He shut the door and trailed after her. "It appears you've already started on those drinks, little girl."

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled the kind of smile that made his instincts go on high alert. "You may not have noticed, but I'm not a little girl."

Before he could respond, she plopped down on the couch and rubbed the seat cushion next to her. Familiar with the move, he stifled a groan. Drunk and horny, a damn lethal combination. He liked her, but number one—she was a nice girl, and number two—she lived right next door. If she had an itch she'd be getting it scratched by someone else, because he did not play stud service to lonely women looking for a walk on the wild side.

He took a seat on the chair across from her, and put his elbows on his knees, ready to nip whatever crazy idea she had in the bud before she embarrassed herself too much. He focused his attention on her and she stuck out her bottom lip in a pout.

He blinked. When did she get those pink, glossy lips? He scowled and surveyed the rest of her. The Abby he ran into in his front yard had her brown hair tied back, no

makeup on, and sensible clothes. The Abby sitting across from him had a tumble of shoulder length waves, a pretty pink flush across her high cheekbones, and a full mouth. Not drop-dead gorgeous, but damn nice. He glanced down and immediately wished he hadn't. The skintight jeans she wore showcased a killer set of legs, while the black spaghetti strap T-shirt revealed a perfect set of breasts he'd somehow failed to notice. His scowl deepened when he realized she wasn't wearing a bra. In his jeans, his cock went rock hard, and he tore his eyes away from the all too tempting view. Who would have guessed she'd be sporting such an unbelievable body under all those conservative clothes?

He shook his head. It didn't matter what assets she'd been hiding, it didn't change who she was. A nice girl. He didn't *do* nice girls. The women he dated were wild, uninhibited, and uninterested in strings. End of story.

Now, he needed to concentrate on getting her the hell out of here before one of them did something they'd regret. To his surprise, he found himself wanting to give her a taste of what she was asking for. Not that he had any intention of acting.

Putting on his calmest expression, he asked, "What can I do for you Abby?"

She giggled like a sixteen-year-old. "Funny you should ask."

Not wanting her to voice anything she'd be embarrassed by, he switched topics. "How much have you had to drink?"

"Enough to go after what I want." She gave him a long meaningful stare. "But not enough that I don't know what I'm doing."

Gut tightening, he stifled a groan. *Whatever you do, don't ask.*

He faltered. Maybe he needed to approach this from a different angle. Obviously, she had sex on the brain, but she had no idea what sex with him would be like. Good girls never did. Once she knew the score, she'd high-tail it right out of there. In the light of day, she might feel awkward, but he could cajole her out of that easily enough.

For now, he'd scare her straight.

Liking his plan, his muscles relaxed and scooping up his discarded beer, he leaned back into his chair. He caught her big brown eyes and gave her his best come-on stare while raising the bottle to take a long drink. She managed to hold the gaze for fifteen seconds before her eyes slid away and her cheeks blushed a pretty pink. This was going to be a piece of cake. He lowered his voice. "What do you want, Abby?"

She darted her attention back to him before peering past him. "Um... well..." She cleared her throat, and straightened in her chair, a determined expression taking up residence on her face. "The thing is, I'm thirty now ... and well... I'm sure someday I'll marry some nice man, but the thing is, before I do, I want to experience something ... different."

"So, you want to take a walk on the wild side?" He figured he'd help her cut to the chase. The sooner he got this over with, the better. The combination of her innocence, pretty face, and killer body made her a lethal cocktail. Far more tempting than her bottle of tequila would ever be. Unable to remember the last time he'd been around a woman with this much inexperience, he found her a real turn on.

She bit her bottom lip and uncertainty flashed over her face for a fraction of second, only to be replaced by a stubborn tilt of the chin and shoulder-straightening resolve.

"Yes, I have some fantasies..."

Time to shock her before this went any further. "You want to know what it feels like

to get fucked properly, is that it?"

Her eyes went wide as saucers. Damn, didn't she realize she telegraphed every thought and feeling she had on her face like a neon sign?

She shook her head and her hand fluttered to her throat. "That's one way to put it."

"And how exactly can I help you with this?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and her cleavage almost fell out of her damn top. He shifted, trying unsuccessfully to make his jeans more comfortable.

"Well ... you ... look like you know what you're doing."

"Thank you, I do."

She swallowed hard. "I was wondering..." She stopped. Shook her head, stiffened her spine, took a huge gulp of air before saying on a rush, "...I was wondering if maybe you wouldn't mind sleeping with me to teach me a few things."

His cock was so hard it started to pulse beneath his zipper. Fuck! Right at this second he wanted to push her onto the couch and make her come six ways till Sunday. That would be very wrong. While keeping his expression blank, he asked, "So you've chosen me to fulfill your sexual fantasies?"

On her cheeks were twin spots of red. "Yes."

"What kind of fantasies are we talking about here?"

"Um ... well, I can't say them out loud."

Surprised laughter burst from his chest before he could stop it. She frowned, and he held up a hand. "I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you, it's just that you're so..." he searched for the right words. "...cute and sexy."

Her whole face lit up like the Fourth of July.

After he got through this strange turn of events, and he worked her out of her embarrassment, he would sit her down and have a long talk about being more guarded. This kind of innocent sexual curiosity would land her in the wrong hands for sure.

Not if you get there first. Appalled at the thought, he squashed it like a bug. She wasn't for him. Some other lucky guy would get all this hot eagerness.

In a voice filled with wonder, she asked, "You think I'm sexy?"

"Yes, very." And now the time had come to burst her bubble. "The thing is, Abby, how do you expect to fuck dirty, if you can't even talk it?"

Instead of bolting, like she should, she appeared thoughtful. "I hadn't thought of that." To his horror, she stood up from the couch and sauntered over, working her hips in a seductive sway. God help him, because he needed every ounce of restraint he possessed in order to do the right thing. When she stood in front of him, she said, "You could teach me. I'm a fast learner."

He'd just bet, but he wouldn't be the one to teach her. He clenched his teeth in restraint against her considerable charm. Unhinging his jaw he took a deep breath.

"You'd be better off starting with someone a little more low key."

"I don't want low key, that's why I came here."

At eye level, he had a clear view of her unbelievable breasts, and he had to tear his gaze away. Time to get back under control. "I like things hard and rough, while you are sweet and soft."

Her brown eyes glazed over. "I've never had hard and rough." She dropped to her knees. Shit, she was seducing him. He was supposed to be better than this. She went in for the kill. "I want it."

He needed her gone. Now! In real danger of losing control and doing something stupid, he said the first thing that popped into his mind, "I'll tell you what. You go home and think this through. Tomorrow, after the margaritas have worn off, if you still feel the same way, you let me know." He'd never hear about this again. Hell, after this, he'd be lucky if he she ever spoke to him again.

"And then what?" she asked, with breathless anticipation.

He leaned in close, so their mouths were barely touching, and took a gamble. "I'll fuck you as hard and as rough as you can take it."

Chapter Three

After his workout and a shower, Luke sat down at his kitchen table with his first cup of coffee. Again, his mind wandered to the Abby situation, as it had most of the morning. What to do about it? He figured the best course of action was to go over to her house tonight and ease any awkwardness she might feel. In his experience, letting a woman stew with unexpressed emotion never led anywhere good. He'd make sure she knew he hadn't taken her seriously and they go back to being friendly neighbors. While she may be uncomfortable for a bit, he'd treat her as he always had, and she'd forget about it eventually. No harm, no foul.

Despite his honorable intentions, he couldn't help wondering what might have been if he'd taken her last night. It had been so long since he'd experienced that kind of innocence, or had that kind of reaction to a woman. What would it be like to teach her about all that pent-up sexuality she'd been carrying around? He shook off the offending thoughts. It didn't matter, because she wasn't an option for him. A girl like Abby deserved to be taken home to the family, and he didn't do involved.

To be a firefighter and have a strong relationship took a lot of work and right now, he didn't have the energy for both. So he remained unattached.

He popped open his laptop, powered up, and clicked the icon for email. Taking another sip of coffee while it loaded, he glanced down at the morning paper.

When he returned his attention to the screen, he froze, mid-sip. Abby had sent him an email entitled, *About Last Night*.

How did she even have his address? In the back of his mind, he vaguely recalled them exchanging information about a month after he'd moved in. He checked out the time, she'd sent it at eight thirty in the morning, well after the alcohol had worn off. It must be to explain. He clicked it open while taking another sip of coffee—and started to choke. When he stopped coughing, he started reading.

Luke,

Yes, this morning I woke up with the appropriate mortification, but in the shower it hit me ... the margaritas just forced me to think about what I wanted and to take action. Turning thirty has made me realize, if I'm not careful, I'll go my whole life playing it safe. I don't want that. So, I'm taking a deep breath, and crossing my fingers you're a man of your word. I'd like to take you up on your offer.

I thought about what you said, and I can try to talk dirty and tell you what I want, but I'm not sure how to do it without sounding stupid. I figure I'll start with email and work up from there. I made a list for you. I was going to make comments to justify myself, but no one likes a long email, so if you have questions let me know. I'm going to start with the basics.

Here goes nothing:

- 1. Have an orgasm.*
- 2. Have really great sex.*
- 3. Oral sex, both kinds.*
- 4. Public sex.*
- 5. Go to a sex club.*

6. *Be tied up.*
7. *Get spanked.*
8. *I'm not sure what this one is called, so I'll go with "Be handled."*
9. *Role playing.*
10. *Rape fantasy (tacky, I know, but I can't help what I think about.)*

This is so embarrassing. This list is getting kind of long, so I'm going to stop now. I hope this isn't too tame for you. I'm sure you can think of other more imaginative things. If you aren't too bored after this stuff, I'll leave the rest up to your discretion. Maybe you'll have some ideas about what I'd like.

So that's about it, I guess I'll wait to hear from you then. Oh, and one more thing, just to reassure you, I'm not looking at this as a long-term thing, I'm well aware you're not into commitment. So no worries on your part.

Thanks for being so neighborly,

Abby

P.S. I'm on birth control pills and have a clean bill of health from my last physical, just to get the tactical stuff out of the way.

Too tame?

She thought this list was too tame? What kind of things did she think he did? Not that he hadn't done every single thing on her list—but tame? Who knew the conservative woman who'd been his neighbor for the last year harbored these kinds of fantasies? Shit, his cock already pulsed in his jeans. How much of a turn-on would the actual doing be?

He re-read the email again. Definitely serious. If he didn't take care of her list, she'd find someone else. Someone who may not treat her the way she deserved. He could justify all he wanted, but he wanted to give her every damn thing on this list. Decision made, he got up and found her business card he'd thrown into his junk drawer.

If Abby Simmons wanted to experiment, she'd picked the right guy.

* * * *

The second Abby clicked the send button she wanted to snatch the email right out of cyber space. All morning she'd bounced back and forth like a ping pong ball vacillating between humiliation and being proud of herself. On one hand, Luke probably thought she was a sexually repressed psycho, but on the other, at least she was taking action instead of sitting around moping and feeling sorry for herself.

The phone rang and her heart leapt into her throat. She shook her head and raised her eyes to the ceiling. *Get a grip.* Luke wouldn't call. In exasperation, she picked up the phone. "Abby Simmons."

"I'll pick you up at eight."

The blood rushed to her ears and a wave of dizziness flooded through her. *Oh my God, it worked. Luke was calling her.* She opened her mouth but no words came out.

"Still there?" His deep voice traveled over the phone line, sounding mildly amused. Her whole body broke out in goose bumps, while she squeaked out, "Yes."

"If you want to back out, this is your last chance, because once I ring the doorbell you're mine."

"No." Her cheeks felt as though they were on fire and her blood pressure had jumped at least fifty points in the last thirty seconds.

"No, you want to back out, or no you don't?" The cocky assuredness of his tone told

her he already knew her answer.

She cleared her throat. "Where are we going?" There, she got out a sentence.

"That's my job to worry about. I have other jobs in mind for you..." He let the sentence trail off, leaving her to speculate on his meaning.

A million ideas ran through her mind like a runaway freight train. Unable to bear the suspense any longer she breathed out, "Yes?"

"I want your hair down. Like last night, I want it to look like you've just been fucked."

Cheeks flaming, she let out an involuntary gasp.

He responded with a low, wicked laugh, before saying, "I'm not done."

"Oh," came her tentative reply. She'd never dreamed he'd take her up on her offer and now the reality made her nervous.

"I want you poured into the sexiest black dress you can find, you're not allowed to cover that killer body of yours anymore."

She glanced down at the plain white button-down blouse she wore. Killer body? Had he gone insane?

"And I want your pussy bare, nothing but smooth skin."

She sucked air into her tight lungs and her hand flew to her chest. Already her nipples were puckered into tight points and her panties felt damp. She couldn't help wondering if she was in too deep. Luke Marlow was so out of her league.

His low voice came over the line. "You want to back out now, little girl?"

The "little girl" crack snapped her to attention. Determination to go through with this crazy idea had her straightening in her chair. Afterwards she'd have to move but it would be worth it. He'd already turned her on more with this phone call than during sex she'd had with the couple of guys she'd slept with. "No, I'm ready."

"Good, then I'll see you at eight."

Chapter Four

Luke rang Abby's doorbell at eight sharp and waited. He'd expected her to back out all day long, but she hadn't. Much to his relief. Unable to remember being this excited about going out with a woman, he jingled his keys in his pocket while he waited.

The door swung open.

Holy fuck!

Where had this woman been hiding? Abby had followed his instructions to a tee. A tumble of golden brown waves fell to her shoulders in a wild tousle, highlighting her high cheekbones and big brown eyes. How had he never noticed how pretty she was?

As he'd requested, she wore a mid-thigh V-necked sleeveless dress so tight it may as well have been painted on. The stiletto heels she wore made her legs appear endless, and the deep V of the dress revealed her pushed up and almost overflowing breasts. That body, Jesus Christ!

She gave him a bright smile, her eyes darting on and off of him like skittish fawn ready to bolt. "Hi. I'll grab my purse."

"Wait a minute." He stepped through the door and shut it behind him. Her throat worked and she blinked up at him. Wanting her to be fully aware of what she was getting into, he slid his hands around her waist and pulled her close, aligning their hips so she could feel his erection.

Her eyes went wide as saucers and panic flashed across her face. "Oh my."

Before she could give too much thought to running, he slanted his mouth over hers. He didn't give her a chance to take it slow. He took possession and kissed her hard. She went stiff as a board. He skimmed his fingers along her back, pausing to stroke when he reached bare skin of her shoulder blades, before continuing upwards, to grasp her neck. Her lips opened under his, and he tightened his hold on her waist to anchor her in place, as he plunged his tongue into her mouth.

In a split second, her whole body melted into him. Like a starving woman, she attacked him, her tongue tangling with his. Delicate fingers climbed up his chest, to clench the fabric of his shirt in an effort to bring him closer. She rose on to tiptoes and tilted her hips into his straining erection. Between her heat and barely contained passion, he got sucked right in.

Moaning, he walked her backwards until she hit a wall. He kicked her legs apart and slid his hands over her ass. She hooked one leg over his hip and ground the head of his cock against her clit. A whimper came from deep within her throat. Goddamn, he wanted to devour her. He needed to stop. Get back in control. Their first time couldn't be up against a wall before they'd even left the house. An exercise in considerable restraint, he released her mouth and stepped away, his breathing ragged.

Her lids fluttered open to reveal glazed eyes. Her chest heaved as she sucked air into her lungs. Between her bruised mouth and color high on her cheeks, everything about her screamed ready. He gritted his teeth. Cock aching with the need to pound into her, he ran his fingers through his hair. She deserved better, and he intended to give her it to her.

"Let's go."

* * * *

Twenty minutes later they were seated in a back u-shaped booth at *Sabatino's*, and Abby was still trying to get her bearings. One touch of Luke's mouth and she'd been panting with need. No other man had kissed her like that, claiming her as his own. It had been thrilling. Unfortunately, the mood had turned, because the car ride to the restaurant had been filled with a tense silence. Maybe now that he'd gotten physical with her, he didn't find her attractive enough to go through with their plans.

The waiter came over and Luke ordered a bottle of wine, without consulting the menu. Unable to stand the silence, the second the waiter walked away she took a deep breath and plunged. "Luke, if you don't want to do this please don't feel obligated. We can forget this whole thing ever happened. I promise I won't bother you again."

His dark brows came together in a V and he frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Her hand fluttered up to her neck and she toyed with the delicate silver chain at her throat. His gaze dropped to follow the movement. She cleared her throat to get his attention, and when his eyes returned to hers, she said, "You don't seem very happy. And while I appreciate your desire to help me, I can understand if you don't feel attracted enough to me to ... um ... consummate our friendship." While remaining outwardly composed, inside she cringed. This had to be one of the top five most embarrassing moments of her life.

"Not want you?" His brown eyes narrowed in what looked like anger. "How in the hell could you think I don't want you?"

"Well ... um ... you've been kind of sullen since you kissed me."

His face smoothed over into understanding. He moved to the center of the booth and tilted his head. "Come over here."

"What?"

"Come here—now." The commanding tone of his voice combined with his unwavering gaze made her think he meant business. A flutter of nerves kicked up in her stomach but she scooted next to him. Putting his arm along the back of the booth, he leaned in close to her, and whispered in her ear, "That was just about the hottest kiss I've ever had."

She felt a hot flush spread over her.

"Despite what you think, I normally don't fuck my dates before I've even taken them to dinner. But I had a hell of a time resisting you." He picked up a lock of her hair, letting the strands fall between his fingers, causing tingles to race along her neck and down her back. She stared at the white tablecloth, unsure of what to do.

"Look at me, Abby!"

She complied because she felt powerless not to. He pressed his forehead into hers. "I'm sorry about the car, but I didn't trust myself not to jump you between the house and the restaurant."

She swallowed hard, trying to grasp the knowledge that Luke Marlow considered her desirable. When had that happened? The length of his hard, muscled thigh warmed the bare skin of her leg, making her buzz with excitement. For now, he was hers. She could do whatever she wanted with him. Not many women were given the opportunity to live out their fantasy, and she was bound and determined to enjoy every minute of it. No matter how uncomfortable.

The waiter returned with their wine, breaking the mood, as he went through the

tasting and pouring ritual. When he left, Luke said, "Let's talk about this list of yours."

Her cheeks flamed and she buried her face in her hands. "Do we have to?"

"Yes." His tone rang with amusement, but he put his large hand on her neck and began to rub, before lowering his voice to a seductive pitch. "I'll be nice, just this once, and spare you having to go through the whole thing. Right now I'm most interested in number one. Have you ever had an orgasm? Or have you just not come with a man?"

"You're really going to make me go through with this? Can't you..." she looked up and waved her hand in the air. "...just take care of it and call it a day?"

He laughed. "Nope. Sorry, Abby."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

He cocked a brow at her, his one dimple flashing as he smiled. "That's easy, because you asked me to."

She stared at him in incredulity. "I most certainly did not."

"Oh yes, you did."

"I never said anything about wanting to play true confessions."

The pad of his thumb traced along her bottom lip. She froze, forgetting to think as she became lost in the intimate, and somehow erotic, gesture. With each swipe, a little tingling jolt shot straight to her womb. When he dropped his hand back down to caress her shoulder blades she wanted to groan in frustration. Why'd he always stop just when she was getting somewhere?

"You said you wanted to be handled."

She furrowed her brow in confusion. She'd meant sexual aggressiveness. What did making her talk have to do with it? She opened her mouth to clarify, but he stopped her dead with a hard kiss.

His tongue curled around hers and he held her still. A wave of desire crashed over her and she started to go under. Eyes closed, a low whimper left her throat, her fingers gripped his muscled forearm. He broke the contact, and said against her lips, "What I say goes." He punctuated his remark by claiming her mouth once again, only to pull away and rumble, "The second you sent me that list, you gave up control to me." He kissed her again, hard and aggressive, showing her exactly who was boss. When he ripped his mouth away she practically fell into his lap. "When I ask you something I expect an answer, not questions."

Heat and desire licked through her body. An unfamiliar ache took up residence deep in her belly, but before she could wonder about it, his mouth crashed down on hers, and there was no more thought. The possessive invasion of his tongue leaving no doubt in her mind how he was handling her. He released her abruptly. "Now tell me if you've ever had a fucking orgasm."

With trembling hands, Abby took a sip of wine and attempted to compose herself. This must be what her mother had meant when she'd said to be careful what you wished for. However disconcerting, she was getting to live out one of her deepest fantasies. Her body practically vibrated from wanting him. Already, her nipples were diamond hard, and the fabric of the black thong she wore damp. She'd never been this turned on, and he'd barely touched her.

After sending the email this morning, she'd promised she'd to go unabashedly for what she wanted. Come hell or high water. She took a long sip of wine and put her glass back down on the table. While she stared at the salt and pepper shakers, she said, "I don't

think so.”

“If you’re not sure, then you haven’t.” Luke’s voice sounded soft, understanding.

She squared her shoulders, tilted her chin, and turned to face him, expecting to see something akin to pity in his expression. Instead, his brown eyes were so hot on hers, she felt her cheeks flame. As she sucked air into her tight lungs, his rich, masculine scent left her dizzy. He leaned in close and flicked his tongue along her bottom lip, before whispering against her mouth, “Trust me Abby. I find everything about you sexy as hell.” She wanted to wrap her arms around him, climb on top of him, and prove she was as sexy as he claimed.

The waiter chose that moment take to their dinner orders, but Luke sent him away since their menus still lay unopened on the table. When he picked up the cream-colored menu and handed it to her, she swallowed, trying to work some moisture into her dry throat. “I don’t think I can eat.”

The wicked smile he bestowed on her made the blood race through her veins. “You’d better, because you’re going to need your strength. We’ll be knocking at least three or four more things off that list tonight.”

“Oh!” She bent her head to study the entrée selections with elaborate concentration, but little interest.

A couple minutes later the server returned, and after they placed dinner orders Luke returned to the subject at hand. “Have you ever tried to get yourself off?”

Still embarrassed by this personal line of questioning, she shrugged.

“That’s not an answer.”

“Fine! A few times, but it didn’t work.”

His hand slipped onto her bare knee and she jumped in surprise. With his thumb stroking the inside of her leg, he asked, “What did you do?”

“What do you mean?” His hand moved higher and her thoughts scattered like marbles on pavement.

Into her ear, he whispered, “Did you rub your clit?”

His hand moved higher skimming along her sensitive skin. Palm gripping the curve of her thigh, he lifted her leg and slid it onto his lap. The position left her open and vulnerable. She went hot all over. Shallow breaths were all she could manage as his fingers came to rest so high on her inner thigh he touched the seam of her panties. His tongue ran along the edge of her earlobe. “Tell me.”

“I think so.” Between the heat of his palm and the slow stroke of his fingers, her eyelids drooped.

“Get up and go the bathroom and take off your panties.”

Her eyelids flew open. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, and when you get back to the table hand them over.”

A rush of heat, panic, and anticipation raced through her.

His wicked, knowing eyes studied hers. “I think it’s time we got started on that orgasm.”

Chapter Five

Luke drank his wine while he waited for Abby to return to the table. His fingers itched to discover if she'd made good on his last demand. Although right now, he doubted his ability to make it through dinner. He couldn't remember the last time he had wanted anyone this badly. Everything about her drove him right out of his fucking mind. The bathroom door, which his eyes had been glued to, opened and she emerged. While she weaved her way through the tables, he let out a groan. He couldn't wait to get his hands on her. Other men shot her sidelong glances out of the corner their eyes in obvious appreciation, but she didn't have the first clue how hot she was and paid no attention. Unlike the other women he dated, who were always on the lookout to see who was watching them.

The anticipation of burying his cock in her had him aching. He hid his smile when she slid into the booth and kept a good foot and a half of distance between them. The contradiction between the advance and retreat of her sexuality made him want to rip her clothes off and pound into her right at the table. He crooked a finger at her. "Come here."

She shot him a wary glance but moved a fraction of an inch in his direction.

"Closer."

Again she moved, but not where he wanted her. In a warning tone, he said, "You looking to get that spanking crossed off your list the first night?"

Her eyes widened and blinked before she sidled right up next to him. He murmured, "Good girl."

She swallowed hard, before lifting her glass to her lips with only the slightest of tremors. She took a huge gulp of the *Zinfandel*, her throat working as she tried to swallow her nerves along with her wine. When she put the goblet back on the table her little chin tilted up. He admired her determination, despite her obvious uneasiness. He leaned in close, the heat of her body warming his skin right through his clothes. The scent of her swirled around him, the mixture of sweet, spice, and sex drove him crazy. "Hand them over."

She exhaled a hard breath of air. "Fine, here." Her tone rang with exasperation. She raised her eyes to the ceiling and shook her head. Despite the fact that she clearly found him unreasonable, she pressed black silk panties into his waiting palm. He wrapped his fingers around the fabric, already damp to the touch. He closed his eyes. Jesus, what a turn on. Already this wet and he hadn't even touched her. He put them in his pants pocket for safekeeping. The blood rushed straight from his head to his throbbing cock. He wanted to drag her out of the restaurant, and fuck her in the parking lot. But this was about Abby's pleasure, not his own. Even if it killed him, he'd give her everything she'd asked for and more.

Instead of running his hand up her thigh as he knew she expected, he put an arm around her shoulder and toyed with her hair. She glanced up at him, confusion written across her face. He just smiled. He wanted her focused on craving his touch instead of pursuing an orgasm.

The waiter delivered salads he didn't want. Abby stared down at the plate in front of her with great interest, but made no move to pick up her fork and actually eat. Luke ran a

finger along the curve between her neck and shoulder. "You look very fuckable. Every man in the room had his eyes on you."

"You don't have to say that." With her big brown eyes she glanced up at him and gave him a tentative little smile. "In case you haven't figured it out yet, I'm a sure thing."

Laughter burst from his chest. Her dry, self-effacing wit made her so different from any other woman he'd been with. He found it refreshing and irresistible. "If you don't believe me, get up and walk across the room again, but this time pay attention."

"You're crazy." She waved off her hand.

She thought he was being polite. She had no idea how she looked. Not that he couldn't understand somewhat. Until yesterday, he'd never paid much attention to her appearance. She'd always seemed so conservative and reserved. How wrong he'd been.

He gripped her jaw and turned her to face him. When she averted her gaze, he commanded, "Look at me."

When she met his stare, he said, "Abby, you have no idea what a total turn-on you are. I'm not doing you a favor." His hand fell away while he flicked his tongue along the seam of her lips, before dipping to her neck to let his mouth skim along the hollow. Her breath hitched and he licked the rapid pulse beating as fast as his own. "You walking in on me last night and your email this morning are the hottest things I've experienced in a long time."

When he pulled back, her expression filled with a mixture of disbelief and what looked a lot like hope. When she spoke her voice sounded soft and unsure. "I'm sure you're being nice." When she smiled, it didn't quite reach her eyes. "But it's still working."

To make her pay attention, he nipped her bottom lip. She gasped. Her cheeks flushed. The grip she had on the fabric of his white dress shirt tightened. He grabbed her hand and pressed her open palm to his hard aching cock. "Does this feel like I'm being nice?"

Wide innocent eyes flew to his.

"I've been like this since you opened your front door." He moved her hand up and down the length, gritting his teeth when she gave a tiny squeeze. "You're driving me crazy. When I get you home I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll feel it in your throat."

* * * *

The waiter delivered the entrees and removed their untouched salads. Abby took the distraction as an opportunity to remove her trembling fingers from Luke's erection. She stared unblinking down at the plate of pasta in front of her. What had she gotten herself into?

As though they'd just been discussing the weather, he gestured to her plate. "Eat something."

Picking up her fork, she scooped up a piece of the creamy penne, but couldn't bring herself to lift the food to her mouth. She didn't think she could swallow. Nerves and desire, mixed with hope swirled like a vortex throwing her from one emotion to the next. She hadn't expected this. She'd expected him to get down to business, not wine and dine her, while teasing her within an inch of sanity.

Luke's hot palm slid over her knee. She jumped, her fork falling from her hands and clattering to the plate. She closed her eyes as his fingers played with her overly sensitive

skin. Uncertainty forgotten, she began to throb, her womb tightening to a clench in anticipation of being filled.

In her ear, he whispered, "So sweet." Moving ever higher, he pulled her legs apart. The heat from her body had to be searing his hand. She barely breathed, as his hand came to rest at the top of her inner thigh. Torn between wanting to pull away and thrust into his touch, she remained still as a statue. "Do you want me to touch you?"

Unable to speak, she nodded.

"Tell me."

She couldn't. A low hum started deep in her belly as he stroked over the damp flesh of her thighs. Aching, she wanted to scream at him to touch her but her throat wouldn't work.

"I want you to say it. Ask me to touch you."

"Why?" Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the edge of the table.

"Because I want it, and so do you."

If he didn't do something soon she would burst into flames. On a hard exhale, she said, "Please touch me."

In an instant, his hand covered her mound. A low groan sounded from deep in his throat. "You are so wet."

Seeking fingers traveled without resistance along her moist flesh. She flushed with need and embarrassment as she practically dripped into his palm. "I'm sorry." Hips jerked involuntarily as a slow ache began to build.

In a slow steady circle, he began to rub. A jolt shot through her as her muscles clenched. "There is nothing to be sorry about. The wetter the better."

Nothing she'd experienced before had felt like this, like a spring coiling tighter and tighter inside her. He kept up a smooth rhythm and she put her head in her hands, shutting her eyes. Unable to help herself, she moaned.

What was he doing?

"Feels good, doesn't it Abby?"

"Oh God, yes."

His fingers sank inside her pussy. She shuddered, her head falling back, as her fingers clutched the white tablecloth. The spring coiled ever tighter, until it became a pinprick of focus. Along her neck, his hot ragged breath warmed her already overheated skin. He whispered, "You're going to come tonight. More times than you can fucking count."

All coherent thought scrambled as his fingers began to pump. Harder. Faster. She bit her lip to keep from crying out.

"So hot and tight. You're going to be a screamer. You're already fighting to keep quiet, and I've barely started." His low, hoarse voice sent shivers down her back.

Her inner muscles clung to his fingers as he pulled out, leaving her with a feeling of emptiness. Before she could stop herself, she moaned, "No, don't stop."

In response, he placed two fingers on either side of her labia and squeezed up and down over her soaking wet pussy. Intense pleasure blasted through her. Her mind went blank. The invisible spring tightened to the point of breaking.

"I can't wait to sink into this hot wet cunt."

"Oh God," Her fingers tightened on the table and she clenched her jaw. What was he doing to her? It was almost unbearable; she wanted to pull back, but then he squeezed

tighter. Her head fell back, she moaned and her hips jerked up.

In a harsh voice, he said, "Look at me."

Her head snapped up. The fierce expression on his face made her shudder. When he plunged his fingers deep within the tight canal, she gripped his forearms to hang on. On a ragged breath his hand stilled. He studied her face, his eyes intense and searching. Finally, he asked, "Is this the way you want your first orgasm? Cause you're about thirty seconds away from exploding all over my hand."

In confusion, she stared at him, not understanding why he stopped when she'd been so close. He kissed her lightly. "This is your show, Abby. I just want to make sure you want the first time you come to be in the middle of a restaurant."

She blinked, coming back from all that good lust. Now that the torment of pleasure had abated, she realized she wanted to be private. She shook her head.

His hand slipped from under her dress and he smoothed the fabric back into place. "Good, I want you some place you can scream. I think you've restrained enough for one lifetime, don't you?" He traced her jaw with his thumb. "Why don't we take this to go?"

Chapter Six

Luke fumbled with his keys as he tried for the third time to unlock his front door. He needed to take a deep breath and slow the fuck down.

Finally, the key slid into the lock and it clicked open. Relief, mixed with anticipation, flooded through him. He grabbed Abby's hand and pulled her roughly into his foyer, causing her to stumble next to him.

Slow down. He ran his fingers through his hair. She'd nearly driven him crazy in the restaurant and he'd hoped the car ride back to the house would have cooled him down. But no such luck, he was still desperate to get in her. He took another deep breath. He needed to be in control here so he could do right by her. Provide her with an experience she'd never forget. He turned to face her, his control shaky at best. "You ready, Abby?"

She nodded, looking unsure and excited all at the same time. He wrapped a hand around her neck and let his thumb trail over her bottom lip. She had the softest mouth. He leaned down to kiss her slow and deep, to put her at ease, but the second his mouth landed on hers she plastered herself along the length of his body.

Good intentions and reason flew right out the window.

On a low growl, he backed her up until she hit the foyer table. He lifted her up while yanking her dress over her thighs before setting her bare-assed on the tabletop. Without breaking contact with her hot mouth, he pushed the stretchy material of her dress down over her shoulders to her elbows, exposing her breasts.

She wrapped those killer legs around his waist and squeezed, her thighs drawing him closer. His mouth ate at hers, devouring her. Breath ragged, she clutched his waist, and arched her hips. He ground his erection against her clit. She gasped and writhed under him, driving him crazy with her unrestrained lust. His intention had been to take her upstairs, strip her naked, and lay her out on his king-size bed, but he couldn't think about anything but touching her.

Releasing her mouth, he drew in a harsh breath, peering down at her. His hands covered her black lacy demi-cut bra, his fingers running along the smooth flesh spilling over the cups. He traced the seam, resting on the clasp for a fraction of a second before flicking it open. Peeling away the fabric, he revealed the most fantastic set of breasts he'd ever seen. His cock throbbed just looking at them. Unable to tear his eyes away, he ran his fingertips over her puckered nipples and her back bowed. When he rolled them in between his thumb and forefinger, she gasped, "Oh God."

He repeated the motion, but this time with a little more force and she bucked against his straining erection. Lifting his gaze, he took in her flushed face and dazed expression. "You're gorgeous."

Her eyes flew open. "No."

"Yes, you are." He pinched her nipples her head fell back and she moaned her approval.

He increased both his tempo and his pressure until her neck arched and she chanted, "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

Never had he been with a woman so responsive and unrestrained. "When we're alone, I want these fucking perfect tits on display at all times." He squeezed the hard buds

and held. She moaned and ground her pussy along his shaft, so wet he could feel his pants getting damp. He gritted his teeth as his fine thread on control continued to fray. “Understood?”

When she didn’t answer, he released one nipple and smacked her ass hard. “Understood?”

Mindless, she whimpered, and rolled her hips. “Yes—Do it again.”

Holy shit, he was done.

The muscles in his jaw worked as he fought the urge to shove his cock into her wet cunt. He pinched her nipple at the base, squeezing as he pulled up to the tip, repeating the stroke as he slapped the top curve of one firm cheek. Her mouth fell open and she murmured, “Yes, again.” The blood raced through his veins, his pulse hammered, and he closed his eyes for a moment to fight for restraint. When he opened his eyes again, he heeded her wish.

Over and over, in synchronized movements, he spanked and pulled and pinched, until he panted, every muscle taut from the effort. She reared and let out a little scream, her head fell against his shoulder. His balls tightened. His cock throbbed and dripped pre-cum. Never had he wanted inside anyone more. He needed to get control. He stopped, staring past her at the caramel-colored wall.

On a breathless moan, she cried, “Noooo!”

“Shhhh, you’ll like this. You are going to come your brains out Abby, right here, right now.” As fast as he could, he stripped his shirt over his head and unbuckled his pants, releasing his straining erection. Grasping the leaking head between his thumb and forefinger, he squeezed to suppress the need to come. It didn’t do much good.

When he regained some restraint, he slid his hands along her soaking wet pussy. He clenched his jaw as she jerked into his palm. He spread her labia open, stepping between her legs and encircling her waist. He nestled the head of his cock against her clit and tugged her hips until she pressed firm enough to feel his every stroke.

Her head thrown back, her eyes closed, she seemed lost in her own little world. Needing her to pay attention, he grabbed her neck, lifting her so they were eye level. “Look at me Abby.”

Her lids snapped open and confusion flashed across her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I want you to squeeze those gorgeous thighs around my waist, and rub that wet pussy along my cock.”

“But ... but ... aren’t you going to...” Her voice trailed off.

“Oh, I’m going to fuck you, Abby. But not yet.”

She blinked, chewing on her full lower lip. She tried to shift away from him, but he held her so tightly all she managed to do was stroke the hard bundle of nerves along the underside of his cock, causing them both to wince from the pleasure. “Oh!” she said, as the light of comprehension dawned.

He gave a strained chuckle. “There you go.” Cupping her breasts in his hands, he leaned down and licked the tips as she bucked against his cock. *Fuck!* This may not have been his brightest idea. He abraded her nipples with his tongue, teasing her with a light suction that had her pumping her hips. When her nipples were nice and wet, he lifted his head and murmured, “Don’t let go.”

He released his hold around her waist, and pinched both nipples hard, pulling them up and away from her body. She screamed and jerked, rubbing her swollen clit along his

shaft. "Come on, work those hips."

Jaw clenched, the pressure in his balls built as her slippery cunt milked him. Her nails dug into his lower back hard enough to leave marks tomorrow. Releasing his hold on one of her breasts he reached down and smacked her ass.

"Oh God, yes," she moaned. "More."

He slapped her again. She went wild, bucking her hips, rubbing her clit frantically along the head of his cock. The pressure built, the base of his spine tingled, and he fought to drag air into his tight lungs.

She chanted, "Harder ... please ... harder."

He lost his fucking mind and delivered five, hard, rapid blows to her ass until she broke, screaming as she came all over his cock.

*

Abby shattered into a million pieces as her pussy convulsed and spasmed with such force she shook, a cry ripping from her throat. Luke growled. Before she had time to come down, he pried her legs from his waist. The room swung as lifted her up and pushed her to the floor. Then his head was between her thighs, his tongue buried deep in her pussy. With a jerk she raised her hips and yelled, "No!" Her skin was so sensitive his touch bordered on pain.

In response his mouth clamped around her clit, the suction hard and ferocious. Terrifying pleasure shot through her, and she tried to move away from his voracious mouth. He grunted and flung an arm across her hips, holding her in place, feasting on her as though he wanted to devour her. She squirmed and writhed, the fabric of the carpet rubbing along her back. Unable to decide if she wanted him to continue or stop, she yelled, "Oh God," as her back bowed off the carpet.

Not letting up his assault on her clit, he plunged two fingers high and hard in her pussy, pumping in time to the movement of his mouth. Out of nowhere, a violent orgasm tore through her. A low guttural moan escaped as her hips ground against his face.

Before the last wave had even crested, he moved up her body, giving her no chance to rest or get her bearings. He kissed her hard and rough. She could taste and smell herself everywhere. Breaking apart, they both panted for a long moment, their bodies slick with sweat. The sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbones combined with the dark passion in his eyes made his face primitive and dangerous. He rose to his knees, tilted her hips, and drove his huge hard cock high inside her. She screamed at the force as her pussy was filled with a pleasurable pain.

"God, Abby you're so tight." He stilled, the corded muscles along his neck popping out. When she'd adjusted and the pressure eased, he began to move. He circled his hips, grinding his pelvis over her ultrasensitive clit on the upstroke. She arched, jolting from the unexpected ache. To her shock, her body began the now familiar upward climb. Over and over, he rotated his lean hips, picking up his tempo until he was moving hard and fast. She strained below him, frustrated because she wanted to touch him, but was unable to because her dress still restrained her arms. Pleasure, sharp as a knife, made her muscles clench around his thick cock. He shifted, moving over her so his chest abraded her nipples. "Harder," she said on a breathless cry.

He complied, driving into her tight canal. The sweat dripped off their bodies and he panted into her ear. "Come again, Abby."

"I can't."

“Yes! You can.” His voice harsh above her. “Tell me to fuck you.”

Her body pulsed at his words, and she moaned. His hips pistoned fast and furious and she rose to meet his punishing thrusts.

He rolled them over so she sprawled on top of him. A hard sharp blow landed full on her ass. She reared up, needing more. Through a clenched jaw, he ordered, “Say it. Tell me to fuck you.”

The words wouldn’t leave her throat. He delivered a rapid series of slaps that caused a fiery burn to race along her skin. Throwing her hips back into his waiting palm she slammed her pussy down on his cock. He groaned. “God, yes, work that cunt.”

The pressure began to coil tighter. He smacked her again. “Say it.”

Her body clamped around him and the words ripped from her throat. “Fuck me!”

He rolled her back over, and pounded into her, driving her body high and higher until she shattered. Her vision blurred and dimmed as a climax crashed over her body in never-ending waves.

Above her, Luke let out a guttural shout, his hips pumping, while his hot cum filled her.

Spent, and exhausted, they collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Abby stared up at the ceiling, her chest heaving as she panted for breath.

She was in so much trouble.

Chapter Seven

The following evening, Abby tugged at the short frayed jean skirt. Twisting around, she examined herself in the mirror. The tight white, v-necked, sleeveless top showed plenty of cleavage. Was it too revealing? She wasn't used to dressing this way, she felt exposed. The woman at the store had said it was the perfect outfit for the causal birthday party Luke was taking her to. She pivoted in front of the mirror, checking herself from all angles, second guessing her choice. She blew out a hard breath. This fretting was not helping the nerves fluttering in her stomach.

She still didn't understand why Luke asked her to go. She'd refused at first. It seemed prudent to keep their relationship focused on sex. She didn't want to risk getting emotionally attached to a man she couldn't have long term.

None of her many arguments held merit in his mind, and he'd refuted every one of her many excuses. Eventually, he cajoled her into going, and that had been the end of the discussion.

It had been the same last night when she'd tried to leave his bed and he'd refused to let her go. She didn't understand it. She'd always heard men couldn't wait for a woman to leave. But when she'd tried over and over again to go home, he'd just held her down and fucked the thought right out of her.

Sex with Luke was nothing like she'd anticipated. The man had been insatiable, driving her to one orgasm after another. Just as he'd promised at dinner, he'd knocked out half her list in one night. She flushed, her belly dropping to her toes as she remembered him whispering into her ear, "You're so dirty, Abby." She'd protested, but he'd just laughed. "You are no good girl." After her performance of uninhibited behavior last night, she wondered if she might be just as dirty as Luke claimed.

One night with him made her realize just what her problem had been with sex all these years. All her previous experiences had been vanilla and tame and as Luke pointed out last night—"Sweet doesn't do it for you. You like the rough stuff. You just never met a man who could pull it off." He'd spoken the truth. When he spanked, pinched and pulled, taken her hard and deep, she went crazy.

It made her uncomfortable, how much she wanted him, the heights he drove her to. She didn't know if she could take it without losing her heart to him. Was she willing to pay the price to live out her fantasies? In the mirror, she stared at her reflection, her chin tilting up with resolve. She'd made a promise to herself to see this through. She would not run. When she'd sent that email, she vowed not to hide, to throw everything she had into the experience, to hold nothing back. If she lost her heart, so be it. He would only be hers for a short time. She would savor it instead of worrying.

The doorbell rang, startling her out of her thoughts. She gave herself another cursory once over, and flew down the stairs. Heart pounding in her ears, she swung open the door.

Propped up against the door frame, hands shoved into his jeans, Luke wore his most wicked smile, lone dimple on full display. In a black knit shirt that highlighted his lean muscles, he looked gorgeous and dangerous. Lascivious intent gleamed in his brown eyes, and her mouth went dry.

They stared at each other for a full thirty seconds before he swooped in and kissed her. Lips slanted over hers, he possessed her, claimed her, while his big hands roamed over her body. With a low growl, he walked her back through the doorway, kicking the door closed behind him. The blood rushed hot and fast in her veins and she plastered herself against him, rubbing along his erection. She did this to him, her—Abby Simmons.

He broke the kiss and said, “I’ve been dreaming about that eager little mouth wrapped around my cock all day.”

Without hesitation, she reached for the button on his jeans, released his straining erection, and dropped to her knees. She’d learned last night that she loved the feel of him throbbing and pulsing in her hand or mouth. Wrapping her fingers around his shaft, she squeezed. She licked the slit, running her tongue up and down the tiny opening while she raised her eyes to look at him.

He stared down at her, a dark feral expression on his face. With slow deliberateness, she ran her tongue from base to tip, and his eyes went dark and wild. He buried his hand in her hair and urged her forward. “Suck my cock.”

Without breaking eye contact, she took only the head into her mouth and created a tight, wet suction, while she swirled her tongue around and around. He moaned. “More. Take it all.”

On a deep swallow, she drew him in as far as she could. Her pussy clenched when he gave a shout. Last night, he’d complimented skills she hadn’t known she possessed, building her confidence. Now every sound he made filled her with a sense of empowerment.

With her palms, she cupped his ass to hold him close, bobbing her head along his rigid length. Their eyes locked. On a ragged breath, he said, “God, that mouth.” He moaned and pumped his hips, his hand fisted tight in her hair as he thrust. “Harder, faster, make me come, Abby.”

She sucked harder, moving down the length of him, before moving back up to flick her tongue along the slit. He lengthened and thickened in her mouth and a rush of anticipation flooded through her. Doubling her efforts, she created such a tight suction she had him groaning. She didn’t let up, just ruthlessly worked him, loving every minute of this power she had over him.

He bowed, shoving his cock deep in her mouth. “Fuucckkk!” he yelled, seconds before hot salty semen shot into the back of her throat. Greedy for the taste of him, she kept up her fast rhythm swallowing every drop while she sucked him dry.

He pulled out and leaned down to devour her mouth with his own. She vibrated with desire and his kiss further enflamed her aching body. Yanking her up from the floor, they broke apart, their breathing ragged. While he zipped his pants, he grinned. “I could get used to greetings like that.”

She laughed.

He swiped his thumb across her lower lip. “I had other plans in mind, but once you fell to your knees I was a goner.” He grabbed her by the shoulders held her away from him, running his hot gaze over her body. Her nipples puckered when he lingered at her chest and licked his lips. She’d never known her breasts were so responsive. No one else had ever paid such delicious attention to them. Until Luke, who acted like he couldn’t get enough. While in bed, he’d played with them constantly, using her sensitivity to keep her at the edge of need. She drew in a deep breath when he palmed her nipples and rubbed,

while he murmured, "You look good enough to eat."

His hands skimmed lower, over her quivering stomach, over the flare of her hips, down to smooth bare thighs. Reaching under the hem he glided his fingers up over her panties to slip inside. She cried out when he circled her clit before plunging his fingers deep within her pussy. His voice turned raspy. "Wider."

Not even a thought of disobeying crossed her mind as she spread her legs. He pumped, letting the heel of his hand rub her clit. The scent of sex surrounded her as she moaned and tilted her hips, seeking the hard pressure she needed to send her over the edge. Her back broke out in fine beads of sweat. She heard the wet sounds of his fingers driving in and out of her. The orgasm hovered just out of her reach. Her pussy clenched, and he stopped so abruptly, she swayed. Catching her balance, she scowled.

His hands rested on her hips and he laughed down at her. "Don't glare."

"What are you doing?" Her body buzzed, she'd been so close. Irritated, she blew out a puff of air.

"I love how your pussy is always dripping wet for me." Ignoring her question, his fingers slipped inside her panties again, dancing along her slippery folds to prove his point. Then he threaded his thumbs along the strings that constituted her underwear and pulled until they snapped. "You won't be needing these."

A sudden flair of panic spiked. What was he up to? Trying to play it cool, she asked, "You don't expect me to meet your friends with no panties do you?"

He tugged at the fabric between her legs and an involuntarily groan escaped her lips as he made sure to pull the fabric over her sensitive clit. The wicked smile he'd worn at the front door reappeared. "Yeah, I do."

"No." Even she had limits.

His nostrils flared, but his eyes flashed with heat. "Don't say no to me."

She cocked a brow. "No." While her voice rang firm, she couldn't deny part of her liked the idea of being naked with only Luke the wiser. Her pussy was so wet, she could feel the dampness on her thighs.

He growled low in his throat and lunged. She screeched and ran. She made it into the living room before a strong arm grabbed around the waist. She struggled, becoming more and more excited, while he encircled both her arms in a death grip and lifted her off the floor. Hot breath filled her ear as he dragged her down on the couch and turned her over his knee. When he yanked her skirt up over her waist, sanity began to prevail. No, even she couldn't do this. She protested, "Luke wait..."

A hard smack landed across her ass and she yelped. In a low harsh voice, he said, "If you're going to be a bad girl, you've got to pay the price."

Slap, slap, slap. The sound reverberated throughout the room. Pain, heat, and pleasure all mixed into one and she groaned, arching into his touch. Again and again, his open palm landed on her ass until they were both panting. He slid his fingers up and down her wet slit and gave a long, put-upon sigh. "This isn't working."

Her heart stopped. What did he mean? "Wh ... what...?"

"You like getting your ass spanked too much..." His voice took on a diabolical tone that caused shivers to run all over her aching body, her sudden anxiety disappearing. "...I have no other choice but to come up with a different punishment." He toyed with her clit, lightly stroking to drive her crazy.

"No, this is good." She moaned. God she needed to come desperately. How could

she have gone from never having an orgasm to this craving?

He laughed. "Oh, I know it is. That's my point." To her immense disappointment, he picked her up from his lap and deposited her onto the couch next to him. He ran his hands through his hair. When he stood and faced her, he gave her a long once over. "I was going to save this for later, but you've given me no choice." In confusion, she watched as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a small black box, which he held out to her. "Open it."

Curiosity mixed with apprehension as she flipped the top open. Two silver balls lay nestled inside. She frowned. "What are these?"

His dark eyes drank her in. "Put them in."

"What?"

"Put them in your pussy." He made the proclamation as though it should be obvious.

"Why? What are they?" She couldn't fathom what purpose they could possibly serve.

His jaw clenched and he crossed his strong forearms over his broad chest. "Don't ask questions. Just do what you're told."

Desire sparked along her nerve endings. Maybe it was wrong, but when he talked like that it drove her mad with lust. While being ordered around wasn't exactly feminist of her, she couldn't deny it was a total turn on. In twenty-four hours, she'd turned into a sex maniac.

She picked them up and held the cool metal in the palm of her hand.

"One at a time."

She rolled one smooth ball in between her thumb and forefinger and it jingled. What could they possibly do? Without taking her gaze off him, she inserted first one, then the other. The flash of heat in his expression told her she was missing something key. He cocked one brow and commanded, "Stand up and come over here."

With utter care, she slid off the couch, but nothing happened. More confident, she took two steps. The balls clanged and a spear of pleasure shot through her. She jerked in response, eyes going wide, she stilled. Finally she understood how he intended to torment her. He crooked his finger, urging her closer. When she moved, they clanged again, hitting on a spot deep inside, and she grabbed on to his arm. "Oh God!"

He chuckled, low and deep, the sound reverberating through her creating just as much havoc as the balls nestled within in her. He ran his finger along her jaw and tilted her chin up. "You ready to go?"

Chapter Eight

Luke watched Abby from across the room as she talked to Anne, a wife of one the guys from the station. Her nipples were puckered into hard little points under her top, a continual reminder of her state of arousal. The desire to run his fingers along her surely slippery pussy gnawed at him. He squashed it down, wanting to drag out this torture for as long as possible.

To his surprise, she was by far the best sex he'd ever had. Hell, despite her innocence, she'd managed to teach him a few things. He liked her too. Last night, in between marathon sessions, they'd talked about everything under the sun from their families to politics. Luke couldn't remember having a better time both in and out of bed. In twenty-four hours he couldn't even remember what he'd thought of her before, or how he could have possibly missed the blatant sexuality lurking behind all those conservative clothes. She was funny, smart, and adventurous. What more could you ask for in a woman?

As if sensing his gaze, she turned and shook her head, raising her eyes to the heavens in exasperation. He knew the ben wa balls were driving her crazy. Just as he'd intended. He cocked one brow at her, while raising his beer to his lips and taking a long drink, his gaze locked on hers. Abby flushed a pretty pink, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. Even across the room, the chemistry between them sparked and threatened to burst into flames.

All of a sudden, her head snapped back to Anne, who must have said something to her, and the spell broke. He expelled a long breath, and wondered what he was going to do with her. She was like an itch that burrowed deeper and deeper under his skin.

"What's up?"

Luke shifted his gaze to his friend Trevor, who watched him with amusement. Hell, he hadn't even noticed his approach, he'd been so caught up in Abby. Luke shook his head. "Not much."

Trevor pointed his beer bottle in Abby's direction. "Sweet little thing."

"Yeah, she is."

"Where'd you find her? She doesn't seem like your normal type."

Luke took in her lean legs, his mouth practically salivating as he thought of what must be going on under her short skirt. "She's my neighbor."

Trevor chuckled and watched her with interest. "My neighbor is an eighty-year-old man with no teeth." He gave Abby a long slow appreciative once-over. "You're more fortunate."

Luke's muscles tensed fractionally, and he frowned. Trevor had a healthy appreciation for all women, and attracted plenty of attention with his Nordic good looks. The way he looked at Abby right now, like the big bad wolf come to eat Little Red Riding Hood, made Luke want to punch him. An unreasonable and unfamiliar response he didn't want to think too much about. Luke took a long draw off his beer bottle, shrugging one shoulder. He remained silent.

In a casual tone, Trevor said, "I met these incredibly hot twins last night. Redheads—natural redheads. What do you say? I guarantee a good time."

Luke's gaze slid to Abby. "Maybe some other time."

Trevor groaned. "Please don't tell me you've caught monogamy."

In the past, he'd tended to keep things commitment free. With Abby, he didn't know what to think other than he didn't want anyone else. He shrugged, "Just not interested."

Abby looked over at him again and she narrowed her eyes into thin slits. He laughed and crooked his finger at her. She shook her head. He gave her a sharp nod. Glancing around, she appeared to be gauging the distance between them. Chin titling up in that stubborn determination he'd come to recognize meant good things for him, she began walking slowly towards him.

He couldn't contain a grin when she came to a dead stop and closed her eyes for a second. The balls must have clanged together against her G-spot. Damn, this had been a good idea. When she opened her lids, she took a deep intake of air and began to walk again.

Finally, she stood next to him and he peered down at her flushed, perturbed face. He snaked an arm around her waist. "How you doin' there, Abby?"

Brown eyes glared up at him, but she couldn't quite hide the flash of heat. "I hate you."

Amused at her response, he couldn't contain a chuckle. "Don't say that. Aren't you having a good time?"

Trevor raised one blond brow and laughed. "A woman who doesn't fall at Luke Marlow's feet? I like you already."

She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted up at Luke before shifting her attention to Trevor. "I'm Abby, Luke's ... neighbor."

Trevor nodded and extended his hand, his blue eyes running leisurely over Abby. "Trevor."

She shook his outstretched hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Do you and Luke work together?"

Trevor nodded, holding onto her fingers a fraction longer than Luke thought appropriate.

Luke frowned. Shit, he sounded like his mother.

"And what do you do, sweet Abby? Besides being neighborly?"

A slight flush stained her cheeks. "I'm an accountant."

Trevor raised a brow, then tossed a surprised glance at Luke. "Not the first profession I would have guessed."

Something akin to confusion passed over her face, and Luke once again wondered about her self-perception. He couldn't figure out how a woman with this much unrestrained passion could be so convinced she was dull. Unlike other women who would probe further in hopes of eliciting compliments, she shrugged. "Not the most exciting profession, but it pays the mortgage."

"So how long have you two been neighbors?"

Luke interjected, "Since I moved in."

Trevor grinned. "Since you're just neighbors, you won't mind if I take Abby onto the dance floor."

"I mind," he growled. The statement came out much more intense than he'd intended. Luke tightened his grasp around her waist. A fierce stab of possessiveness knifed him in the gut. He frowned at the unfamiliar feeling. Trevor and he were good

friends, and he'd never minded before. So what made Abby different? It must be because he hadn't gotten nearly enough of her to satisfy him.

Trevor chuckled. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

Abby blinked up at Luke and he leaned down to whispered in her ear, "I'm not sharing this hot little body with anyone." She swayed a bit in his arms and he gripped her, pressing his aching cock against her stomach. "I don't think I can wait much longer for you."

Her breathing kicked up and she went up onto tiptoes to get closer, resting her hands on his shoulders. In a soft voice, she said, "Please..."

"Please what?"

"Fuck me."

His whole body vibrated with the need to pound into her, mark her as his. His fingers skimmed along the base of her spine. "Are you still wet for me?"

She nodded, her soft brown hair tickling his cheek. He breathed in her scent, that mixture of vanilla and spice. "Then come with me."

He pulled away and shifted his attention to Trevor's knowing grin. "We'll see you later."

Trevor laughed. "You always did have the devil's luck." He nodded at Abby. "Nice to meet you."

Not giving her a chance to respond, he pulled Abby through the crowd, walking slowly enough so she wouldn't drop the balls, but with enough purpose that no one approached him.

Blood pounded through his veins as he led her outside, in between two buildings and down a dark, private walkway. When they were far enough away from the people loitering in front of the bar, he pushed her up against the wall and slanted his mouth over hers. In an instant, she groaned and flung herself into the kiss. Their tongues tangled, and he grabbed a handful of hair to hold her in place while he wreaked havoc.

The need to possess her, to mark her, stormed through him. He crushed his body into hers, gripping her hips tight and rocking her along the length of his hard cock. "I need you now!"

She cried out, her back bowing. "Yes, now."

He'd wanted to take his time, to drive her crazy, but he couldn't slow down. He slipped a hand under her skirt and grunted in approval when he found her soaking wet. He hooked his fingers, fished the balls out, and let them fall forgotten to the ground. With his thumb, he circled her clit and she arched, driving his fingers deeper.

He growled in frustration. It wasn't enough. He needed primal—so she'd understand who she belonged to. He jerked away. She looked up at him, her pretty brown eyes filled with lust and confusion. He turned her around. "Hands against the wall."

Without hesitation she complied. He yanked her skirt up and smacked her hard on the ass. With a whimper she pushed back into his palm. His cock pulsed in response. He'd never met anyone who liked to be spanked as much as she did. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if she could come from that alone, but he'd always lost patience with his insatiable desire to fuck her senseless before he found out.

He unzipped his jeans, freeing his straining cock before he raised his palm and delivered several sharp blows on her creamy pale skin. When they were both breathing fast, and he throbbed so hard it bordered on pain, he positioned himself behind her. In

one thrust, he drove hard into her tight wet heat. She let out a little scream and came, her muscles squeezing him so tight he gritted his teeth to fight his own release. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice breathless.

He gave a grunt of a laugh. Only Abby would apologize for coming. Unable to delay any longer, he began long deep strokes, pulling out to the barest tip before plunging back. Her cunt tightened around him. She moaned. "More."

Any thread of restraint he had broke and he gripped her hips with both hands. He thrust into her with a brutal force that left him shaking. Over and over he pounded, sweat breaking out along his back as he relentlessly took her.

She began to tremble, her muscles tightening on his shaft. She screamed and threw her head back. Once again her orgasm squeezed his cock. The base of his spine tingled. He clamped a hand over her mouth, and said in a harsh rasp, "My pussy. Mine." He thrust high and deep, and claimed her the way he wanted to. "You belong to me."

He gritted his teeth, as another wave of climaxes milked his cock. She bit his palm. The base of his spine tingled and on a rush he exploded inside her. "Jesus Abby!" He groaned, while every ounce of cum he had spurted hot and fast into her with such force his vision blurred.

*

"*You belong to me.*" Abby tried to catch her breath and quell the shaking. What Luke had meant? Already past the breaking point when he'd staked his claim, her heart had answered back with a resounding yes. An answer she thankfully hadn't been able to voice because of his hand over her mouth. A flutter of nerves kicked up in her stomach. After only twenty-four hours she already had the sinking feeling she was in too deep.

She needed to remember they were having fun. Luke didn't do commitment, and he wasn't hers to keep. It must have been in the heat of the moment, he couldn't have realized what he said.

She listened to his labored breathing, while his big hands rested on her back. Their breathing began to slow. He pulled out of her sliding her skirt back down. When she heard his zipper, she turned to face him, a ready smile upon her lips. The dark, intense expression on his face startled her, and the smile faded. The flutter came back and her hand went to her throat. "Is everything okay, Luke?"

He curled a hand around her neck, tracing his thumb along her mouth. "What are you doing to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're killing me here. I already want you again."

She blinked hard. Was she actually giving Luke Marlow a run for his money? "So you're not just trying to knock stuff off my list?"

He laughed. "Yes, but I wasn't thinking about anything but you when I pressed you against the building."

She wanted to know more. When she'd sent him the email she'd decided she would go all out, hold nothing back, fear and all. On a deep breath, she asked, "It's not just my inexperience that makes me think the sex is pretty good?"

He frowned. "Pretty good? You call that pretty good?"

A hot flush spread over her chest and up her cheeks. "Well I don't have much to compare it to, but I think so. I mean, I understand you're used to much more experienced women—"

“Abby, the sex is fucking unbelievable.”

“Oh!” A thrill of pleasure made her tingle all over. “I thought maybe it was just me. You know...” She waved a hand. “...that this was par for the course for you.”

He shook his head and claimed her mouth in a hard possessive kiss, making her toes curl. When he released her, she swayed in her spot. “Look at me, Abby.”

She raised her gaze to meet his. In a deadly serious tone, he said, “This is not par for the course. I don’t know what this is, but par for the course doesn’t even come close to describing it.”

Relief flooded through her, making her muscles go soft as butter. “I’m glad.” She smiled up at him. “I’d hate to be the only one hanging out there.”

“You’re not. There’s only one thing I’m disappointed about...”

“What?”

He kissed her again and pressed his erection into her belly. “I wish I knew about your wild streak a long time ago. Think about how much fun we’ve missed.”

Desire ran fast through her veins when she thought of the night ahead of her. Like the temptress she’d always wanted to be, she snaked her hands under his shirt, up the smooth muscles of his stomach before she pinched his nipples. When he jerked and groaned she rubbed her hips along his erection. “I guess we’ll just have to make up for lost time.”

Under hooded lids he gazed down at her. “When we get home I’m going to tie you to my bed and make you beg me to fuck you.”

Another item from her list. Heart slamming in her chest, her stomach jumped in anticipation, and she could already feel the heat grow between her legs. “Okay, but I need to tell you one thing.”

He nipped at her bottom lip. “What’s that?”

“I’m never wearing the damn balls ever again. Those things are pure torture.”

Chapter Nine

One week later Abby pulled into her driveway and climbed out of her car, already excited to see Luke. Like a bad habit, her craving for him permeated all facets of her life. While in meetings, she found herself daydreaming about all the dirty, fantastic things they did together. At lunch with Jane the other day, she'd drifted off so many times she'd been forced to confess in order to explain her odd behavior. Her friend had seen Luke and was properly green with envy.

The second she slammed the car door, Luke's head popped out from behind the bushes—reminding her of the day their fling began. In one week she'd gone from a reserved woman who'd never had an orgasm to a “wildcat” as Luke liked to call her.

To her surprise, they'd spent all their free time together, both in and out of bed. In between their scorching sex, they talked, laughed, and watched TV. Smart, well read, and funny as hell—there was a lot more to Luke than his pretty face.

The baby in a big, close knit family, Luke had an older brother and three sisters. He'd followed in his father's footsteps when he'd become a firefighter, much to his mother's disappointment. According to Luke, his mom had finally breathed a sigh of relief when his father had retired only to have to start worrying again when he'd joined the department. Not that Abby could blame her. When he had been just her neighbor she hadn't thought much about his job other than from a fantasy perspective. After listening to the reality of his profession the first time he'd headed off to work, she hadn't been able to relax until his car pulled into the driveway the following day.

In turn, Abby told him about growing up with parents who were preoccupied with her troubled big sister. She'd told him how she'd spent her formative years never wanting to cause waves. How she'd struggled to be good, had been a model student, and had never rebelled so she wouldn't cause her parents any more grief. Up until she'd decided to take a walk on the wild side with Luke, she'd always played it safe, too afraid of becoming like her sister, to deviate from the straight and narrow.

In some ways, he knew her better than anyone and being with him made her feel alive in a way she never had. No longer burdened with the expectation of being the sensible one, she'd cut loose and for the first time felt comfortable in her own skin. She found it liberating and scary all at the same time. Abby kept trying to remind herself their relationship was temporary, but it was getting harder and harder to keep the hope at bay.

Luke gave her his bad boy smile and waved. “Hey Abby girl, I was just getting in a little yard work before you got—” he stopped abruptly. His gaze narrowed and darkened.

Taken aback, she asked, “What's wrong?”

He pointed at her with his shovel. “What are you wearing?”

Confused, she peered down at her outfit. “A dress, what does it look like?”

His jaw took on the stubborn line she'd begun to know so well. “I don't like it.”

“Well, too bad for you.” She began walking up her driveway, irritation in her every step. The big jerk. She'd bought this dress as a present to herself, kind of a coming out of hiding present. A form fitting black shirtwaist dress, it had tiny buttons running down the front. The pencil cut to the skirt fell to her knees and a three-inch wide belt accented her figure. She looked damn good. A fact verified numerous times during the course of her

day. If he didn't like it, that was his problem. She was through dressing for anyone but herself.

In one bounding leap, he hopped over the shrubs and stood in her path, blocking her from the front door. He grinned. "I see someone's feisty today."

With a warning glare, she sidestepped him, once again beginning the trek up her front walk. "Word to the wise, your tactics could use some work."

He grabbed her around the waist, hauling her back against his already hard cock. Did the man walk around with a perpetual hard-on? "Hmmm ... is that so?" He nipped her earlobe and an involuntary shiver raced through her. "It puts you on your back often enough."

"Ha!" She pried his hands off her stomach. With him touching her, keeping her cool tended to be difficult at best. Over her shoulder she tossed him a smile. "Arrogance will get you nowhere." She walked up the front steps and slipped her key into the lock. Behind her, the heat of his body radiated off him, warming her back. Already the lust began to pulse between her legs, making her wet. When the lock clicked open she strode through the door and tossed her work stuff onto the foyer table.

Luke kicked the door closed. Grabbing her arm, he spun her around and pressed her up against the door before kissing her breathless. His mouth ate at hers, like he couldn't ever get enough, his tongue tangling with hers so seductively she couldn't think. When he had her panting, he broke the kiss and whispered, "Maybe I should rephrase." He unhooked her belt and let it fall with a clatter to the floor. "You look hot as hell. I don't want the men at work getting ideas because you're driving them crazy." He pinched her nipples through the fabric. She gasped, arching into his palms. Her hands clenched his shoulders as her lids drifted closed. When he spoke into her ear, she shivered. "The only man I want you to drive crazy is me." Then he fisted the dress in both of his hands and ripped it open.

Buttons flew everywhere and her eyes snapped open in shock. A thrill of pleasure shot through her. The woman in her loved when he got all possessive and territorial, but she still exclaimed, "That was new!"

His mouth skimmed over the curve of her neck. "Mmmm ... sorry."

"No you're not." Her blood heated as he licked at her nipple through her lacy black bra before biting at the tip.

He murmured, "I'll buy you another one."

She dropped one hand to the erection tenting his jeans and squeezed. "The same one?"

"Will you wear it to work?"

"Yes."

"Then no." With a flick of the wrist he undid her bra, freeing her breasts to his seeking palms. Deft fingers stroked and abraded her sensitive nipples.

Unzipping his jeans, she arched and groaned when he rolled the hard buds. She gasped, "You're jealous," and reached inside his boxer briefs to circle the head of his cock.

He let out a hiss that made her heart beat fast. "Hell yes, I'm jealous." He kissed her hard and before she knew what hit her, he had her hands restrained above her head. When he broke away, he bit at her bottom lip. "I want you to myself."

There he went again, saying stuff he couldn't possibly mean. Making her hope they

had a future. Not wanting to lose the heat between them, she shoved the thought away, determined, that, like Scarlett O'Hara, she'd think about it tomorrow.

Right now, she wanted him.

She whispered into his ear, "You have me. Now fuck me—hard and fast."

He growled low and feral in his throat, then claimed her mouth in a hot possessive kiss.

Forty-five minutes later, they sat at Abby's small kitchen table eating gooey grilled cheese. Abby gave an appreciative moan, "This might be the best sandwich I've ever had."

Luke, who had made the culinary masterpiece, laughed. "I'm pretty sure you've just worked up an appetite."

She swallowed her bite. "You cook, you do lawn work, you're smart, gorgeous and give killer orgasms. I'll keep you after all." She smiled and shrugged a shoulder. "Despite the havoc you wreak on my wardrobe."

"That dress was a menace, I did you a favor."

"I'll dig out my receipt so you can fund a new one."

He gave her a grin, lone dimple flashing. "Oh, all right ... but I'm not going to like it. I might have to show up at your work one day, just to scare all those bean counters."

An image of Luke beating his chest while walking through rows of cubicles sprang to mind causing a giggle to escape. "You're crazy. You make it sound like the dress was fit for a Vegas showgirl. Don't forget, I've watched the women you date traipse up and down your walkway for a year. Now there's flash for you."

He tilted his head to the side as if contemplating her statement. "True." His brown-eyed gaze zeroed in on her. "But what you have is far more captivating."

The grilled cheese lodged in her throat. Why did he keep saying stuff like that? A surge of irritation rose, and she put her sandwich down on the plate in front of her. "You don't have to butter me up, Luke."

The lines on his forehead creased as he frowned at her. "I'm not. Just because you don't believe it doesn't make it untrue, Abby."

"I know we're having fun here. But I'm realistic as well. I know I'm not your type and it's not your job to bolster my self-esteem."

"Okay, you're not my type." His words stung even though she'd already known the truth. The lines of his face took on an aggressive edge. "I've never been with anyone quite like you. And, in truth, I never gave you much thought until you showed up on my doorstep. Is that what you want to hear?"

Her chin tilted up in defiance. "At least it's honest." It sucked, and it hurt, but it was true. Honesty blew big-time.

He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table, his expression unreadable. Suddenly, her stomach flipped in nervous apprehension and she was sorry she'd brought it up.

"Since you're so interested in honest, let me spell it out for you."

Not wanting to hear his next words, she held her breath, her chest tight.

He ran his hands through his hair. "The truth is I can't get you out of my mind. I want you constantly. Hell, I can't wait to see you. And I don't mean the sex, which is fucking unbelievable, I mean you. All of you. Abby, you are by far the sexiest and most interesting woman I've ever been with. In fact, you scare the shit of me. I don't know

what I'm going to do with you."

Her jaw fell open. He meant it. Luke wouldn't lead her on. He had too much integrity for that. She blinked. "Oh!"

"That's it? Oh?" Anger flashed in his dark eyes. Apparently, he didn't approve of her disbelief.

She bit her lip. "Thank you."

He gave her a hard, long stare then a bark of laughter escaped. He shook his head. "You never do what I expect. Most women would be pumping me for more information, wanting to know my intentions, and my every thought and feeling. But not you, you just say 'thank you.'"

To lighten the mood, she smiled. "If you want me to pump you, I'm sure I can muster up some other questions."

His expression didn't soften even a little. "What about you, Abby? Are you using me to cross off the things on your list?"

Appalled, she said. "No! Of course not."

"Are you sure? Maybe I'm just a good time, someone to fulfill your fantasies."

"That's insane."

"Why?"

At a loss for words, she blustered, "Because, I'm me ... and you're you."

The muscles in his biceps bunched, and if possible his jaw took on a more stubborn line. "I don't know what that means."

Unprepared for the turn in the conversation, she didn't know what to say. So she shrugged a shoulder. "Forget it."

"No. Explain it to me."

On a deep sigh, she said, "We hardly match."

"Why do you think that?"

"Please, the women you date are practically supermodels." She waved a hand and shook her head. "I'm ... well ... I'm an accountant. The last guy I dated thought going to a Star Trek convention constituted a good time."

"Just because you underestimate yourself doesn't mean I have to." He leaned back in his chair, food forgotten, and laced his fingers over his flat stomach.

Irritation made her edgy, and she blew out an exasperated breath. "I'm not underestimating myself. I'm a realist."

"That's bullshit." His harsh tone made her wince. "I think you're convinced you're ordinary because that's what your family wanted you to be. It may have been easier for them, but trust me, that's not who you are."

While being compared to her older, much more beautiful sister, Brianna, may have warped her self-perception, it didn't change who she was. She'd learned a long time ago she couldn't compete. Figuring out early on it was best to play on her strengths. And vixen wasn't one of them. "I'm quiet and bookish."

He had the gall to laugh. "Please, you may be smart as hell, but you're not bookish. Oh sure, you wore all those drab clothes—which by the way don't look so bad to me in light of your current wardrobe choices—but you couldn't ever hide your smart-ass nature. The only thing that's changed is now your exterior matches who you are on the inside. And for the record, you're not quiet. Hell, half the time I'm worried someone's going to send the cops after me because they think I'm beating you, you're screaming so

loud.”

A hot flush spread up over her chest to warm her face. She titled her chin. “While there’s some truth to your statement, we’re hardly in the same league.”

“You’re crazy.” He shook his head, and closed his eyes, rubbing them with the heel of his palm. “This is what I get for getting involved with a pragmatic accountant.” The statement seemed to be to himself, so she didn’t comment. Finally, he looked up and placed his elbows on the table. “Okay, you need some sort of proof. Since my word isn’t good enough.”

She opened her mouth to issue a protest but he held up his hand to silence her.

“We’ll deal with that later. For now, let’s stick to the point at hand. When I took you to the party last week, no one questioned why I was with you.”

“I’m sure they were being polite.” Even to Abby, her tone sounded prim.

He gave a bark of laughter. “You don’t know firefighters. We practically live together, and they’re never polite, especially to one of their own. If they wondered what I was doing with you, they would have asked me why I needed to take my charity fuck out in public.”

That stopped her cold and she raised a brow.

A cocky smile splayed over his gorgeous face. “Do you want to know what they did say?”

The mature, sensible part of her wanted to say no, but the giddy female in her couldn’t. In an attempt to be casual, she shrugged one shoulder.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Let’s see, I’m pretty sure Trevor would have stolen you right out from under me if he had half a chance. Then there was Bobby, who couldn’t stop talking about your killer body. Oh, and Jimmy asked me if I’d be interested in a threesome.”

“Oh!” A purely feminine thrill shot through her. She straightened in her chair.

“Now I’ve got your attention,” he chuckled. “For the record, Trevor wouldn’t have gotten two steps with you, I told Bobby to shut the fuck up, and I’ll never share you, so get that idea right out of your wild little mind.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” She couldn’t help the grin plastered to her face.

Like a bolt of lightning, he shot out from the chair, causing it to skid across the floor. He grabbed her, hauling her up from her seat, making her heart pound in her chest. With a sweep of his arm, he pushed the plates to the floor. Dishes crashed and clattered around them as he put her on the table. That intense territorial gleam in his dark brown eyes. Grabbing her around the back of the neck, he brought his mouth close to hers. “Damn straight you won’t.”

Chapter Ten

“Look at him, he’s pussy whipped.” Trevor’s amused voice startled Luke from his Abby-centric thoughts.

Luke shifted in his chair and tried to work up some interest in the conversation around the station’s kitchen table. He thought Trevor, Jimmy, and Charlie were talking about some bar they’d gone to the other night. “What?”

“You’re pussy whipped.” Trevor repeated in a slow voice that called his intelligence into question.

“No, I’m not.” Despite the rejection, the idea didn’t appall Luke the way it once would have. In fact, he wasn’t sure the statement didn’t hold some merit. He’d been with Abby for one month and he wanted her now more than ever.

Instead of listening to the guys’ exploits, his mind had been the phone sex he’d talked Abby into last night while at work. A horrible idea on his part. He’d been forced to sit there in the station office, with the big clear window overlooking the main floor, while he talked dirty. His cock had ached listening to her breathy moans and pants, while she rubbed her responsive little clit until she came.

“I don’t know.” Charlie rubbed the dark scruff on his chin and jaw. “How long’s it been since you’ve been out with us?”

Luke didn’t know. He had no desire to go out on the prowl with the three musketeers.

“Is he talking about that chick you brought to Bobby’s birthday?” Jimmy asked.

“That’s right, sweet Abby,” Trevor said, with a grin.

Jimmy raised a blond brow. “Hmmm ... she was pretty sweet. Nice rack.”

Luke tilted his chair back and rocked while clenching his fists behind his back. He shot Jimmy a warning look, and resisted the urge to knock him on his ass.

“Oh, so that’s how it is?” Jimmy’s tone rang with amusement.

“Yes, that’s how it is.” Standard station rules, casual lays were open to detailed discussion, wives and girlfriends were not.

To his left, Charlie chimed in, “He’s down for the count.”

Jimmy laughed. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

Trevor asked, “Are we still on for Saturday?”

Lucky for Luke, Trevor was a member of an exclusive sex club, so he would finally be able to take that off Abby’s list. The last couple of weekends hadn’t worked out, but the timing had fallen into place for this Saturday night. They hadn’t really talked much about her desire to go to a club, so he was curious to see what she thought.

He’d gone a couple of times with Trevor and it had been okay, lots of cavorting bodies, but it hadn’t done much for him. But with Abby, while he expected it would be a onetime experience, he didn’t doubt they’d have a good time.

The door to the station opened, and as if he conjured her, Abby walked in. Surprised as hell to see her, he blinked, concern for her rising fast in his throat. “Abby, is everything okay?”

She smiled and sauntered towards him, hips swaying in a black, belted coat. “Sorry to drop in on you, but I really need to talk to you.”

A tickle of alarm crept up his neck. "Okay."

She glanced around to the other men and lowered her voice. "Could we have some privacy?"

Trevor grinned at her. "Hey Abby, have you met Jimmy and Charlie?"

She nodded and said demurely, "It's nice to see you again."

Not wanting to delay any longer, Luke said, "Come with me."

A million bad reasons for her visit ran through his mind. He walked her down a small corridor before finally pulling her into the tool room. He clicked the lock shut and turned to face her. "Is something wrong, Abby?"

"Yes." Her expression gave nothing away.

Luke's heart began to hammer in his chest and he went cold. "What?"

She glanced at the work stool. "Could you sit down please?"

What the fuck was going on? He sat and crossed his arms over his chest.

While never taking her eyes off him, she began to untie the knot at her waist. "The thing is, Luke..."

Blood racing, he nodded, urging her to continue.

The coat dropped in a puddle at her feet and his jaw went slack. She stood before him, hands on her hips, in a very skimpy Catholic schoolgirl's outfit. "I've been a very bad girl."

Relief, followed by white-hot lust, flooded through him. His cock immediately sprang to attention. She wore a white button-down shirt, completely undone, and tied under her breasts, revealing her smooth, flat stomach. The tiny blue and gray plaid skirt was so short, if she turned around, he wouldn't be surprised if he could see the curve of her ass. White thigh-high tights completed the ensemble. Goddamn, she looked hotter than hell.

"I can see." With his erection already hard enough to pound nails, he tried to keep his cool instead of lunging for her. He cocked a brow. "Does someone need a good spanking?"

She licked her pink, glossy lips. "I do."

Before he could react, she turned around and leaned over the tool bench. With one hand she flipped up the back of her skirt. He gulped. *Bare ass naked*. Luke was surprised his head didn't explode right then and there. Her pussy peeked out from between her legs and perfectly round butt. His mouth watered.

She wiggled her hips a bit. "What are you going to do about it?"

The statement broke his trance, and he hopped up from the stool and placed an open palm on her back. "Does someone need to be taught a lesson?"

She moaned and swayed her hips invitingly back at him. "Yes."

He ran his hands up her thighs. "Open your legs wider."

Glancing back over her shoulder, she gave him the most carnal smile he'd ever seen. "Make me."

Holy mother of God, he was a dead man. He smacked her hard on the ass. "So, we're going to play it that way?"

"Oh yeah."

Already more turned-on than he could ever remember, he gritted his teeth and fought the impulse to drive into her. Instead, he gave a silent prayer to God that no calls came in, and slapped one smooth cheek, before soothing it. He kicked her legs apart with his foot

until her pussy was open and vulnerable. He slipped his fingers over her slick opening. "Has someone been having impure thoughts?"

He teased over her clit, barely skimming the surface, causing her to arch her back in an effort to deepen the touch. She moaned, "Yes, I have."

"And what would those be, little girl?"

Shaking her head she pushed her hips back and he stopped. Her head whipped around and she glared at him. He affixed a stern expression to his face and slapped her ass, causing a blush of pink to spread over her skin. "Tell me. Or I'll make your experience with the balls seem like child's play."

"My neighbor," she gasped. "He's driving me to distraction."

"And?" He let his fingers begin to move again over her slippery flesh. Light touches meant to tease but deliver no real satisfaction.

She thrust back at him. "All I can think about is how good he licks my pussy."

His cock throbbed in his pants and he stifled a low moan. "Does he do it like this?" He dove for her cunt, licking into her, thrusting his tongue in and out before flicking her clit over and over.

On a jerk, she cried, "God yes." His mouth sucked and prodded until she shook, then he stood up.

"What else?" he demanded, wanting driver her crazy. He didn't want to ruin the game, but the need to take her was becoming overwhelming.

On a strangled breath, she said, "I think about him fucking me!"

"Mmmm..." His jaw ached from suppressing his desire. Instead he delivered a series of hard, rapid slaps to her ass until they were both panting and she pushed her hips into each blow. "Too bad you're not ready to be fucked."

"Oh, I am."

"I don't think so." He circled her clit before plunging two fingers into her hot wet depths. "You've been very naughty."

He kept his strokes shallow and when he felt her building to a climax he backed off. In frustration, she groaned and banged her fist on the wood of the bench. He yanked her up, and still standing behind her, undid the knot at her ribcage and spread the fabric to reveal her bare breasts. "You came here naked?"

"Yes."

"You are a bad girl." His bad girl. He ran his thumbs over the tips, before dragging his knuckles up and down over her nipples. She moaned and strained back, rubbing her ass along his hard cock. He let one hand skim down her stomach, over the curve of her hip, before dipping into her dripping pussy. On a low groan, he wet his fingers before returning to circle her puckered nipple. He repeated the motion with his other hand.

When the hard buds were wet, he pinched and rolled, pulling them away from her body until she let out a little scream. He gritted his teeth, as she arched and begged, "Oh, please."

He wanted to continue, to draw out her pleasure until she was nothing but a puddle of need, but his restraint broke. "Look at me." His voice sounded foreign to his own ears.

Her head tilted up, eyes glazed over, cheeks flushed, and her full lips parted. Beautiful and filled with passion, her expression open and trusting, his chest squeezed then released. "Mine. You're mine."

"Yes," came her whispered admission.

He spun her around and claimed her mouth in a hard, possessive kiss. As always, she plastered herself to the length of his body, wrapping her arms around his neck while she kissed him with wild abandon. He fisted her hair in his hand to anchor her in place. He fused their mouths. His tongue tangled with hers, and he pressed tight against her, wanting her closer. His breath ragged, he broke the kiss. "I'm sorry, I can't hold out."

"Please Luke, I'm so ready." She tilted her hips into his, grinding her clit along the length of his shaft. "Fuck me."

And just like that, the game was over, and it was just the two of them.

She unbuckled the belt of his pants and slid the zipper down, reaching into his boxer briefs where his cock strained and throbbed. He gripped her fingers and stopped her from going further. In confusion, her brown eyes met his. He shook his head. "You can't touch me right now. Just let me inside."

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Abby dropped her hand. Luke's dark intense eyes stared down at her, making her heart pound so hard it felt as though it might burst from her chest. Without a word, he lifted her up on the tool bench, and drove into her with such force it took her breath away. Through gritted teeth, he said, "Don't come yet."

All she could promise was a meager, "I'll try." Her body screamed for release. Every nerve was on fire for him.

He moaned, "So, hot, and tight, and wet."

Her back bowed and she met his hard thrusts, letting her head fall back as he stroked hard and sure. As his cock dragged along her inner walls, her muscles clenched in response and she fought the impending orgasm. Into her ear, came his low demand. "Do not come."

He slowed his rhythm. The frantic need abated, but her whole body tingled on the edge of exploding. He ground his hips slowly into her, catching her clit on the upstroke. She pulled him close, wrapping her arms around his waist, digging her nails into his ass. Her muscles tightened around his hard cock. He stilled. "Not yet. Jesus, your cunt feels good."

She throbbed. Pulsed. Sat on the brink of climax while his hard cock filled her and she willed her body to calm. The sound of their ragged breathing filled the small room, and when she thought she was under control, she arched her hips. Meeting his eyes, she pleaded, "Luke."

Something dark and untamed passed across his face. He slammed into her with such force she yelled, "Oh God yes!"

He gripped her neck. "Watch."

She stared down at his cock plunging hard and deep into her pussy. A spring coiled tight, pushing her beyond control. He kept up his brutal thrusts, pounding over and over, driving her higher. His forehead pressed against hers. "So fucking good, Abby."

The sounds of their bodies slapping together, the wet suctioning as he fucked her, the smell of sex filling the air was all too much. With her body shaking, she cried, "I can't wait."

On a grunt, he quickened his already frenzied pace. The orgasm built and built until it crashed over her. Intense waves of pleasure wracked through her body with such force she began to scream. His mouth crashed onto hers, swallowing her cries. The spasms of her inner walls went on and on, milking his cock. He shuddered and hot cum filled her to

overflowing as he came with a low harsh growl.

While their bodies cooled and their breath steadied, something indefinable shifted and clicked into place inside her. Before she could examine it too closely, Luke lifted his head, his brown eyes assessing, but lazy. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

Her heart began to hammer. Maybe showing up at his work hadn’t been the best idea. She’d thought long and hard about her role playing exercise. She realized that this had been one fantasy she wanted to take charge of, and in keeping with her, “*I’m going for it*” attitude, had counted on his sense of adventure to override the inappropriateness of showing up to his workplace. She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I guess I shouldn’t have come.”

With a furrowed brow, he asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Aren’t you mad I came to your work?”

Confusion crossed over his face, only to clear when comprehension dawned. “Are you kidding me? That was hot as hell. Feel free to show up in any costume you want.” He grinned, and her apprehension melted away. He lowered his voice. “Shit, come in a burlap sack, I don’t care.”

“So what am I never supposed to do again?”

“Scare the shit out of me. The way you came in here, I thought something terrible had happened.” He pulled out of her and she smoothed the miniscule skirt back in place while he zipped up his pants.

She tilted her head to ponder the problem. “How about this? I’ll give you a signal. If I show up in a sweat suit, no makeup, and my hair in a ponytail, you’re screwed.”

He laughed. “Good plan.” The tension gone from his face, he appeared relaxed and happy. His broad smile made his eyes light up, and his dimple flashed. He reached up and trailed one long finger along her jaw.

The truth hit her like a ton of bricks. Her chest tightened.

She loved him.

Now what?

Chapter Eleven

Abby paced the floor in her new skimpy electric blue dress and mile-high silver strappy sandals while she waited for Luke to pick her up for their night at the sex club.

She didn't want to go.

Over the past couple days, she and Luke had spent all their free time together and she'd realized three things—her love was real and grew stronger every day, she could no longer treat their relationship as a fling, and she didn't want to go to this damn sex club. Why in the hell had she even put it on her list? At the time, it had sounded fun and wild, something Luke might be interested in. But now, she couldn't watch him touch another woman, and she certainly didn't want to touch another man. Other people watching them had no appeal. In her mind it cheapened what they shared.

Why hadn't she spoken up before now? She cursed herself, and ran a hand through her already tousled hair. These days she made it a habit to be honest with herself—she'd remained silent because she didn't want to disappoint him. He'd been so excited about being able to get them in, and check it off her list, that she didn't want to burst his bubble.

On top of her anxiety about the club, she couldn't make heads or tails of what Luke was thinking. He seemed to want to spend time with her, but beyond that she had no idea what his intentions were. To her disgust, she was scared to ask. She didn't want to hear they were just having a good time. All his actions spoke of commitment, but she didn't have the guts to lay it out on the line. So for the past couple of days, she'd ping-ponged back and forth between confrontation and avoidance. She couldn't go on this way—she'd learned the hard way that she deserved everything she wanted. But she wasn't ready to let him go if he didn't reciprocate her desire for commitment. She didn't know what to do.

The door opened, and from downstairs Luke called out, "Abby?"

Her heart leapt into her throat and she tilted her chin in defiance. Determined to go through with the evening as planned, she vowed she'd talk to him first thing in the morning. Time to stop being a chickenshit. With a deep breath, she called out, "I'll be right down."

She walked out of her room, down the steps, only to stall at the sight of him. He was gorgeous in all black, his brown hair tousled, his hands tucked into pockets as he leaned back against the wall. Posture relaxed, he appeared to not have a care in the world.

Once again she began her descent. Hearing the noise of her shoes clicking on the hardwood, he glanced up. Pleasure burst through her when his jaw went slack at the sight of her. When he looked at her like that, she wondered how she'd ever seen herself as plain. With a little shake of his head, he seemed to come to his senses, and he gave her a long wolf whistle. "I'm not sure I want you leaving the house like that. Very hot dress."

She opened her mouth, teasing comeback on the tip of her tongue, but instead she blurted, "I can't go." Despite the fact that she hadn't intended to say anything, once the statement left her lips, relief flooded through her.

His eyes clouded over in confusion, and he pushed off the wall to stand up straight. "What do you mean?"

She blinked, she couldn't hold back any longer. She needed to be true to herself. Even if it killed her. "I've thought about it, and I don't want to go. I should have said

something sooner. I hope you're not too disappointed."

"Oh." He shrugged. "No big deal. Honestly, I don't think you'd like it anyway. And I'm certainly not interested in sharing you, so all that's left to do is watch." He gave her his wicked smile, the one that always made her tingle. "You've never shown much interest in watching. You're more of a doer." When she didn't respond in her normal fashion, his brow furrowed. "Is anything wrong?"

More than anything she wanted to shake her head no and throw herself into his arms. But she couldn't. She'd started, now she had to finish. Tears welled in her eyes and he rushed to her, concern splashed across his face. "Abby, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

She nodded, her throat closing up.

"What the hell is it?" He snapped, clearly frustrated at her lack of communication.

"I can't do this anymore."

Disbelief, quickly followed by anger, filled his expression before his eyes went flat. Through gritted teeth, he spoke as though trying to keep his patience. "Start over. Abby, tell me what is going on and I'll fix it."

Nausea rolled through her stomach and rose thick in her throat. "You can't fix this."

"Well at least tell me what the fuck-*this-is*!" He ran his hands through his hair and expelled a long hard breath. "Shit, Abby, this is out of left field, don't I at least get an explanation?"

She pulled away from him and walked to the picture window overlooking her front yard. The same window she'd watched Luke from on her thirtieth birthday while thinking about how exciting he'd be. She'd been right, he was exciting. But she'd never anticipated losing her heart to him.

Now that she knew him better, knew he wasn't just another bad boy with a nice face and body, she saw how stupid she'd been. The entire time they'd lived next door to each other she'd taken him at face value, never looking below the surface. She'd made a mess of everything, and the time had come to take responsibility for her actions.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared through the window at the darkened tree-lined street. "You're right. You deserve an explanation. You're not going to like it."

From behind her, he said in a dead tone, "Let me be the judge of that."

She bit her lip in an attempt to squash down her threatening tears. "I can't be casual. I know we're supposed to be having fun, but I can't do that anymore..." The tears wouldn't be contained and she swiped the wet tracks from her cheeks. "I wanted to pretend it didn't matter. But I can't. Ironically, because of you, I need more. I deserve more."

"So that's it? You've had your fun and now want to move on to something more serious?" His voice shook. Abby kept her back to him. Not wanting to see the anger. When his hand gripped her upper arm and he spun her to face him, she gasped at the pure rage in his stormy brown eyes. Tension radiated off him in waves.

"At least fucking look at me."

"What more is there to say? We want different things." He was breaking her heart. She wanted him gone so she could curl up on the couch and bawl until there was nothing left.

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her as if trying to knock some sense into her. "You know what I want, Abby? You. Every second, of every day—I want you. I love

you, goddamn it!”

She blinked. Had she heard him right? “Wh...what?”

He released her so abruptly she swayed. And through a jaw so tight, she was surprised it didn’t shatter, he said, “I love you.”

Hope began to grow. “You do?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t seem to formulate a coherent thought.

Shaking his head as if she were insane, he said, “Tell me what you want. Not what you think I don’t.”

Some, but not all of her tension, relaxed. This was ten times scarier than sending her list. “I want a commitment. I’m not saying marriage, but a relationship. I can’t do fun and casual anymore. I love you too much for that.”

He closed the distance between them, and ran his hands up her bare arms. His touch was gentle now as softness replaced his anger. “That’s not going to work for me.”

Her heart plummeted to her feet, and tears spilled over onto her cheeks as she nodded. With a swipe of his thumb, he wiped away the wet streaks. “I can’t settle for anything less than marriage.”

In confusion, she asked, “You want to marry me?”

He nodded. “If you’ll take me. You’ll be marrying my job too, though. It’s not easy, and most couples don’t make it.” He smiled at her. “But I’ve come to find you’re a woman who likes risk. This isn’t the way I envisioned things going or I’d have come prepared. I’ve been biding my time, not wanting to scare you away while you got used to me.”

“You’ve been waiting for me?”

He nodded again. “I want to get you a ring and properly propose, but in light of your feelings, I think it’s more important for you to know how serious I am.”

She gaped at him, stunned, unable to move or speak. Luke Marlow wanted to marry her. He loved her.

He ran his thumb over her lips. “So do I get an answer? Or would you rather wait and take things slow?”

She snapped out of her daze. “Yes! I’ll marry you.” She threw herself into his arms almost knocking him flat on his back before he managed to right himself.

He held her so tight she couldn’t get any air in her lungs, but she didn’t protest. He growled low in her ear, “I warned you not to scare me like this again. Next time you won’t be able to sit down for a week.” When she nodded against him, he relaxed his death grip on her.

Then his mouth crashed down on hers and he kissed her long, slow, and deep. When he lifted his head, she had no doubts about his intentions. On a ragged breath, he said, “Why don’t I leave? You go get naked and slip under your covers upstairs.”

Her body already buzzing with anticipation, she swatted him on the arm. “Why would you leave if I’m about to get naked?”

The wicked grin she loved, the one that told her he was up to mischief, and she was about to be a very satisfied woman, flashed across his lips. “Because I’m going to climb in your window so we can knock that last fantasy off your list. The rape fantasy.”

“Oh!” Her heart began galloping in her chest. She wouldn’t have to settle for a boring guy after all. Instead, she’d have Luke, and enough excitement to last three

lifetimes.

“I have a list of my own I want to work through.”

She raised an eyebrow and gave him a seductive smile. “Sounds promising.”

“It is. Expect it in your email first thing Monday morning.”

The End

About the Author:

Born and bred in the suburbs of Chicago, Julia Devlin met her husband at the age of twenty-two at the public library. One look and she knew she'd found a keeper. Fast forward lots of years and two kids later and he still supports every crazy idea she's ever had. There's just something about a man who doesn't even blink an eye when you tell him you're going to start writing erotic romance.

Julia began writing on a whim, playing with stories running amuck in her head. The second she put pen to paper she was hooked, and has been writing ever since. In addition to being a wife and mother, she's also a management consultant. Sometimes when she's sitting in one boring meeting after another, she looks around and thinks... if they only knew what was going on in her head right now...

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