



Chains of Jericho

Vivien Dean

(c) 2009

Chains of Jericho

Vivien Dean

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-574-9

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Vivien Dean. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Jean Cooper

Cover Artist
April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Blurb

Declan Jericho is a vampire with a purpose. His best hope for success rests on the shoulders of a brilliant young cancer specialist, but saving the undead isn't exactly the career path Dr. Maya Sheldon has in mind.

When Dec kidnaps Maya from work, the last thing she wants to do is help him. Then she discovers what he wants her for: develop a cure for the mysterious illness killing the young vampires in his care. Vampires or not, she's unable to abandon them. Her interest in Dec quickly shifts from professional to something more intimate, but as their attraction grows, darker secrets threaten their newfound relationship. Dec has his own reasons for wanting the young vampires cured, and he's not telling...

Contains: Bloodplay, light bondage, anal sex, graphic violence

Chapter One

The silent ones were the worst. The ones that stared back at her with Precious Moments eyes, trusting that she could take their pain away because their mommies and daddies always said that doctors made everything better.

Sometimes, Maya wanted to gag every parent who ever uttered the platitude. It was hard living up to the image of being God.

Pulling the door closed on little Jason Hsu's room, Dr. Maya Sheldon leaned her forehead against the cold metal, her eyes closed as she tried to focus on her breathing. Inside the tiny private room, Jason was dying, and what was worse, Jason knew it. His parents weren't ready to accept the grim reality, and Maya wasn't ready to stop fighting, but somewhere deep in her gut she sensed the little boy's resignation every time she checked in on him. He'd spent the last year of his short six on this planet in and out of the hospital, and his spirits were beginning to show the first signs of defeat. His cancer was proving resistant to all their treatments, but even as she ordered new tests and researched new techniques, Maya refused to give in to the disease. This was why she'd become a doctor in the first place.

"You were supposed to leave two hours ago."

Though the voice was soft, Maya still jumped at its sudden intrusion, whirling to gaze down into the weathered features of Karen Ponti, the head nurse. She was a tiny woman, deceptively fragile-looking, with snow-white hair and gentle brown eyes. In spite of her placid appearance, however, she had a spine of steel and tolerated little weakness within her domain. She was even hard on the doctors. They walked on eggshells every time she came within earshot.

Maya wasn't scared of her, though. Very little frightened Maya. In fact, most of the time, Karen amused the hell out of her.

She pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen loose from the utilitarian low ponytail she always wore on rounds. "Actually, it was supposed to be four."

"I was already taking into consideration the two hours you usually stay late."

"And I'm going, I'm going. Jason was my last call for the day."

Karen's gaze slid to the door. "Is he sleeping yet?"

"Dozing. He'll likely be restless for the night. The new meds aren't working like I'd hoped they might. His dyssomnia is back."

"I'll make sure the staff knows. Now go home. I don't want to see you again until the weekend." She lifted a warning finger. "And don't even think about showing up tomorrow just to check up on your patients. They can go one day without you hovering in their door, worrying."

"Yes, ma'am." Maya offered a mock salute. Brushing past, she started down the hall, her tennis shoes silent against the linoleum. "And I don't hover," she called out without looking back.

She dropped off Jason's chart at the nurses' station, barely noticing the dark-haired man seated in the waiting area across from it before heading to the elevator. She was exhausted. Her day had begun at dawn when she'd come in early to offer moral support to the parents of a little girl who was undergoing surgery; it had been non-stop from

there. Such was the life, though. It was what she'd signed up for when she'd accepted the position in pediatric oncology, and she wouldn't have traded it for the world.

Well, she might have loaned it for an hour in exchange for a good night's sleep. Maya was going to do everything in her power to hold true to Karen's order to stay away.

In the locker room, she didn't bother considering a quick shower, opting instead to splash some cold water over her face so she'd be alert enough to drive home. An examination in the mirror over the sink revealed the shadows beneath her wide brown eyes, the pinching that happened around her full mouth when she got tired. Even her chestnut-colored hair was showing signs of fatigue, she decided with a grimace, and tucked the same lank strand she had earlier back behind her ear. It was no wonder she was still single. With plenty of rest and lots of attention, she could pass for "intelligently attractive," but after her eighth consecutive seventeen-hour shift, Maya considered herself lucky not to be giving her young patients nightmares. She didn't know how other women did it.

Grabbing her leather jacket, she reached inside her locker for the backpack stuffed in its recesses. Usually, she left it at the hospital, but with the determination to actually take a day off, she was going to need what it contained. Just because she wouldn't be around didn't mean she couldn't still do something for her patients. Research was never a bad idea.

She went down the back stairs to the parking lot. It was easier that way, faster, not to mention there was absolutely no chance for her to get stopped by someone she knew. These days, everyone and their brother seemed to have an opinion on how she should run her life—she was working too hard, she wasn't taking care of herself, she was sabotaging her love life by being so antisocial. Was there any wonder she was antisocial when the last time she went out on a date, the guy turned out to be breaking his parole? Not that she had a problem with cons; she just didn't care for the police knocking on her door in the middle of the night to arrest the guy she'd been about to sleep with. The first guy she'd even *considered* sleeping with in almost two years.

It made a girl wary. Justifiably so, she thought.

Welcoming the cool blast of air on her face when she pushed open the door to the lot, Maya paused beneath the safety light to savor the November sky stretching overhead. Some days it felt as if she lived in a plastic world, all crisp whites and ammonia. It was the world she'd worked for, but sometimes she couldn't help but wish that maybe part of it could be a little less sterile.

She shook her head, dispelling the thoughts as quickly as they appeared. She was tired. She just needed to get home and get a good night's sleep for a change.

Maya was halfway to her car when a woman's pained scream shattered the air. Immediately, she halted, stiffening, her head snapping in the sound's direction.

The lot was devoid of life.

She peered into the darkness. The cry had come from the alley alongside the hospital. The narrow strip was often used by both staff and visitors as a shortcut between the parking lot and the road, but this sounded like the woman had taken the byway and encountered someone not so willing to let her pass. Though the scream faded into a soft echo, Maya was already moving, her hand diving into her bag for her cell phone.

She'd punched in the numbers when the second scream came. The tinny voice of the operator came through on the line, requesting the nature of her emergency, and she

wincing when another piercing shriek ripped through her.

“What do you *think* is wrong?” she snapped.

“Are you hurt, ma’am?”

“It’s not me. I think someone is being mugged, or attacked, or ... something.”

“Where are you, ma’am?”

“The parking lot behind Sisters of Mercy Hospital. There’s an alley that runs out to the street. I think she’s there.”

“I’ll send medical assistance—”

“I *am* medical assistance!” Maya shouted in frustration. “Just send the damn police!”

Snapping the phone shut, she barely got it shoved back into her pocket before she reached the alley, pausing only for a second before plunging into the darkness. The familiar scent of blood reached her nose, and she saw the crumpled form of a woman at the far end, the streetlight filtering in just enough to outline her in black shadows. No one else was in the alley.

Maya skidded before she reached the woman, her heel catching on an unseen bottle and rolling out beneath her. The rough concrete scraped her palms as she caught herself from falling, and she lurched forward the last few feet to fall to her knees at the victim’s side.

“You better not die on me now,” she muttered as she gave the body a cursory examination for her injuries.

The woman was young, younger than Maya by more than a couple years, probably barely twenty. Her skin was deathly pale, her hands abraded from where she’d tried to fight off her attacker, and her torn shirt exposed a lacy bra. Blood poured from a series of cuts across her upper body, with the worst a series of puncture wounds in her neck. It looked very much like she’d been viciously mauled by some kind of wild animal.

In the middle of urban California?

She didn’t have time to consider the nature of the attack. The woman was dying. Maya had to do what she could to save her.

Dropping her backpack to the ground, she exposed the remaining injuries, ripping off strips of cloth to use to staunch the flow of blood. As she pressed them into the wounds, Maya reached to take the woman’s pulse. And then froze.

There was none.

Her nerves sharpened. The blood was still free-flowing, which meant the heart could only have just stopped.

Abandoning her efforts to slow the bleeding, Maya bent over the body, tilting the woman’s head and pinching her nose to start CPR. The tepid temperature of the lips frightened her into thinking she may have been too late, but it didn’t stop her from continuing her efforts, going through the motions with the brisk efficiency that always took her over in the face of an emergency.

Vaguely, she became aware of footsteps approaching her from behind, and thanked whatever god that was listening that the police decided to be fast for a change. When she straightened to start the chest compressions, Maya risked a glance over her shoulder, and frowned when she saw the tall man emerge from the shadows.

No uniform. No sense of haste to indicate he was here for an emergency. His pace was slow and measured, and instead of the traditional plainclothes attire she’d seen some of the policemen wear, this man wore jeans and a worn, black leather biker’s jacket. Cops

didn't dress like that.

Turning away before he could see her flash of alarm, she resumed the CPR. "If you're here to help," she said, her voice eerily calm, "go to the ER and send someone out with a gurney so we can move her."

"You don't need a gurney, Dr. Sheldon."

Her first instinct was that he was offering his aid in carrying the woman inside, but then the rest of his words sank in as he rounded the body to obstruct them from anyone looking from the street. When she glanced up again, she saw his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his muscles still. He had no intention to assist her.

"If you work for the hospital, I'm going to make sure you end up fired if you don't help me," she warned.

"I don't. Get up, Katie."

Muscles tensed beneath Maya's hands. When the woman without a pulse opened her eyes, Maya jerked away and fell back onto her ass.

"What the...?" Her heart pounded against her ribcage. As Katie rose to her feet and stood next to the stranger, Maya swallowed to quell the surge of panic rising inside her. "But you were *dead*—"

"Am I done here?" Katie asked the man.

Taking off his coat, he put it over her shoulders, covering her nearly naked torso. "Go home," he instructed, and in that second, with his greater height and the protective tone of his voice, he appeared very much like a father to her. It was impossible, of course. Even in the dim light, Maya could see that he was no more than thirty, his long face unlined. But there was still something about the way he guided her toward the back of the alley, and the way Katie glanced back at him as she went made Maya believe there was more to the relationship than met the eye.

"What's going on here?" she demanded, scrambling to her feet. She pointed at Katie's retreating form. "She needs medical attention. Those cuts—"

"Will be gone by morning," he interrupted. He took a step forward, prompting her to counter with her own step back. "I just needed to get your attention, Dr. Sheldon. I needed the chance to speak with you in private."

That was the second time he addressed her by her title. "And you couldn't have made an appointment?"

"You and I don't exactly keep the same hours."

He took another step. This one positioned him beneath the streetlamp, clearly highlighting his features for the first time.

She'd been right about the age. He towered above Maya, probably standing around six four or five when all was said and done. It was impossible to tell what color his deep-set eyes were, but they glittered with intelligence and pinned her in place just as effectively as if he'd used his hands. Dark hair tumbled across a low brow, and his aquiline nose had to have been broken at least once in the past. Noting his powerful chest and the strong hands that now had nowhere to hide, Maya could only wonder if the other guy in that particular fight had even survived.

As he moved closer, every flight instinct in Maya's body screamed at her to take action. The best she managed was slowly backing off, her gaze fixed on his face as she tried to determine what it was he wanted with her. Clearly, this had been a set-up of some sort, though how the girl could've faked not having a pulse, Maya had no idea. But this

man radiated danger, from the top of his head to the sole of his scuffed boots, and she was terrified that if she turned and made a run for it, it would be the last thing she ever did.

“Who are you?” she asked instead. Maybe she could talk her way back to the parking lot. There were more options for her there, more things she could use as a potential weapon. Her backpack was already lost to her, resting on the ground between them, and she kicked herself for not picking it up when she’d had the chance.

“I don’t wish to hurt you,” he said, ignoring her question. “But I need for you to come with me.”

She realized he hadn’t said, “I *won’t* hurt you,” which made her terror about what he really wanted burn just a little bit brighter. “I’m thinking ... no,” she started to say, and then stopped when she saw the familiar strobe of police lights at the end of the alley. Relief flooded through her as her pace hesitated, but it must’ve shown in her face because the stranger’s head whipped around to see what she was looking at.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“It’s called 911, asshole,” she retorted. “Now’s the time you might want to think about running before they lock you up.”

He moved so quickly, she didn’t even have time to scream. One moment he was six feet away, the next he was behind her, his hand over her mouth, dragging her backward toward the parking lot and away from the police in a whirlwind that left her breathless.

“It didn’t have to be this way,” she heard him say.

Fury overwhelmed the fear that had been holding her rigid, and Maya began to fight back, shoving her elbow into his solar plexus as she tried to use her feet to kick at his legs. It only worked for a moment before his arms turned into iron bands around her, and she was locked against his unyielding chest, his hand cool over her mouth. The chilly air stung her cheeks from the speed at which he was moving, her eyes watering as her exhaustion began to help the stranger out, and by the time she’d blinked the tears away, they were already on the far side of the parking lot.

He stopped beside a dark van, opening the unlocked door on the back to reveal darkness within. *This can’t be happening to me*, Maya thought as he climbed in and shut the door behind him. *This only happens in the movies. Or to other people. This can’t be real.*

Except it was, and her legs were now more exhausted than the rest of her from struggling to free herself. The stranger wasn’t even letting her go, moving through the inky interior with the comfortable ease of familiarity. The clink of metal hitting metal echoed between the walls, and then something cold snapped around her wrist.

“I’m going to sit you down now.” His mouth hovered at her ear. “You can scream if you want, but it’s not going to do you any good. Nobody’s going to hear you.”

The instant his hand moved from her mouth, Maya gulped at the fresh air. “Just tell me what it is you want from me,” she pleaded. “I’ve got money. Just tell me—”

“I don’t want your money. All I want is you.”

With that, he was gone, out the back doors of the van, leaving her alone and terrified. A forceful pull against the handcuff around her wrist demonstrated just how stuck she really was when she nearly pulled her arm out of its socket and it didn’t budge.

Maya sank to the cold, metallic floor with tears in her eyes. How the hell was she going to get out of *this*?

Chapter Two

Against her better judgment, the rocking of the moving van lulled Maya into sleep. She was hardly comfortable—apparently her abductor didn't believe in heating—but her exhausting hours and poor sleeping patterns had trained her body to catch slumber whenever it could, and this time was no different.

She woke when the van stopped moving, bleary-eyed and sore from the awkward position she'd assumed against the wall. A door slammed, and then there was a moment of silence before the back of the vehicle opened to reveal the same man watching her intently.

"What?" she demanded after an interminable minute in which he didn't even move.

"You never screamed." Surprise colored his deep voice.

"Yeah, well, it would've been a waste of energy, now, wouldn't it?"

"That doesn't stop most people."

Her blood chilled at his words. His statement betrayed him. This was a man accustomed to people screaming when he was around.

In spite of the return of her fear, Maya lifted her chin and stared him in the eye. It wouldn't do her any good to give him what he was looking for by crying and begging for mercy. She'd done that once and it hadn't worked. She wouldn't try it again.

"I'm not most people," she said to him, her tone as austere as she could manage.

He responded in a way she never would have imagined.

He smiled. And it seemed to wipe a century of malice from his eyes.

Without a word, he climbed into the van, the vehicle sloping slightly from the added weight. He crouched at her side, a key appearing from his jeans pocket to slide into the handcuff around her wrist. There was a moment of hesitation before he turned the key, however, and Maya looked up to see him regarding her again.

"You can't run. You know that, right?" he commented. "But if I undo this and you try and make a break for it, I'm not going to have a choice but to hurt you, and ... I don't want that."

For some reason, she believed him. She nodded.

"Am I ever going to find out what it is you want with me?" she asked as he unlocked the cuff.

"Soon enough." His fingers were cool where they brushed over her skin, sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. Immediately, his head jerked up. "Are you cold?"

"No, I'm just..." Her voice faded away. His eyes were blue. This close, and with the light filtering from the open doors of the van, Maya could finally discern that tiny detail. "I don't want to die," she said faintly. Somehow, it seemed important to get that out there.

His gaze was inscrutable. "I don't want you to die, either."

He held her firmly by the wrist as he pulled her from the van, and she blinked against the sudden change in light. They were on a narrow street she didn't recognize, steeply sloped with a spectacular view of the bay. The lights from the bridge twinkled brighter than the stars that had finally decided to come out, illuminating the rows of houses that lined the street. Before them, though, stood a tall, narrow church, its spire reaching to

point an accusatory finger at the heavens.

"This way," he said, but instead of leading her into the church, the stranger pulled her to the alley that ran alongside it, more silent than the deserted road behind them.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he stopped before a set of trap doors that seemed to burrow beneath the church.

He didn't reply. He tugged the nearest door open to reveal a narrow set of wooden stairs leading downward. Maya had no choice but to follow him as he began to descend, and when light disappeared after the fourth step, she was forced to place a nervous hand on his back so she wouldn't stumble and fall.

It occurred to her she'd never considered screaming once she was free of the van. This was a residential area. People would be home, tucked into bed, impossible for them not to hear her. But the inclination to scream and try to run had faded.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, the faint sound of scratching echoing around her, the air increasingly cool and damp. His stop was abrupt, causing her to collide with his broad back, but the man's grip on her wrist remained sure and strong, tugging her to her feet without even a glance. His strength surprised her. It was obvious he was in great shape, but there was a grace and confidence in his every movement that spoke of more than hours spent at the gym. It seemed to be a part of his very marrow.

A door opened into a dusty hall. Maya sneezed before she could stop herself. The musty air didn't seem to bother her abductor, and he continued to pull her along, ignoring the closed doors they passed on the way. Bare light bulbs dangling from the ceiling revealed empty corridor after empty corridor, grime and the occasional spider the only things to spy, but from behind the walls, from behind the closed doors, came the unmistakable sounds of life. A radio. Running water. Muted voices.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"Where I live."

Further and further they went into the maze, until Maya had lost all sense of depth and direction. More stairs, more doors, and each step had her increasingly confused about what exactly she was doing in this bizarre place, with this very strange man. There was no doubt in her mind that he was dangerous, and there was still a chance that all of this was just some diabolical scheme on his part before he chose to rape and dismember her. But with every foot they traveled, Maya found it harder to believe there wasn't something a little less sinister about this whole arrangement.

He finally stopped in front of a door. This one looked like all the others they'd passed, with the exception of a padlock dangling from a latch near the upper casing. Releasing her wrist for the first time since leaving the van, he reached into his jeans pocket to extract his key ring, and then paused, realizing that she was unmoving behind him. Their eyes met.

"I hope you're always this surprising," he said softly.

Maya's mind whirled as he turned back to open the padlock. He didn't really expect her to try and run away down here, did he? Where would she go? Then again, *why* hadn't she tried to get away? But she already knew the answer to that last question.

Because she wasn't convinced any more that he meant her any ill will.

Pushing the door open, he stood aside, indicating she should enter first. She did so, hesitantly, and came to a dead halt as soon as she crossed the threshold.

It was a bedroom. More than that, it was a studio apartment, all contained within four

walls. A king-sized bed with thick quilts in disarray atop it. A black leather divan, overstuffed and comfortable-looking. A wall of books that took advantage of the vaulted ceilings to demand a sliding ladder in order to reach higher shelves. There was even a small table and chair set in the far corner with a mini-fridge to cater to it.

Where the hall had been dim and dusty, this room sparkled all the way down to its natural hardwood floor. Lamps illuminated every corner, bathing the room in soft, golden light, and as Maya took another step inside, she smelled the distinct scent of a man's cologne.

"You live *here*?" she said, incredulous.

The soft click of the door was followed by his heavy step across the wood. "That's one word for it."

He wasn't paying her any attention as he went to the refrigerator to take out a sports bottle and begin gulping down its contents. After a moment, Maya turned to the books and stepped closer, tilting her head in order to better read some of the titles.

"These are all medical texts!" Her head jerked around, her brows drawn into confused line. "Is this your idea of light reading?"

"More like research." Carefully recapping the bottle, he set it on the counter without taking those unwavering blue eyes off her. "For you," he added.

Her mouth opened to finally demand what exactly was going on, when the door slammed open and the young woman from the hospital's alley burst inside.

"Danny escaped again," she said in a rush.

Any calm that may have composed her captor's demeanor vanished at the mention of the new name. "How many dead?" His voice was so low and tight, Maya had to fight to hear him.

"Two so far." Katie held out her arm, pushing up her sleeve to expose a series of still-fresh puncture wounds near her elbow. "He tried making me his third."

Turning his back to them, the man reached behind the refrigerator and pulled out a long scabbard. "Gather the younger ones," he said as he pulled the long blade it contained free from the simple leather. "Hide them in the great room."

"But, Dec—"

"Do it!"

Maya shrank away at the fierce roar in his voice. His jaw was stone, his eyes flashing, and while he held the weapon with practiced ease, the grip he had on its hilt proclaimed his agitation all too loudly.

Katie's mouth opened to argue again, but something in Dec's face made her snap it shut, whirling on her heel to race from the room. He followed immediately after, no glance toward Maya, no sloth to his step, and she was left in the echoing chamber wondering just what in hell had happened.

There was only one way to find out.

Follow him.

Her feet carried her to the doorway, but the hall was already empty of both her captor and the mysterious young woman from the alley. The sounds were louder out here, screams in the distance repeating like ripples on a river's surface through the air. Their direction was obvious, and she turned toward them without a thought about her own escape.

They were screams of pain. Someone, or *someones*, was hurt. She had to help.

She ran into Katie pulling a pair of young teenage girls from a room and propelling them down the hallway. Katie's blouse still hung in tatters on her slim frame, but the blood that had flowed from her wounds had long since dried. In fact, Maya could've sworn the cuts looked smaller somehow, and echoes of her captor's assertions that she would be better by morning rang through her head.

"Where...?" Maya started to say, but stopped when she realized she was talking to empty air. Katie and the girls were already gone, fled to the left at a t-junction in the labyrinth.

Pausing, Maya took a deep breath as she assessed the situation. There were children here, and someone her captor considered dangerous was apparently on the loose and hurting them. If Katie had been instructed to get the girls to safety, that meant the threat was in the opposite direction.

She took off in a dead run down the right-hand corridor.

The sound of crying now accompanied the intermittent screams, ripping through the dust motes to make Maya clumsy in her flight. More than once, she stumbled over her own feet, so that by the time she encountered another person and not a disembodied voice shrieking at the top of its lungs, both her palms were bloody and torn, the scrapes she'd received in the alley refreshed from the rough floorboards.

The young girl brushed her aside to try and flee past her, but Maya's hand shot out and grabbed her arm, desperate to stop her.

"Where is he?" she asked even as the pale teenager slipped from her grasp and kept running.

Maya didn't need an answer. The door through which the young girl had just exited suddenly exploded into the hall, and a slim body crashed into the opposite wall.

It was male, shirtless, skin pale where blood didn't streak it with a vicious war paint. Baggy jeans hung from his lean hips, and there were distinct chafing marks around his wrists and upper chest where something had been rubbing tightly against him. They looked like restraint marks; she'd seen them once or twice when she'd done her psych rotations in school, and Maya's heart ached for the boy as she crouched down to see to his wounds.

Until he lifted his head to stare at her.

He couldn't have been more than sixteen. Dark hair fell across his forehead in a tangled mop, edges jagged as if he'd attempted to cut it himself without a mirror. It didn't hide his eyes, though. Those gleamed with an unnatural light as they fixed on the hands she had outstretched to him. Her chest tightened, choking her, when his lips parted to allow his tongue to lick at them.

Instead of regular teeth, the boy had fangs. Razor sharp and deadly looking. The analytical part of Maya's brain automatically compared them to the puncture wounds she'd seen on Katie's arm, and found them more than commensurate.

A grip of steel shot out and grabbed her wrist, yanking her forward and onto the teenager's lap. In spite of his frail appearance, his strength was incontestable, painful and unyielding as she felt the fragile bones in her wrist start to give, and she could do nothing as he lifted her palm to his mouth.

First, he inhaled deeply. Then, his tongue darted out and lapped at the beads of blood that tangled with the broken skin of her palm. A gurgle of delight escaped his throat, and Maya cried out as he bit into the fleshy pad below her thumb.

The heavy tread of footsteps thundered into the corridor behind her, but it wasn't enough to break the seal he had on her hand. When she twisted to see who was approaching, the silvery whisk of metal went flying past her, and the knife with which Dec had left his room suddenly embedded in the boy's shoulder.

He shrieked in pain, releasing her to grab onto the blade. Strong hands took hold of Maya and pulled her away, but then dumped her unceremoniously off to the side while Dec took her place in front of the boy.

"Danny!" he growled, taking him by the shoulders and pinning him to the wall.

Something inside Maya winced when Danny's fingers began fumbling with the weapon that was still stuck in him, every shake from the bigger man obviously aggravating the injury. Before she could think otherwise, she was crawling forward and pulling at the strong arms to try and break the hold, fear and confusion forgotten in the face of her need to stop Dec before it was too late.

"You're killing him!" Maya said.

He didn't look at her, nor did he loosen his hold. "Not today," Dec said in a low voice.

"She bleeds," Danny whined, and there was his tongue again, licking at his lips as if he hadn't had a drink in months. "Please, Dec, let me have her."

The faint words were what it took to tear Dec's eyes from the boy, and he tilted his head to see the smears of blood Maya's hands were leaving on his forearms. "Damn," he muttered.

"Dec, please, I'm so hungry..."

She couldn't move. Every word he uttered shifted an already nightmarish situation into a horror beyond anything she'd envisioned. The blood from Danny's injury flowed down his chest in skinny rivulets that joined with the other drying streaks. With that much blood loss, he should've passed out long ago. What had she stumbled into?

The young girl who'd fled the scene on Maya's arrival reappeared with a clang, chains that should've been too heavy for her to carry bundled in her arms. She dropped them at Dec's side, and then pulled a small black bag from her pocket to hand it over to him.

"There's only one more left," she said apologetically.

He nodded, as if he hadn't expected to hear otherwise. While he kept one hand firmly planted on Danny's shoulder, Dec tore the bag open with his teeth, spitting out the plastic as he extracted a filled hypodermic.

"What're you giving him?" Maya asked, her curiosity automatic.

"A sedative." He plunged the needle into Danny's arm, heedless of making it easy for him, but the muscles in his tense jaw twitched when the teenager screamed at the contact.

Danny reacted almost immediately, slumping against the wall as his eyes rolled back into his head. As she watched, his fangs retracted, his jaw hung lax, and he looked again like the teenage boy who'd come crashing through the door.

Pulling the blade with a sickening squelch from the shoulder, Dec tossed it aside before grabbing the chains. It seemed to take only a moment for him to wrap them around Danny's chest, looping them around his wrists as if they were tissue paper, and when he straightened with the boy now unconscious in his arms, Maya clambered to her feet to follow him down the hallway.

“Which hospital are you taking him to?” she asked, having to walk twice as quickly as she normally would in order to keep up with the pair.

“I’m not.”

“What? But, he’s bleeding. And if you have to sedate him—”

“I know you’re not stupid, Dr. Sheldon. You know he can’t go to the hospital.”

“At least let me bandage that stab wound.”

Stopping before a closed door, Dec turned eyes the color of stormy oceans and almost as violent to gaze at her so intently that Maya shivered. “You’ve done enough damage for one night,” he said, and pushed the door open to step inside.

Hovering in the doorway, she watched as he dropped Danny onto a single bed that was shoved awkwardly against the wall. The room looked as if it had been a bedroom of some sort at one time, but time and neglect had left a layer of dust on the Spartan furniture that made her nose tickle. Were all the rooms like this?

Gradually, Maya became aware of a growing presence behind her, and stole a glance down the hall to see a group of pale faces staring back. Not one of them could’ve been over twenty years old, but more than half had eyes that glowed with the same silver gleam that had radiated from Danny’s. It wasn’t fear she saw in them. It was hunger, and Maya instinctively took a step back.

The solid wall of a powerfully muscled chest prevented her from moving further. Before she could skitter away, Dec’s arm snaked around her waist to pull her flush against him. “I didn’t want to do this.” The velvet baritone of his voice so close to her ear made her shiver. “But you let Danny get a taste of you. I don’t have a choice any more.”

She felt a cool tingle where his mouth trailed down the side of her neck, and the swift memory of the slice of Danny’s teeth into her hand made her start struggling against Dec’s hold.

“Forgive me,” he whispered.

The sharp prick of fangs sinking into her neck tore the scream from Maya’s throat.

Chapter Three

The initial sting burned.

It wasn't that different from getting blood drawn, except she felt Dec's lips pressed to the curve of her neck, felt his tongue dancing across her skin. His fangs were no longer embedded in her flesh, but he didn't need that particular anchor to keep her in place any more. The drawing that seemed to start someplace in the pit of her pelvis sizzled up along her spine to be sucked away, swallowed down, devoured in languor as the others merely watched.

Each drag felt like an eternity. Each time she felt his lips tense against her, felt the suction his mouth created tighten and trap, Maya lost another inch of her control, her body loosening, the desire to fight back lessening. Her voice faded into a moan, and her eyes fluttered shut, blocking out the sight of the others staring until all she was aware of was the piercing ache permeating her flesh.

Dimly, she became aware of the world tilting around her, the pressure of the ground disappearing from beneath her feet. The scent of clove suddenly filled her nostrils, familiar and yet not, and she wondered distractedly if someone was baking somewhere in these Byzantine depths. Without thinking, she nuzzled against the soft fabric that now brushed along her cheek and let the darkness start seeping into the edges of her consciousness.

Doors opened and closed. The world rocked and swayed. Maya heard a glimmer of voices ebb and flow without breaking through the fog that had settled around her.

Then, silence. And the soft of down as she sank into it.

When she finally found the strength to open her eyes again, Maya was staring blearily up at uneven plaster, disheveled quilts bunched awkwardly beneath her body. The light was low, but the scent that hung in the air didn't need illumination to identify it.

She was back in Dec's room. On his bed. Where did that place Dec?

A shadow loomed in the periphery of her vision.

"Drink this," Dec instructed, and a glass of water was suddenly at her lips.

Pushing up on her elbows, Maya waited until the room finished spinning around her before sipping at the warm liquid. Her neck ached, and she wondered why it hadn't seemed to hurt so much when he was biting her—

It was the word "biting" that made her jump.

"What did you do to me?" Her hand flew to her neck. The demand didn't come out nearly as forcefully as she intended; in fact, her voice sounded rather like a little girl's. Instead of the bite marks she expected to find, Maya felt the smooth, squared edges of a gauze bandage. This wasn't going at all as she intended.

The mattress bowed beneath his weight when he sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to assume that it's just the anxiety of the night that's having you ask so many stupid questions." There was no mockery in his eyes, but there was no complaisance, either. "You should have waited here."

"For what? You haven't even told me your name, let alone what you intend to do to me. And if you think I can just stand back while people are dying, then who's really the stupid one here?"

His mouth twitched. It looked for a moment as if he was going to smile, but his features remained solemn. "I meant to introduce myself at the hospital, but your police intervention forced me to change my plans." He bowed his head, in some antiquated gesture of chivalry. "Declan Jericho. You can call me Dec."

"And you think you're a vampire." The observation tumbled from her mouth before she could stop it.

"There's no thinking involved. It's what I am."

"You can't be," she continued to argue. "There's no such a thing."

Dec sighed. "I thought you were a scientist, Dr. Sheldon. Don't scientists believe what's right in front of their eyes?"

"Not when it's crazy."

"Ah, well, I didn't say that I wasn't a little mad, now did I?" Reaching across her body, he took her right hand and pulled it up to his chest, pressing her palm to the corded muscle without breaking their gazes. "It doesn't beat. Do you have another explanation better than mine?"

It had been a deliberate move on his part, she knew. He could've taken her left hand, which was closer, or he could've offered her his wrist to check for a pulse. But no. Dec had specifically chosen to force Maya to be pulled up into his body, to more closely inhale the scent of musk and clove that seemed to cling to his skin, and to remember those moments of oblivion after he had bitten her. It made the mark on her neck tingle unexpectedly, and she tore her eyes away from his to focus on the broad expanse of his chest right before her.

She couldn't deny facts. His heart was completely still.

"Danny and Katie..." she murmured.

"The same as me. Except ... younger."

Maya tried to pull her hand away, but Dec's grip was firm. At least it explained his strength now. "I don't get it." Her voice was even fainter than it had been, confusion sapping what little strength she'd regained. "I'm still alive. Aren't you supposed to, I don't know, turn me, or make me dinner, or something like that?"

"That wasn't the plan, no." Finally letting her go, Dec let Maya scoot back into the corner of the bed, though he didn't bother rising from it himself. "It's a long story, Dr. Sheldon—"

"Maya."

He paused. "What?"

"You keep calling me Dr. Sheldon and it's just weird. I'm not at the hospital, and you're not my patient. Call me Maya."

Slowly, he shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

She couldn't help but roll her eyes. "So, you can kidnap me, drag me to god knows where, and even bite me, but you can't call me by my first name?" She wondered if he realized what she was doing. If she could get him to think of her by her first name, it would personalize her in his mind. He'd be less likely to hurt her then.

That was the theory, at least.

The silence between them stretched into several minutes as he regarded her with dark eyes. She refused him the satisfaction of turning away, and watched him just as steadily, realizing in those long seconds just how attractive he really was. Under better light than what had been in the alley, she could see the thickness of his sooty lashes, the small

imperfection of a scar just under his chin. She had to fight the unwanted urge to tidy her own appearance; she just knew she looked a fright with half her hair now pulled from its holder to hang in her face.

"Maya, then," he finally said. He stood and turned his back to her. "Like I said, what I have to tell you is going to take some time, and I'd prefer that it get told while we're both reasonably alert." Her eyes widened when he peeled his shirt off, revealing a tightly corded back. "I'll explain everything tomorrow. After a good night's sleep."

Kicking off his boots, Dec padded over to the light switches on the walls and flicked them off, drowning the room in blackness. The complete void that remained drove Maya into the corner of the bed, curling into a tiny ball as she strained to see or hear anything of what might happen next.

Nothing.

Not a breath.

Not a soft tread of a bare foot on the floor

Not even a puff of air across her cheek.

Then, the bed sagged again, the squeak of the springs a screech in her ear that made her jerk back against the wall.

"What are you doing?" Maya challenged.

Strong fingers wrapped around her ankle. "Going to sleep," Dec said. Within seconds, her laces were untied, her foot freed, and the sound of her tennis shoe hitting the floor echoed in the dark.

"Here?"

"It's my bed. You're the one who doesn't really belong in it."

He proceeded to take off her other shoe, though how he could see so clearly in the darkness, Maya had no idea. Must be a vampire thing, she thought.

"So, where am I going to sleep?" she asked, even as she wondered how in hell she was expected to sleep in a situation like this.

"Here." With a firm insistence she couldn't counter, Dec slid his hands up her legs until he reached her hips, taking hold and pulling her back to lie flat on the bed. Within seconds, he was stretched out next to her, the solid muscle of his arm brushing against hers.

"You're kidding, right?" In spite of the lethargy in her bones, Maya sat up and started to clamber down the mattress, determined to escape this time. She didn't get very far. That iron band that had held her firm in the alley almost immediately appeared again, this time around her waist, and pulled her back to her supine position.

He didn't let go of her this time. Rolling both of them onto their sides, Dec spooned behind her, keeping her firmly in place with his arm, the top of her head tucked neatly beneath his chin.

"I can't risk you ending up as someone else's dinner," he said. "This is the only way to keep you safe."

She shook her head at the irony of hearing a vampire saying she was only safe in his arms. "And how exactly does this particular sleeping arrangement accomplish that?"

"If anyone comes in, they'll see you as mine," Dec explained. "My bite does the same, but I can't be sure that's enough. Especially since Danny's had a taste of you now. If he gets free, you'll be the first thing he goes for."

It made sense, in a twisted kind of way, but it didn't stop Maya from stiffening. "You

think he's going to escape again?" Suddenly, having Dec as a protector didn't sound like such a bad idea.

"I don't know." Pause. "Danny keeps surprising me."

"Unpredictable?"

He snorted. "That's one way to put it."

She shivered involuntarily. The boy—the *vampire*, she corrected—didn't necessarily frighten her; he'd seemed more scared than anything else. But then she remembered how quickly he'd honed in on her injury, and how desperate he'd sounded pleading to Dec for more of her blood, and maybe she got scared at what he might do without any restraints holding him back. Just a little bit.

Dec's arm tightened around her, and she felt the soft feather of ... *something* across the top of her head. "You're safe for now," he said, his voice quiet and reassuring. "But you'll have to get over being nervous around Danny. He's one of the reasons you're here."

Maya didn't know what to say to that. There would be no explanations tonight; Dec had made that abundantly clear. But the possibilities behind her abduction seemed to grow exponentially inside her head with each passing second, and she was desperate for some clarity to the whole situation.

It didn't help, either, that she was stuck in the bed of a very attractive man—*vampire*, she was going to have to fight to remember that—and that he seemed to be going out of his way to make this ordeal as easy for her as possible. Her body was well aware of the power in the muscles behind her, and there remained a vestige of the desire that had underlined her reaction to his bite.

It was going to be a very long night.

* * * *

It seemed to take forever for her to fall asleep.

As the minutes passed, and the first hour slipped away, Dec remained vigilant as he listened to her body's rhythms, felt the tension slowly dissipate from her limbs as exhaustion eventually won her over. To be certain, he waited another half an hour, staying still, convincing himself that she was finally asleep, before easing out of bed. It had absolutely nothing to do with enjoying the feel of a warm human body, and a beautiful one at that, sharing his bed for the first time in a decade.

He turned on a lone light by the couch, and settled in to try and get some reading done before attempting to sleep himself. His body burned from her stolen heat, and the surge of electricity that still charged through his veins from her blood made rest impossible to contemplate at the moment. This wasn't how he'd envisioned the night going. Though he'd always intended to bring her back to their refuge, he'd never wanted her to be so closely tied to his quarters, or to have seen the others until he'd had the opportunity to prepare her. He'd watched and researched Dr. Maya Sheldon long enough to know that was the best way to get a positive result from her. Now, however, the rules were changed.

Unbidden, his eyes lifted from his book to settle on her recumbent form. Her thick dark hair was loose from the ponytail she normally kept it in, and the soft waves against her flushed cheeks made her seem younger than her thirty years. It was the first time he'd seen her with her hair down, making her appear surprisingly softer. An illusion, he knew.

Time and time again, Dec had been impressed with how assiduously she pursued her medicine, refusing to let negative diagnoses deter her from continuing to try. It was the primary reason he'd chosen her for this. She would not give up.

But had he crossed a line in biting her? Would she still help him when day came and she was thinking more clearly about her circumstances? He hadn't had a choice; she had to realize that. If she'd only stayed put—

The direction his thoughts were going almost made him laugh out loud.

Had he really expected her not to run to the aid of screaming children? After all, that was how he had known he could get her attention at the hospital. It had been his own fault for not locking her up behind him.

He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Reluctantly, Dec turned his attention away from Maya and back to the textbook in his lap. He couldn't return to his bed until he had better control over his body. At the moment, his every nerve was aware of her presence, his erection straining against the denim of his jeans. He wanted nothing more than to strip out of the rest of his clothes and finish what he'd started with the bite, sinking into her supple flesh in more ways than one. It had been a long time since he'd felt the desire to forget his vows, and even longer since he'd seriously contemplated dismissing them entirely, but something about Maya Sheldon made him wonder if it might not be possible to have it both ways.

She inspired hope. He'd seen it in the faces of her patients at the hospital.

Funny, but Dec had never once considered that just maybe he might be included in those numbers, not even when he'd decided she was his best hope to save Danny and the others.

Chapter Four

She dreamed.

What surprised Maya was her awareness of the fact. That didn't happen for her. Usually, she slept too deeply to remember anything when she woke up, let alone have any sense of cognizance during REM.

So this recognition of the dreams while they actually occurred, this was most definitely unanticipated.

And not altogether welcome.

The normally soothing scent of antiseptic did nothing to settle her skittering nerves as she crept through the darkened hallways of the hospital. The entire place was deserted. No hum of electrical power, no murmur of voices, no sound of any kind. Even Maya's footsteps were silent. The only thing she heard was her hammering heart.

"Hello?" she called out.

She waited.

Only her echo answered her back.

Stopping before the door to the stairwell, she pushed on the handle to find it unyielding beneath her touch. Locked. She'd take the elevator, then.

But jabbing at the elevator's buttons produced nothing. There wasn't even the faraway whirr of its engine as it slid up and down within its shaft.

The bite of claustrophobia began to gnaw somewhere inside her, and Maya quickened her step as she headed toward the other end of the floor. Maybe there would be a way out there. She was off-duty. She had to get home, though for what, she wasn't entirely certain.

A sliver of light peeked through Jason Hsu's barely ajar door. Stopping, she heard him mumbling and realized the nurses must not have paid any attention to her instructions regarding his dyssomnia. That wasn't right. The boy was dying, and they couldn't just ignore treating him, regardless of how they might feel about his chances for survival.

When she pushed the door open, the light blinked out.

Maya froze. The pitch black stifled some of her senses, heightened others. She didn't want to call out to Jason. Maybe he was just talking in his sleep. But she still had to check him.

One step forward.

Another.

The door slipped from her hold and clicked shut behind her.

"Dr. Sheldon?"

She whirled at the sound of Dec's voice, her arms reaching out blindly in search of his solid form. They only met with air.

"Dr. Sheldon?"

Behind her again, prompting her to twist back. Her eyes searched the darkness, and in spite of the inky black, almost immediately found the silvery glow of his eyes.

"What've you done to Jason?" she whispered, though it seemed to boom in the confined space.

"Jason's dead."

He was no longer in front of her, but before she could turn to face him, his powerful hands encircled her waist and pulled her back against his immovable chest. She struggled to try and free herself, clawing at his tensed forearm, but he only pulled her closer, making it impossible not to feel every inch of rigid flesh pressing into her back.

Into her bottom.

Maya's eyes widened, though she saw nothing. He was aroused, the long length of his erection nudging along the crack of her ass, and the hands that held her were already starting to run along the sides of her body, stroking her through her thin top, brushing along the sides of her breasts. Without sight, the sensations he created were amplified, here, there, everywhere, exploding with frissons of both terror and delight along her skin. She involuntarily shuddered.

"You can't be scared," Dec murmured. "You face death every day, Dr. Sheldon. Why would you be afraid of your own?"

"I don't want to die," she replied.

"So, run." A hand slid over to her front, cupping a full breast and squeezing.

"Scream." His other hand fell to the flat of her abdomen, pushing her pelvis back against his straining cock. "Fight."

The second she felt the cool wet on the side of her neck, Maya's feet lashed back, searching to connect with muscles that would force him to loosen his grip. His response was to pick her up as if her weight was a mere feather to bear, to make the world swing wildly around her as she tried to find the floor again, all the while sucking and licking at the sinew along her shoulder.

"That's it." His voice was a husky growl. "That's the spirit I'm looking for. Is this what you show your patients? Is this how you get them to love you, even as they die under your care?"

"They don't ... all ... die," she gasped. Her defenses were weakening. With a last measure of desperation, her head flew back, connecting with his jaw with a resounding crack and taking him completely by surprise.

Dec's arms loosened. Maya slid to the floor, scrambling along the cold tile to get away. A fresh cut stung her scalp, and a trickle of blood dripped down her neck from where it bled through her hair, but she was oblivious to anything but her own escape.

Thin fingers wrapped around her wrist in the dark, drawing a scream from Maya's throat. "Don't, don't," she repeated as she skidded forward, but it wasn't Dec's broad chest she encountered. It was a slimmer man, skinny even, and when silvery eyes turned to her, a glimmer of light reflecting off an exposed fang, she realized who it was.

"Let her go, Danny," Dec ordered from behind her.

"I'm hungry," the vampire whined.

"She's not here for that."

"What else could she possibly be good for?" She heard the smacking of his lips before feeling the cool slither of a tongue across her palm. "How does she taste, Dec? Like honey, I bet."

"You'll never know."

All of a sudden, Maya was wrenched free from Danny's grasp, tossed aside like a forgotten doll. The sound of fighting filled the room, the screech of metal across the tiled floor, the protesting creaks of bedsprings being upturned. Beneath it all, the two men

remained silent, except for the occasional grunt when contact was made.

Yet, she didn't run away. She didn't flee. She remained stuck to her spot as the fight went on, hypnotized by the rhythms of their blows.

The room fell silent. The whisper of weight settling on the mattress thickened the air instead of sounding through.

"He won't hurt you now," Dec said from the darkness. His voice was weary, and she could imagine his broad shoulders slumped in defeat.

"What about you?" she couldn't help but ask.

"I never wanted to hurt you."

A slight breeze brushed over her cheek, and she turned toward it to feel him hovering behind her again. He didn't touch her this time. This time, he held himself away, mere inches from contact. Had he been warm, she would've been able to feel his body heat radiating from his skin, but now, all she sensed was the strength housed within his muscles, the might he was so carefully containing.

"What do you want, then?" A whisper. That's all it was. She didn't have the nerve to voice the query any louder.

He sighed, and the air was cool where it tickled across her skin. "Forgive me."

His fangs sank into her neck.

Her eyes flew open.

Staring blindly at the wall in front of her, Maya listened to her heart panicking for escape, determined to make its presence known. The vestiges of her dream clung to her skin with tiny claws, and it took a full minute for her to realize that not everything she felt was a remainder of her imagination.

At her neck, Dec's mouth suckled gently at the exposed skin around the edges of the bandage, lapping at the soft skin with a lethargy that belied any provocation on his part. She stiffened, waiting for the teeth to come, just as they had in her dream, just as they had after her encounter with Danny. Perhaps the pain wouldn't be that great this time.

But they didn't.

All she felt was the wet probe of his mouth, the careful attention of his tongue. His arm was still looped around her waist, holding her firmly against him as he'd told her would be necessary before she fell asleep, and now, there was the added pressure of his erection nestled firmly against her bottom.

Just like in her dream.

No wonder her mind had gone there.

Her body betrayed her. It had been far too long since she'd experienced any sort of intimate contact with the opposite sex, like the almost tender exploration of his mouth or the definition of his arousal. Her thighs trembled in response, her skin hot and tight. She struggled not to close her eyes again and give over to the sensations he was creating. She needed to remember she was here against her will, that he'd trapped and kidnapped her for purposes yet to be disclosed.

His thumb brushed along the underside of her breast.

A whimper escaped her.

The movement at her throat immediately stopped. Before Maya could react, Dec leapt from the bed, the blankets that had been in disarray around their legs now completely gone. She rolled over to see him go straight for the refrigerator, pulling out the sports bottle and draining its contents without a glance back at what he'd left.

“Are you OK?” She blurted the question before she could stop it.

It took him a moment to respond. Licking at his lips, Dec kept his eyes averted from hers as he tossed the empty sports bottle aside. “I’m sorry. It’s not an excuse, but I wasn’t ... really awake. It’s been a long time for me.” He shook his head, and repeated, “I’m sorry.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. He was clearly distressed about his behavior, which, considering the fact that he was a vampire, made no sense whatsoever. Weren’t they supposed to be monsters? Killing people, feeding off their blood, all that Dracula nonsense? She’d never really given it much thought, to be honest. There were enough real monsters in the world vying for her attention without needing to go looking for the pretend ones. Except he wasn’t so pretend, was he? He’d bitten her. She’d seen his face. She’d seen Danny’s, seen it change. Like he’d told her before they turned in, she couldn’t argue with facts displayed before her very eyes.

“Do you need anything?” he was saying. He stood before the wardrobe and pulled out a plastic bag. “I have extra clothes for you, and some toiletries, but I wasn’t sure how long you’d be staying.”

“You still haven’t told me what’s going on.” Toiletries? What kind of kidnapper bought toothpaste for his hostage? “Something about a long story?”

His hands stilled. “Are you sure you don’t want a shower first?”

“You’re stalling.”

“No, I just don’t know where to start.” He dropped the bag with a sigh and started to pace, every step feral with an energy that begged to be unleashed. “It took me a long time to find someone I thought could do it. I just never stopped to consider what would happen once I got that someone here.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I suppose I’m not.” Stopping, he turned dark eyes that seemed to strip all the layers from her flesh, leaving her exposed and squirming on the bed. “Do you believe me now? That I’m a vampire?”

Maya nodded, her hand rising to finger the bandage on her neck. “I have to. I can’t ignore what I saw. Or felt.”

That seemed to deflate some of his tension, and Dec’s features softened to a facsimile of the friendliness he’d exhibited at points the night before. “That makes this easier. Danny and I aren’t the only ones who live here. Last count, there were twenty-three of us.” He paused, frowning as something triggered in his memory. “Sorry. Twenty-one. For a second there, I forgot what Danny did last night.”

“Why do you keep him chained up like that?”

“Because he’s dangerous. And before you say it, I *know* I should kill him. If he gets out...” He stopped, passing a strong hand over his face. “Danny’s why you’re here. Danny and the others. They’re sick. I need you to figure out how to cure them.”

Out of all the possibilities she’d considered, this nowhere near resembled any of them. Slowly, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, sitting on the edge of the mattress to regard him more directly. “If he’s irrational,” she said carefully, “you need a psychiatrist. My specialty is—”

“Pediatric oncology. I know. I picked you for a reason, Maya. I didn’t do all this without a plan. There’s too much at stake.”

It explained a lot. Calling her by name, the caution he took in kidnapping her. There

was one thing, though, that didn't make sense.

"You're not seriously trying to tell me he's got cancer, are you?" Her eyes narrowed as she gauged his reaction. "Aren't vampires already dead? How can you catch a human disease?"

"You can't. But it's killing him, just the same."

"What is?"

"The poison in his blood."

"Then you need the antidote, not a doctor."

"I need you."

She rose from the bed, walking in front of Dec to force him to look at her. "Is this some kind of vampire hospital, then? Your last doctor ended up as a main course and now I'm the replacement?"

For a moment, his eyes flared silver. "There's been nobody else. And no, this isn't a hospital. It's a haven for these kids. Out on the streets, they'd be dead within a week. Here, they stand a shot at survival."

It was the use of the word "kids" that made her pause. Memories from the night before, ghostly faces staring at her in hunger, rose before her mind's eye, and Maya took a step backward, her stomach plummeting as she realized the full extent of her circumstances. "They're all vampires?" When he nodded, something inside her snapped. "They're *children*!"

"Which is why I wanted you. I've seen you with your patients. You don't give up on them. That's what Danny and the others need."

"The others." They were all sick. "How many?"

His eyes darkened. "Nineteen. Danny's got it the worst. The others don't need to be restrained. Not yet, anyway."

Her mouth clamped shut. *Not yet*. She hated those words.

When she tried to march past, Dec grabbed her arm, dragging her back. "You're not leaving." His eyes flashed with dangerous glints. "I can't allow that."

"It's a waste having me here," Maya countered. "I can't help them. I don't know anything about vampire physiology. Even if I did, why would I save a bunch of monsters, just so they can get back on the streets and eat people?"

Dec shook his head. "You're wrong about that. About them. Killing for vampires is about instinct." Though he only glanced at the bandage on her neck, even that brief intensity was enough to make her shiver. "Instincts can be honed." He let her go then, suddenly, abruptly, and strode toward the door without looking back. "You need to clean up. The smell of the blood on you will make it worse on the others when you examine them."

He wasn't tolerating any more discussion on the topic. Falling into step behind him, Maya tried making sense of all the new information she had, feeling each thought jostle inside her skull with a ferocity that was already threatening to explode into a migraine. It was going to take time to sort it all out, time she wasn't sure she had before children started dying.

Or she did.

Chapter Five

The bathroom was dim and old-fashioned with copper-colored taps as big across as her hand and the distinct sound of scuttling behind the water-stained plaster walls, but the shower was scalding hot, and Dec left her alone with every amenity she could've wanted. She bent her head beneath the pounding droplets. How was she supposed to turn her back on somebody needing her help?

But these are monsters, a small voice said inside her. *Save them, and you condemn others.*

Dec didn't believe so.

Dec's one of them.

Dec was different.

So, he didn't bite you?

The little voice inside Maya's head was notorious for throwing logic and fact back in her face.

As the water spilled over her shoulders, Maya's fingers went to the exposed bite on her neck, touching the small raised holes where his fangs had pierced her skin. The memory of his whispered plea for absolution made her shiver in spite of the hot water, and she couldn't help but wonder what could've happened to Dec to make him change his ways. He'd seemed genuinely contrite that he'd bitten her. She supposed it could've been his fear that he'd go too far and lose the aid he'd gone to such lengths to retrieve, but she wasn't convinced that was all of it. There had to be more. After all, why was he so concerned about saving all these young vampires?

Though stepping out of the shower meant facing these questions head-on, she finally turned off the water and grabbed her towel to stave off the chills that erupted at the heat's absence. She dressed swiftly and was running a comb through her wet hair when a knock sounded at the door.

"May I come in?" Dec asked from the other side.

"Like I can stop you," Maya muttered, but called out approval anyway.

He didn't actually enter. He just stood in the entrance, filling it from jamb to jamb. She was surprised he didn't have to duck.

"You could, actually," he said.

Maya frowned. "I could what?"

"Stop me. I wouldn't have come in if you'd said you weren't ready."

Dismay mingled with embarrassment in Maya's eyes, and she turned away to finish her hair. "You heard that, huh? I didn't mean—"

He waved her apology away. "It's all right. I just thought you should know. There's not much that I can't catch, so that's your warning."

She didn't know what else to say, other than a murmured, "Thanks."

"The others are still asleep," Dec continued. "I wanted to take this time to show you around a little bit."

"When I'm not a distraction, you mean."

"Well, yes."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "Why bother? I thought I was a

prisoner here. Since when do prisoners get grand tours?"

He surprised her by not backing down from the challenge in her voice. "Because I expect you're going to prove to me that I can trust you. You'll need to know how to get around when that happens."

"I haven't said I'm going to do it yet."

After pulling her hair back, she reached for a clean bandage, only to be stopped by Dec's fingers around her wrist.

"Leave it exposed."

Maya frowned. "Why? So the others can see it?"

"It'll reinforce the idea that they're not to touch you." His thumb stroked the soft skin over her pulse point, but he didn't seem aware of what he was doing. "For a lot of them, it's been months since they've seen someone breathing."

"But then how do they eat?"

"Strays. The occasional rat. What I can steal from the hospital. I've been weaning them as best I can, but..." A shadow passed over his face when he glanced down at the bite mark on her hand. "...I'm not always as successful as I'd like to be."

He let her go at that, stepping away to leave her gaping at him in disbelief. "I don't get it. Why?"

The candor he'd been displaying was extinguished so quickly, it left her breathless. "Let's get this over with," Dec said, ignoring her question. "They'll be waking soon."

Scrambling to gather her things, Maya scowled at his back. This habit of walking out of a room without waiting for her was going to have to be addressed. She wasn't going to spend the next few days following him around like a puppy, waiting for him to notice her.

* * * *

No matter how much he tried, Dec couldn't seem to shake Maya from his awareness. She was everywhere—always there in the periphery of his vision, her scent floating on the air like a heated honey perfume, the rhythm of her body echoing inside his own immobile flesh. He'd stayed out of his bed for as long as he could the night before, willing his arousal to diminish, but had finally succumbed to exhaustion and crawled in behind her. He had to. Should one of the others barge in with an emergency and see her unprotected, there was no telling how they would react. She was his responsibility to keep safe if he wanted her to succeed with an antidote.

He couldn't even blame it on the newness of having a human around. Over the past couple of months, he'd spent quite a bit of time around Sisters of Mercy Hospital, observing the doctors, speaking with patients and their families. He'd heard the accolades for Dr. Sheldon early on, and started looking into her as a possibility for his needs. But when he'd finally seen her in person, Dec had had his first reconsideration on his potential choice. She seemed too young to be so adept, too captivating not to be a distraction if he selected her for the task. He didn't believe that she would be able to hold her own among his covey.

Then, he met a little boy named Evan. Evan changed his mind.

The nine-year-old boy had been referred to Sisters of Mercy as a last resort. Diagnosed with recurrent nasopharyngeal cancer, his doctors had convinced his parents that his only hope was neck dissection surgery, a prospect which terrified the little boy. After Maya had her first consult, she'd announced that they should attempt a round of

chemotherapy first. A new clinical study was producing excellent results with recurrent NPC, and since Evan's parents had opted for radiation therapy the first time around, Maya saw no point in not at least giving the drugs a chance. Nobody wanted to listen to her. She argued, and she fought, and then, desperate to convince them to try, she took every finding she could get her hands on to back her decision to Evan's home and family, including the testimonial of a little girl near Evan's age who had had unparalleled success.

When Dec met Evan, the boy was in the middle of his first drug cycle, but already, he showed signs of beating the cancer that had been a part of his life for nearly two years. Every other word out of his mouth was praise for Dr. Maya; his adoration for her literally made him glow.

Dec couldn't argue with results. After all, that was what he was most interested in.

It had taken little time to learn what he could about her. She was a workaholic and spent most of her time at the hospital, whether she was scheduled or not. Her circle of friends was limited to colleagues, and as for a personal life, well, she had none. Her patients were her life, and it was that dedication that Dec wanted to tap into so badly.

Walking through the corridors of his home, showing Maya the few rooms that she would need access to while she stayed with him, Dec maintained a neutral façade, deliberately keeping a pace ahead of her so he couldn't see the perceptive gleam in her eye as she assessed her situation, or the slight sway of her hips as she strode purposefully along. One of the things he found most curious about her was her complete obliviousness to her own charms. She wasn't beautiful by conventional standards, but there was no denying the intelligence in her gaze, or the humor in her full mouth. It was the face of the girl next door with all the naughty secrets and the discretion never to tell, someone he wouldn't have hesitated to turn back when he was doing so. Eternity would be entertaining with someone like Maya around.

But, contemplating eternity wasn't something he allowed any more. There were other, more important things to consider. If he could keep his own response to Maya under control, everything would be all right.

She didn't volunteer any questions throughout the entire tour. Even when they were in the antiquated kitchen, she remained silent, though Dec had expected that she'd ask about food. It wasn't until they were standing outside his room again that she spoke up.

"What exactly is this place?"

He paused in opening the padlock. "I told you. A haven—"

"No." She gestured around them. "I meant, what *is* this place? I know we're underground. We came down too many stairs for us not to be. But, all these rooms..."

"Oh." He finally understood what it was she was asking. "It was a hospital. The quake of 1906 destroyed the foundation and it sank into the fault, but the city just built over it instead of tearing it down."

"And I suppose you're going to tell me that you were there when it happened."

When he glanced back at her, there was a mixture of amused curiosity gleaming in her eyes, setting Dec unexpectedly at ease. "You're not saying I look a hundred years old, are you?"

She smiled. "It's the crows' feet that give you away."

The air between them was infinitely more relaxed upon their return to his room than it had been on their departure, and Dec stepped aside to allow Maya to enter first. She

hung back for a moment, clearly debating something, and then moved past him with a rush of lilac-scented shampoo. Though the side of her arm barely skimmed his shirtfront, it sent a jolt straight to his cock, making him harden, making his body come to an alert that had nothing to do with a threat and everything to do with her allure. Or, perhaps they were the same thing.

“I’ll do it.”

So focused on containing his insurgent nerves, he almost didn’t hear her. “What did you say?”

She stood in front of the books, her fingers trailing over the spines. “I’ll do it,” she repeated, louder, more sure. Her hand paused over a thick volume, then plucked it from its mooring, opening it to peruse its pages. “There need to be rules about this, though. There’ll be things I need. Like your word that if I do manage to save them, they’re not going to turn around and kill half the Bay Area.”

He’d never doubted that she wouldn’t at least try, but hearing the words fall so easily from her lips, especially in light of her earlier protests, was enough to bring the first genuine rush of joy to Dec’s gut since he’d managed to bring the last of the children to the refuge. That had been seven months previous, and the possibility that there might be a light at the end of the tunnel made him sag against the jamb.

“I expected rules. As for my word, I swear to you that if I find out one of them is killing, I’ll stake them myself. I’m not doing this so more blood can be spilled.”

“Good.” She paused. “Thank you.”

“What’s first on the list? If you need supplies, I’ll need a list.”

“It’s too early for that. First things first, I have to know about your physiology, how vampire bodies work, what your biological needs are. Do you have any books that’ll help me with that?”

It dawned on Dec that she was deliberately not looking at him. Though her voice was calm, her heart had started beating faster the moment he’d turned his attention to her. More than that, an underlying musk emanated from her pores, heady and wanting, mingling with her natural scent. Though his arousal had slightly abated with her announcement, it returned now with a throbbing vengeance.

“We’re not exactly known for being scholars,” he said softly.

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Maya sighed and placed the book she held back on the shelf in order to extract another. “I’ll have to conduct a physical examination on someone, then. Someone healthy. I need a baseline for comparison.”

“I’ll get Katie.” He backed to the open door, grateful for the reason to leave.

“There’s a basic med kit beneath the bed. You can help yourself. Anything else you may need, just write it down and I’ll get it for you.”

With that, he was gone, free from the lingering effects Maya’s proximity had on his senses. Purpose made it easier to forget about his own desires, but the discipline he’d gained over the past two years seemed to be flagging. Though Dec knew the situation was exacerbated because he’d been forced to drink from her, knowing didn’t ease the tension ribboned throughout his flesh. He could still feel the effects of her blood in his system, and while the demon within was ravenous for what it provided, the rest of him was terrified at losing his control.

He wouldn’t.

He couldn’t.

Purpose. He must focus on his purpose.

* * * *

He woke to the familiar pressure of the chains around his chest, though the miasma that had drenched Danny's mind seemed clearer than it had been in days. He was back in his bed, bound by Dec's rule, but the usual pangs of hunger that turned his thoughts to pestilent ruin were absent.

Only a brief attempt to remember why was necessary.

The sharp memory of the woman's blood on his tongue made Danny's mouth water, his fangs emerging unbidden to prick at his lower lip. She wasn't just an illusion, he realized. She was real. The spirit that had flowed through her veins still electrified him, still had his nerves humming with the desire for more. His mind raced with questions. Who was she? Dec's, obviously. The way Dec had pulled her away made that all too clear. But he hadn't smelled Dec's scent on her skin, nor had he tasted it in her blood. Was Dec bringing humans into their home again? Why?

She'd also thought Dec was killing him, leaping to defend Danny with an insistence that would've testified to loyalty if he even knew who she was. It didn't make sense, but then, little did in his world these days.

At least he could think straight. For that, Danny was grateful. These moments were too few and far between these days.

The scratch at the door made him try and sit up on instinct, but the chains kept him firmly in place. His eyes narrowed when Katie slipped inside, a tray in her hands, though she hesitated before approaching the bed.

"Traitor," he spat, unthinking.

Her face remained immobile, but her gaze ducked as she took a few steps closer.

"Are you hungry?"

"For that pig swill? Hardly."

She nodded, accepting the response without question. Setting down the tray, she turned and headed back for the door.

"Katie?" It was as if something had clicked over in his head, making it impossible to keep the pleading tone from his voice as he called after her.

"Yes?" she replied without coming back into the room.

"Did I...?" He needed to know, but the words refused to come.

Her eyes remained averted. "It was Annie and Christopher this time. Dec got to you before you were able to hurt anyone else."

"OK."

But it wasn't OK. And as Katie left him in the gloom of his cell, Danny stared up at the ceiling remembering the faces of the two young vampires who'd been in his way last night. He didn't know why the urges came, and he didn't know how to control them when they did, but it didn't stop the regret that always flooded through him afterward. It never lasted long, though, and each time someone else died, the brief respite he had after an episode was shorter.

He'd never been this terrified before. Neither in this life, nor his human one. He just wanted it all to end.

Chapter Six

She had everything ready by the time the door opened again. “This is what I’m going to need,” she said, handing over her list. “My first exam will be pretty basic for now, but with those, I’ll be able to get some more minute readings. They’ll especially help after I’ve had the chance to examine Danny.” She glanced between Dec and Katie, but their faces were inscrutable. “Am I right in assuming you’re almost out of sedatives for him? That’s what that girl meant last night, right?”

Dec nodded. “I’ll have to get some more. At least we won’t need it tonight. He should still be sluggish from last night’s dosage.”

Maya did the calculation in her head, and then frowned. “What are you giving him?”

When he turned from her to sit on the couch, keeping his attention on the paper in his hand instead of on her, she knew he didn’t want to tell her. “It doesn’t matter. It works.”

Her temper bristled, and without considering her actions, Maya swept past the waiting Katie to stand before him, snatching the page away to force him to look at her. “Wrong answer. You make me his doctor, you make me responsible for everything that goes into his system. If you don’t tell me what it is, I’ll take him off it and you can just suffer the consequences while I try to find something else as effective.”

Dec’s lips thinned as he regarded her. “Midazolam,” he finally said.

Some of the frustration faded. “Well, that’s not—”

“With a saquinavir chaser.”

Maya’s jaw dropped. “Are you trying to kill him?”

“Actually, technically, Danny’s already dead,” Katie volunteered from behind.

“Stay out of this,” Maya snapped.

“She’s right, though.” Dec stood, forcing Maya to lift her eyes in order to look up at him. “When Danny first started getting unmanageable, we used midazolam all on its own to give us some peace. It stopped working as he got worse, and none of the other drugs I tried had any effect at all.”

“But saquinavir inhibits the body’s attempts to clear the midazolam out of the system naturally.”

“Exactly. Which is why it still works on him. Trust me. I’m well aware of the side effects of combining the two, and I worried about it at first. You think I want to put him into a perpetual coma? Why would I be bothering trying to do this at all if I thought that was an acceptable alternative?”

“How long have you been using the combination?”

“About two months.”

“Then all I can say is that you’re lucky you haven’t made the situation worse.”

“I couldn’t.” Dec sighed, the fight suddenly gone from his shoulders. “Even that’s starting to be ineffective.”

“What do you mean? What’s happening to him?”

When it became clear Dec wasn’t going to respond, Katie said, “The sedatives used to knock Danny out for at least two days. This last one only lasted twelve hours.”

“He’s developing a resistance, then,” Maya said. “It just means switching his meds to something new.”

“No.” The authority in Dec’s voice drew her attention back to him, but he no longer stood in front of her, moving past to stand at the wall of books. “It’s part of the progression of the disease. It’s only a matter of time before everything stops working completely.”

There was so much more he wasn’t telling her. Every fiber of his body practically screamed it at her. This wasn’t the time for pursuing information, however. Right now, Maya needed to get her baseline data so she could draw her own unbiased conclusions.

“This isn’t over,” she warned Dec. “You have to come clean with me at some point.”

“I know.” Somehow, he made it sound like doing so would be the end of the world for him.

Maya turned back to Katie, who hovered uncertainly by the table. “All right,” she said, her tone all business. “Let’s do this.”

*

It was mildly disconcerting with Dec hovering in the background, but since Katie clearly didn’t care about stripping down in front of him, Maya let it go, concentrating on the task at hand. Of course, it helped that he got distracted by his own dealings. Pulling a cell phone from his pocket, Dec settled on the couch making calls, the deep rumble of his voice unexpectedly soothing as he spoke to various people about her supplies.

As it turned out, there was little she could actually do with Katie. Blood pressure and pulse were obviously out, and without more sophisticated equipment, she had to resort to a mere musculature examination. She was able to gather samples, but how she was going to analyze them, Maya still wasn’t sure. Most of her time was spent asking questions, and when Katie couldn’t answer them, Dec broke away from whatever business he was conducting so that he could reply for her.

Finally, Maya wrote down the last of her notes and stepped away from where Katie sat on the edge of the bed. “That’s it. I’m done.”

“Do I get a lollipop for being a good patient?” Katie grabbed her clothes. “Blood-flavored would be nice, but cherry will do in a pinch.”

Maya grimaced at the macabre joke, but before she could answer, Dec said, “If you want the night off from duty, take it.”

Katie’s face lit up. “Serious?”

“The usual rules, but, yeah. Go have some fun.”

Organizing her kit at the table, Maya watched them out of the corner of her eye as Katie quickly got dressed again. She waited until the young woman practically ran from the room before asking her question.

“Who is she to you?” She kept her tone neutral, though the curiosity regarding their relationship was killing her. “Did you turn her?”

“No, Katie doesn’t know who sired her. She was drunk when it happened. Frat house, I think she said. I met her in ninety-nine, but she’d already been a vampire for a few years at that point.”

“So, you’ve been together for awhile now.”

His eyes narrowed. His intense scrutiny made her squirm, shimmers of something akin to anticipation causing her hands to tremble slightly as she placed the last of the tools in the bag. “You ask a lot of personal questions. Why?”

“It’s my job.”

“I’m not your patient.”

I know that, she wanted to shout, but took her tension out on the clasp of the bag. “Forget it. I was just curious. Obviously, it’s none of my business who you’re sleeping with.” But her temper was starting to take over, some of the frustration at being so out of control bleeding over into her words. “I’m just the one you’ve kidnapped, after all, and the one you asked to help cure your little gang of horrors, not to mention the one you turned into your own personal chew toy—”

His grip was tight around her wrist when he grabbed her, snapping her into silence with a painful jerk. “Katie was Danny’s best friend before he got sick.” He wasn’t angry, but there was a stiff control to his voice that surprised her. “She’s been my right arm through all of this, but that’s all.”

“Oh.” She felt mildly childish for being so petulant about the girl, especially in light of the fact that Maya was the outsider here. “I just thought ... never mind. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

He didn’t release her, though. If anything, his hand tightened, and the distance between them lessened as he pulled her slowly against him.

The tip of his tongue appeared between his parted lips, moistening them when she hadn’t realized they were dry. As she watched, the blue of his eyes lightened as the silver threatened to erupt, but there was no sign of his fangs, no other indication of his other face.

“Say anything you wish. But you’re right. I’ve put you in an awkward situation. The least I can do for you is give you some answers.”

Her throat tightened, but the questions that had been a tumult just moments earlier seemed to have scattered as dust in a heavy wind. She hunted for something to say, some way to respond to the leeway he’d extended, but came up with little that didn’t make her look like a complete lunatic.

The corner of his mouth lifted the longer she stayed silent. “I think this is the longest I’ve seen you go without speaking.”

“You’ve only known me a day.”

Dec shook his head. “I couldn’t have brought a stranger into my home.”

“Do you have any idea how weird it is to hear a vampire talking about his home?” Her eyes flickered around the well-lit interior. “None of this is what I would have imagined. It’s all too civil.”

“Don’t be fooled, Dr. Sheldon.” And the silver was a little brighter, his voice huskier. “Don’t trust anything you see.”

“Maya.” It was a breath, automatic. She wasn’t so sure why she felt the need to make the distinction to him.

His gaze fell to the curve of her throat, and his tongue swept hungrily across his teeth again. Slowly, his head bent, and she stood, frozen, waiting with thudding heart for the contact.

It never came. Instead, Dec stopped, millimeters from her skin, and inhaled deeply. “Before last night,” he said, and his voice was a ghost of a whisper, “it had been two years since I’d had a taste of blood from the source. I forgot how intoxicating it can be.”

Unconsciously, Maya shivered, but between the circle of his fingers around her wrist and her own traitorous body, she found it impossible to move away. “What is it you want?”

“You.” The answer came without pause. “You make me want to forget my vow.”

She smiled. She couldn't help it. "They have vampire monks?"

"Who said it was a vow of celibacy?"

His mouth was on her then, sucking at the sinew of her neck, pulling at the same patch of skin where he'd bitten her with such a ferocity that it made her cry out from the sharpness. Pressing against him, Maya felt the hard line of his arousal pushing into her stomach, and her own body responded in kind, her thighs tingling from the anticipation of further contact, her breasts tender for more of his touch. Dec's free hand slid around to settle in the small of her back, forcing her to mold to him, and she gasped at the sudden crush against her clit.

A growl rumbled through his chest, and the pull of his mouth was gone, replaced by the slide of his tongue, up her neck, beneath her hair, tracing a route to the soft skin below her ear where it settled for a new feast. Releasing his grip around her wrist, his hand stayed between their torsos to seek out the curve of her breast, brushing against her hard nipple with a tantalizing tease.

"Dec..." she breathed, though the effort to speak was hampered by the desire to use her mouth for anything other than words. "What ... what are we...?"

But she couldn't finish the question.

Dec stiffened against her, his fingers stilling where they'd been stroking the underside of her breast, his lips pulling away from the heat of her skin. "Maya..." he said, and his voice was rough with something more than desire.

When he pulled away, she saw the dark anger in his eyes, and frowned. "What's wrong?" *That*, she could ask.

He swallowed once, twice, and his gaze dropped for a second to her throat before he stepped back. "You're here for Danny. This can't happen."

Snatching her list from where he'd left it on the couch, he whirled and strode to the doorway, leaving her frustrated and more than a little confused. "I'll send Katie around to take you to go see Danny. He should still be out of it enough for you to be safe around him without my presence."

"Where are you going?"

"Out. You need supplies. And I need more drugs."

She was left staring at a closed door, the distinct sound of the padlock echoing through the heavy wood as he clicked it into place. What the hell just happened? He was running hot and cold, treating her like a friend one moment, a would-be lover the next, and then turning around and reminding her of her imprisonment without so much as an explanation as to what was going through his head.

Of course, she wasn't entirely sure what was going through her own head. It wasn't entirely fair of her to expect answers to questions she couldn't satisfy herself.

With a sigh, Maya went to look over her notes on Katie's physiology. She might as well concentrate on the task she was brought here to accomplish. The sooner she figured out how to treat Danny and the others, the sooner she could get away from this place. And from Dec.

* * * *

He found Katie in her room, sorting through a pile of clothes to find something to wear out later that night. For a moment, Dec hesitated as he watched. It had been a long time since she'd seemed so carefree; she was just a ghost of the party vamp she used to

be. That was his influence, he knew, but it was also the wear of Danny's illness. She wore the responsibility of that like a death shroud, and it took a minor miracle to get her to discard it on the odd occasion.

It looked like she was approaching this night of freedom with gusto. For some reason, that pleased him.

"Don't go black," he commented when she picked up a tiny scrap of a skirt. He wasn't even going to bother mentioning that it would barely cover her ass. Nothing he ever ventured in the realm of clothing criticism was ever received well.

"Why not? Black's sexy."

"Black's boring. You look better in color."

She held it front of her and looked down to examine the effect before tossing it aside. "Plus, there's blood on it," Katie said. "I'll look cheap, and not in a good way."

He frowned. "Blood?"

"Not human, so stop right there. It's Danny's."

The unease settled, and the reminder of why he was there came slamming back. "I need you to take Maya to go see him. She needs to do the exam now that she's had a look at you."

"Why can't you do it?"

"I'm going out."

She looked up then, and really noticed Dec this time, her eyes narrowing as they swept over him. He knew it was pointless to pretend nothing had just happened back in his room, but when Katie turned away and spoke again, her bluntness still managed to take him by surprise.

"You should just sleep with her and get it out of your system," she said, picking up a long red skirt. "How long has it been for you?"

His anger flared, though not necessarily in response to her direct question. "That's none of your business."

Katie shrugged. "Probably not, unless it messes with your head while we're trying to do this for Danny."

"It's not—"

"You bit her, Dec. Don't try and tell me that's not huge for you."

Folding his arms across his chest was as much to keep himself from lashing out at the girl as it was a defensive maneuver. "I had to. Danny got a taste of her, and then all anyone could smell was blood. I didn't have a choice but to make sure they knew she was off-limits."

"Off-limits to everyone but you, you mean."

"Yes." He caught her raised eyebrow and felt a swell of panic rise in his throat. "I mean, no. She's off-limits to me, too. We need her for Danny."

"There are other doctors out there."

"*She's* the only one who can do this."

"That's what you keep saying. I'll believe it when I see it."

He didn't have time for this, and said as much, turning on his heel to leave the room. Katie's soft voice stopped him from a stormy exit, and Dec glanced back over his shoulder to see her watching him, her eyes melancholy.

"Make all the promises to yourself that you want, but it will never change the fact of what you are. It only has to be that bad if you make it so. Isn't that what you're always

telling the kids?”

He left. He didn't know how to respond to his own arguments, especially when they rang with truth.

Chapter Seven

As she followed Katie through the labyrinthine corridors, Maya pretended she was on her rounds at the hospital. Danny was sick. He needed her help. Forget about the fact that he was growing increasingly dangerous, both to himself and to others, and forget that he'd bitten her with barely a moment's hesitation less than twelve hours previously. After all, Dec had done the same thing, and she wasn't the weaker for it.

There was no reason to be anxious. Both men were vampires. Both men had tasted her blood. She wasn't afraid of Dec, ergo, she wouldn't be afraid of Danny.

A door slammed ahead of them, followed by the patter of running feet. Katie rounded the corner to immediately catch a small form barreling forward, scooping the child up and containing the struggles as it fought against her.

"Stop it!" Katie snapped, and there was the distinct flare of silver in her eyes. "What's going on?"

The child—a little boy, around the age of ten, Maya figured—became a dead weight in Katie's arms, dropping his head to her shoulder and sobbing. Dirty blond hair obscured his face from Maya's view, but his voice was more than clear.

"Danny's mean!"

The soothing hand Katie had been stroking over the child's back stopped. "Don't tell me you were in Danny's room."

The child stiffened. "He ... he ... called for me," he said.

"And how many times has Dec told you to stay away from Danny? Huh? How many?" Unceremoniously, she released her hold on the boy, letting him fall with a plop to the floor. "Dec's going to kill you if he finds out."

The boy's eyes widened, the tears all of a sudden stopped. "You won't tell him, will you, Katie?"

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

There was a pause as he clearly gave this some serious thought. Then, a wicked gleam appeared in his eyes, enough to make Maya take a step backward.

"If you do, I'll tell him how Danny got free last night in the first place."

Her face contorted into a mask of rage. "He wouldn't believe you."

"You sure?"

Silence filled the corridor. All thoughts of the child's earlier upset were gone as the two vampires squared off, until finally, Katie gave a sound of disgust and shook her head.

"Don't let me catch you with Danny again," she threatened.

The child nodded, and with barely a glance at Maya, took off running in the opposite direction.

Without notice, Katie began walking again, her heels echoing in the empty hall. Maya had to rush to catch up to her, but when she did so, she felt the reluctance creep in and temper her teeming questions.

They stopped in front of a closed door, presumably the one to Danny's room though Maya would never have been able to pick it out. Katie paused, her hand curled around the doorknob. "Before we go in, there's a few things you should know. One. Danny's best plan of attack has always been looking weaker than he really is. Don't fall for it."

“I think—”

“Two. Since he’s awake, the chains *don’t* come off.”

It was odd being ordered around by a girl who looked so much younger than herself. In reality, Maya realized they could very well be the same age biologically, but seeing a barely twenty-year-old acting like the den mother when Maya was the one with the M.D. was just a little weird.

“Three. I’m not going anywhere. If something happens, you don’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell of surviving without help, and Dec will kill me if I let you get hurt or worse. So, no asking me to leave, got it?”

She nodded. Simple enough rules. She didn’t want the young vampire unfettered until she had a better idea of what the poison was doing to him anyway. And someone standing around to protect her, even if it was Katie, sounded like a great idea.

The room was just as grim as she remembered, a single light bulb dangling from the ceiling its only illumination. Danny lay on the same bed Dec had dumped him the night before, only now, strong straps had been added at his ankles and waist to hold him in place. At his sides, his wrists were lashed to the bed frame with thick, coated rope, but his head was mostly free, turning to stare at the new arrivals when the door opened.

Maya swallowed. The vestiges of the vampire she’d seen were gone. The eyes that gazed at her now were the same shade of blue as Dec’s. In fact, without having fear and surprise cloud her inspection, she could see other similarities to her captor. The same long bone structure. The same aquiline nose. The body was slimmer, not as tall, but that was attributable to age.

At least now she knew why Dec was so determined to see Danny cured. They were family. Brothers, if she had to take a guess.

For a long moment, they just stared at each other. Then, Danny’s nose twitched, as if something was tickling it, and the blue irises disappeared, replaced by the now so-familiar silver.

“Hello,” Maya said before he could say something to unnerve her. She took a step forward. “I’m Dr. Sheldon.”

The title surprised him, his gaze jumping to Katie.

“She’s here to help you,” Katie offered. Her voice was surprisingly affectionate, and Maya remembered what Dec had said about the two young people. Best friends. For some reason, Maya suspected it was something more than that.

He turned his head away, obviously unwilling to look at either of them. “Go away,” he muttered.

The two words immediately set Maya at ease. This was a situation she could handle. How many recalcitrant patients had she seen over the course of her career? Especially when they’d given up hope. Danny was no different.

“Easier said than done,” she said, walking forward to stand by the bed. Up close, she saw the disturbance in the dust around the piece of furniture, and a trickle of something dark beneath it. It looked like blood, and when she tilted her head to look more closely, the upturned glass that had rolled underneath the bed verified it.

“Not hungry? It can’t be worse than hospital food.” Bending to retrieve the glass, she sniffed at it and grimaced. “OK, I stand corrected.”

Curiosity pulled his attention back, and Danny watched her, perplexed, as she set the glass aside. “Why are you here?” The silver was gone, leaving behind the innocent

teenage visage that was so contradictory to his true nature.

"You mean the doctor title doesn't give me away?" She kept her tone light. Befriend him. Make him trust her. This was how she gained the ability to help as many people as she could. So, OK, he was her first vampire, but a patient was a patient. This was what she did. "How do you feel?"

Danny snorted. "Like death. Some doctor you are."

She glanced through the heavy links of the chain as she pulled out her notepad. "How's the shoulder?"

"It hurts." He paused, and his face softened, his eyes pleading silently as he weighed his next words. "Can you wrap it or something? It's getting rubbed raw—"

"No," Katie said. "It's a ploy to take off the restraints."

"Bitch," Danny hissed.

The venom in his tone surprised Maya. Maybe her assessment regarding their relationship had been too hasty. "I'm just here to do an initial evaluation. Find out where it hurts, check your responses, that kind of thing."

He turned his blue gaze back to her, and some of the bitterness dissipated. "Why?"

"Because I want to see that you get better."

"Why?"

"Don't you *want* to get better?"

"I can't. Dec should've told you that."

"Dec wouldn't have brought me here if he didn't think it was possible."

"Dec's a freak." He started to turn away from her again, but his gaze caught on her neck, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed again at the air. When his eyes returned to bore into Maya's, the silver was back, the first hints of his fangs appearing as he spoke. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," he gloated, a smile curling his lips. "Did he do that *after* our little fight last night? Don't tell me he's afraid I'll get you all to myself." He chuckled, a hoarse rattle that sent shivers down her spine. "But you did taste good. I can't really blame him for wanting some for himself."

For some reason, she didn't want to give Danny the satisfaction. "It's not like that."

"Oh, god, you're a groupie." Now it was disdain tingeing his tone. "You probably promised Dec that you could cure me in exchange for a few bites and a quick fuck—"

"Enough!" Marching forward, Katie grabbed the end of the chains that dragged on the floor and pulled, tightening them even further around Danny's slim form and tearing the screams from his throat.

As Danny arched away from the mattress in agony, straining against the restraints, Maya pulled ineffectively at Katie's grip. "Stop it! You're hurting him!"

"That's the idea," Katie said grimly.

"Let him go, or I'll tell Dec." The threat just slipped out, and she didn't know why on earth she thought it might be effective, but Katie paused anyway, assessing the validity of her bluff. "I mean it," Maya added, when she saw how it worked, and was rewarded with the sudden release of the chains and the cessation of Danny's screams.

Quickly, she turned back to the young man, pushing aside the links to more closely examine the fresh marks on his skin. Beads of blood swelled in the grooves, and purple and blue bruises were already joining the green marks from yesterday and before.

Danny's whimpers of pain tore through Maya's defenses, making her wince with him, and she reached down to her bag and some bandages, holding the chains away from the

worst of the injuries near his neck as she did so.

The sudden sting of his fangs sinking into her wrist made her cry out loud. Maya yanked against the attack, feeling her flesh rip as she broke away, the blood spurting from the exposed vein. Danny grinned at her with a sickening crimson leer, his head falling back onto the pillow, but it was wiped from his face when Katie's fist connected with his jaw.

"I told you not to move the chains," Katie said as Maya stumbled away from the bed.

"I know that," she muttered. The blood still flowed freely from the wound, and she grabbed a gauze strip from her bag to wind it around her wrist. She was furious with her own stupidity. She'd been warned, and she'd forgotten, and he'd bitten her a second time as a result. She felt like a fool. Worse, she *looked* like a fool, and if there was anything Maya was proud of, it was the fact that she could hold her own.

"OK, examination's over," Katie announced. Grabbing Maya by her free arm, she hauled her with indisputable force to the doorway, pulling her into the hall and slamming the door shut behind them, all the while ignoring Danny's angry shouts.

It was pointless to ask where they were going. Back to the books. Back to lock-up. She'd messed up, so it was time to tuck her away and wait for the impending punishment. As she struggled to keep up with Katie's furious pace, all Maya could picture was the disappointment in Dec's face when he discovered what had happened. Would he release her for her failure?

She suddenly hoped not.

She needed to prove to him that she could do this. After all his trust in her, she wasn't about to make him regret it already.

* * * *

The first sign of trouble was the lingering aroma of blood in the air as Dec descended the staircase. Though it was obviously Maya's, he wouldn't have been as worried about its presence if it wasn't for one distinguishing feature. It was fresh.

He raced to his room, a blur of black through the shadows, but then fumbled with the key on the padlock overhead. Blood spattered the floor, as if a wound had dripped, and his eyes kept falling to it when he should've been sliding his key into the lock. What the hell had happened here? He shouldn't have left. He should've just stuck it out and made sure nothing happened to Maya. It was imperative that she be OK. For Danny's sake.

He had to stop as soon as he opened the door. His head swam at the thick scent, the swift memory of his mouth on her skin, the pulse of her blood coursing over his tongue. The room tilted at dangerous angles as he slowly turned his gaze to spy her at the table.

She sat amidst a circle of books, her hair knotted at the nape to keep it off her face, and looked very much like a college student cramming for a final. Dec paused. Had he made a mistake? But then, he saw the white gauze wrapped around her left wrist, and heard the skittering of her heartbeat as she slid her arm into her lap to hide it.

His jaw locked. Dropping the bags containing Maya's things, he marched forward to reach for her arm. Maya shocked him by bolting from the chair and putting the table between them.

"Before you get mad—" she started.

Dec's brows shot up. "*Before?*" he demanded. "You think I can walk into my room, see that you've been hurt, and not *already* be upset?"

She was moving too easily for it to be a serious injury. But any injury at all was unacceptable.

"It was a mistake. It won't happen again. I promise."

"*What* won't happen again?" When she didn't speak, he began to step around the table, stopping when he realized she was countering his moves. "Show me."

Guilt kept her eyes averted, and there was a moment when Dec thought she would openly defy him again. Then, slowly, she lifted her arm and began unwrapping the gauze.

He knew before she'd exposed the tender skin what had happened. When he'd first stepped into the room, Dec had been too overwhelmed with the delicacy of her blood hanging in the air to be aware of the other, more primal scent. Now, with the bandages falling away, there was no mistaking it. Danny. He'd bitten her. Again.

Sudden fury surged through him. He leapt across the table and took her in his arms, forcing her to hold out her hand. When he pulled at the remaining gauze, the ragged edges of the injury came exposed.

It wasn't a clean bite. She'd obviously struggled and torn herself away from it, ripping through the flesh at her own expense. She had, however, tended it with expert care, taping shut the worst of the cuts and stopping the flow of blood.

Something inside Dec seized. "Where was Katie when this happened?"

"It was my fault. She told me the rules in seeing him, and I thought ... I forgot. I looked at him, and I forgot, and you have no idea how stupid I feel, but he sounded like he was in so much pain, and I just wanted to make it better. I know it looks bad, but it's just a superficial wound. It doesn't even hurt now."

Her pounding heart vibrated across his skin. Common sense told him to let Maya go, to release his hold since she was obviously all right, but that common sense was being thoroughly squashed by Dec's baser instincts.

To protect what was his.

To rail against that which would hurt her.

To quench the need for more.

He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. Having her so near wasn't working as he'd anticipated. She wasn't supposed to be so tantalizing, so damnably delicious. He would have to take steps to change things before everything got out of hand completely.

Maya chose that moment to pull her arm away, pressing against Dec unconsciously as she reached past him to grab the gauze from the table.

Common sense lost.

Chapter Eight

Her mistake was in forgetting she wasn't dealing with men.

In Danny, she recognized the desperate need to dissociate that she saw in so many of her terminal patients. Anger at being sick. Frustration with the inability to do anything about it. Fear at the very real possibilities that stretched out before him if his illness continued to go unchecked. It made him human, even when he gazed at her with hungry silver eyes and dripping fangs. She didn't see the monster. She saw the scared teenager, and she answered the instinct to assuage any terror she could, real or imaginary, heedless of the bite that was then inevitable.

Dec was the same, but different. Dec entered her awareness with the force of a man who knew what he was, who wore that knowledge like a badge of honor without forethought or malice, and did as he wished because he knew there was no one to stop him. He prowled through his life with purpose, and even though it annoyed her that she wasn't always aware of what that purpose was most of the time, there was no way Maya could deny its appeal. He appeared unflappable. Like now. That was why she took the opportunity to reach for the gauze, in spite of the fact that he'd just practically thrown the table aside in order to see the injury more closely. She thought it was her best chance to wrap it back up.

She was wrong.

Muscles tensed, muscles that weren't hers, hard and unyielding against Maya's softer curves. When she felt the arm around her back tighten, her eyes turned back to his, holding, seeing, questioning his intent.

He answered her with a kiss.

She saw his lips descend, knew if she was to stop him, now was the time. But even before his mouth met hers, insistent and hungry, and even before his hand tangled possessively in the hair at her nape, Maya knew she wouldn't. She had no desire to stop this glorious assault on her senses. For too long, she'd been walking through her life in a fog and now, here was a fresh opportunity, beckoning to her in Technicolor to yield to its temptation. She wanted this just as badly as he did, wanted to feel him pounding into her, skin to skin, bare flesh to bare flesh. Already, her body tingled with anticipation at how he would feel sliding between her legs.

As her arms slid around his back, her feet left the floor, the power housed in Dec's frame making it frighteningly simple for him to lift her up and back, until her legs hit the wooden footboard at the end of his bed. He didn't stop there. Before she could blink, they were both over and onto the mattress, his long length bearing her down into the disheveled blankets as his mouth finally left hers and slid to her neck.

Maya gasped at the first hard pull. She'd never even seen his features change, but there was no mistaking the sting of his fangs piercing her skin. It left her light-headed, forcing her to squeeze her eyes shut to stop the dizzying sensations of the room spinning around them. The moment they did, Dec shifted his weight atop her, easing the suction he had on her throat while his body slid sideways to position her leg between his.

Her thigh was trapped, making it impossible not to feel the length of his arousal pressing against her. She moved, rubbing deliberately along his cock, and Dec groaned,

his fangs retracting, the tight grasp that had been holding her close loosening to start a determined exploration of her skin.

"You drive me mad." Long fingers slid beneath her top, tracing the curve of her waist up to the soft swell of her breast. "So lush, so rich. I'd forgotten..."

But his words were lost as his mouth returned to the task of tasting every inch of her, his leg rubbing against the juncture between her thighs, strong hands pushing aside her lacy bra to pinch at her pebbled nipples. There was no denying the demand of his touch, but the desire to reject Dec had vanished long before he'd made this latest advance. This want had been simmering almost since her arrival.

She turned her head, allowing him better access to what he sought, and whimpered when his teeth, now blunt, nibbled along the sinew of her shoulder. Unbidden, her hands went around his back, fingers scrabbling at his shirt so that she could feel his skin beneath her palms. "Dec, please. Let me touch you."

He stopped at that, and lifted away, gazing down at her with eyes black with desire. "No," he rasped, but he didn't move.

"What?" Her head was a dervish, the rational clashing with the incoherent, logic versus the overwhelming sensations he created with every brush of his flesh against hers. Was he stopping this? But he'd started it. "What do you mean, 'no'?" No, I can't touch you? Or no, we shouldn't be doing this? Because—"

But he didn't let her voice her acquiescence to this new level of their relationship. He cut her off with a swift, bruising kiss, at the same time reaching behind to extract himself from her embrace. So lost in the hungry caress, Maya barely felt her arms being stretched above her head, or the careful way Dec separated his body from hers. It wasn't until his lips were gone, leaving hers swollen and trembling, that she realized she was practically alone on the bed.

Pushing up on shaky elbows, Maya watched Dec paced around the room, his hands running through his hair, his steps sharp and measured. "OK. What just happened here?"

"I lost control. I'm—"

"Don't say you're sorry," Maya warned, and then threw caution to the wind when she added, "I'm not."

He halted, his head turning to stare at her in disbelief. "I could've killed you."

"Could've, maybe. Would've? I don't think so. You've had plenty of opportunities, but you said it yourself. You don't want me to die." She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. "For whatever reason."

The muscles in his jaw twitched. "Which is exactly why that shouldn't have happened. Biting you the first time was about protecting you from the others. Biting you this time..." He tore his eyes away, and resumed his pacing. "...wasn't."

Slowly, carefully, Maya swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. The room spun around her, and she swayed as she fought for her equilibrium. Before she could reach out for balance, Dec was there, strong hands under her elbow, leading her over to the chair to sit her down. She could only watch as he picked up the gauze she'd meant to earlier, and began to wrap up her wrist again, as if the past ten minutes had never occurred.

"Did you get what you needed from Danny?" he asked. It was back to business for him. Forget about the kiss, about the bite, about everything, it would seem. The guy had a serious avoidance problem.

“No.” She itched to change the subject, but doubted she’d get very far. If she pushed, he would likely walk out again, and she needed answers to other, more pressing questions before she could let that happen. “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to examine him when he’s so alert.”

“I told you he was dangerous.”

“I know, and so did Katie, and yes, I was stupid for letting him get to me, so can we just skip past that part for now?” She tried to catch his gaze, but he was studiously avoiding hers. Maya sighed. Her head still wasn’t clear, and her body had yet to stop humming. She was in no shape to be having this discussion with him right now.

Finishing the bandage on her wrist, Dec turned back to the supplies on the table and picked up a clean gauze pad. He handed it over without a word, and she looked from it to her bound wrist in confusion.

“Am I missing something here?” she asked.

“Your neck.” A single finger reached forward, touched the soft hollow near the base of her throat, and drew away with a bead of red on its tip.

“Oh.” Pressing the pad to the bite, she looked away, but not before seeing him lick the blood from his finger.

Silence wrapped around them, thick and uncomfortable with its weight.

“I stopped feeding from humans two years ago when I found out Danny was sick.” His voice was a low rumble, his head bowed, and the soft honesty of his words lured her attention back. “I won’t lie to you and say it was an easy decision, or that I haven’t regretted it more than once since. But I made the choice and I stuck to it. I thought if I could help Danny, and the others, then it was worth the trade.”

“I always thought vampires were, you know, evil,” she said, matching his tone.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “No. We’re motivated by our lust. For blood. For life. For anything that makes us feel good. The being evil is a side effect of that. Most of us just don’t care about the consequences of our actions.”

“*You* care.”

“That’s because I’ve been around long enough to have ghosts. Let me tell you, there’s nothing more terrifying than your own past coming back to bite you in the ass.”

“Try getting kidnapped outside your place of work some time.”

She said it with a smile and a small kick to his shin. So, when he tilted his head to look at her, Maya set aside the gauze pad she’d held to her neck to deliberately bare the bite, gauging his tiny wince and the silvery flicker in his eyes.

“I believe you when you say you don’t want to hurt me,” she continued softly. “You need me here to help Danny. But that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends, does it?”

Her heart thudded against her ribs, so thunderous and rapid she had no doubt he was aware of every beat. It was a risk she was taking, walking the edge of this particular precipice, and maybe she was only doing it because she was lonely. It was certainly not her usual style, being so direct with men. But, considering how vehemently they had both reacted at the slightest physical contact, how her body still clamored for him to continue where he’d left off touching her, kissing her, even tasting her ... Maya wasn’t sure how she could just forget and then try to focus on saving his brother when all the while he would be hovering right behind her.

Any mirth in his face faded. Blue shifted to dark gray, and the corners of his mouth fell. “If this continues, I *will* hurt you. There’s no getting around that. It’s the nature of

what I am.”

“Haven’t you already proven that you can fight against that nature, though?” She was nothing if not tenacious.

Slowly, he reached forward and touched the pricks on her neck. “I haven’t been fighting very effectively, it would seem.”

“I think the fact that I’m coherent enough to have this argument with you in the first place shows that you know when to stop.” Tentatively, Maya lifted her hand to his, latching on to it when Dec pulled away at her touch. “If Danny is going to get better, we have to work together. Being friends makes it easier.”

He regarded her for a long minute before nodding. “Promise me you won’t do anything foolish any more, though.”

“I’ve learned my lesson.”

Carefully, he extracted his fingers from hers and stood, crossing the room to the door. “Have you had the chance to eat yet?”

“No, but—”

“I’ll get you something, then. I’ll be right back.” His hand hesitated on the door knob. Without looking at her, Dec added, “You continue to surprise me, Maya. Thank you for that.”

When she was alone in the room, she exhaled loudly, strands of tension in her muscles soothing with the simple act. He’d run again, but this time, it didn’t seem to bother her as much. This time, Maya was fairly certain he would be coming back quickly, and when he did, things between them would be different. She would make sure of that.

Chapter Nine

Maya was surprised when Dec didn't sit down with her to eat. It wasn't that she expected him to dine with her, especially since his diet was a liquid one, but she'd thought they'd reached a semi-understanding when he'd left. Now, he was back to being oddly distant. She didn't like it.

"I'm going to bring one of the others around for you to examine," he said from where he hovered near the door. "The progression of the poison is most severe with Danny, so the others are more manageable, especially if I'm around. You shouldn't have the same problems this time."

"There's also the fact that I'll have better equipment. It'll be more thorough than the exam I did on Katie."

"Do you need to redo that one?"

She shook her head. "I should be fine with what I have. If I find out later I need something for a comparison, I'll do it then." She was dying to ask him to sit down, but the fear of spooking him again held her tongue. Her resolve from earlier seemed to have dissipated in his presence, and Maya was left wishing that Dec didn't turn her into a quivering schoolgirl when he was around. She was an intelligent, professional woman; she faced life and death every day. A lone man shouldn't have proved to be such a difficulty. Then again, he wasn't a man. He was a vampire. Maybe that made all the difference.

She glanced up at him through her lashes, drinking in the broad shoulders beneath the dark blue shirt, the solemn shadows of his eyes. Who was she kidding? She didn't see him as anything but a man, in spite of the two bites.

"I stopped by the hospital while I was out," Dec said. "I told the head nurse you had a family emergency and that you'd be out for the next two weeks."

All benign thoughts fled. "What? Why would you do that?"

He frowned. "Because you're going to be here. You have enough vacation time accrued. The hospital will still pay you."

"That's not the point. I have patients who need me."

"You have patients *here*."

"Again, not the point. You can't just interfere with my life like that. What if I was saving that vacation for a trip to Hawaii or something?"

"But you weren't."

"But I could've been."

"I don't understand." His confusion seemed genuine, and he took a small step closer to her. "You accepted the responsibility. Why are you changing your mind?"

"I'm not. I just don't like the cavalier way you've tried to take over my life."

"Would you rather get fired for not showing up at work for two weeks?"

Maya pressed her lips together. She didn't like it, but there was no disputing the logic of his statement.

When she didn't respond right away, Dec relaxed, and the hint of a satisfied smile played on his lips. "I'm going to check on Danny, and then bring one of the kids around for you to look at. I'll probably be an hour. Is that enough time for you to get ready?"

Nodding, Maya could only watch while he walked out, the lock slipping back into place. Just when she thought she was figuring him out, Dec pulled out another surprise that left her scrambling to understand. At the rate she was going, she wasn't sure it was ever going to happen.

It wasn't until after he was gone that she realized he'd left with one of the bags of supplies he'd arrived with.

* * * *

He prepared the syringe before going to Danny's room. The last time Dec had made the mistake of trying to do it in front of him, Danny had nearly gnawed off his own hand to break free of the chains before Dec could administer the sedative. It had been bloody and brutal, and left Dec with a wrenching desperation to end it for both of them. He had no desire to repeat the experience.

He listened outside the closed door before entering. There was no point in knocking. If he was awake, Danny would only shout out rude epithets in response. If he wasn't, the noise would only rouse him. Dec heard nothing. He hoped that was a good omen.

Dust motes swirled in the air as he entered, though the outlines of other footsteps were clear along the floor. At least one set was Maya's, and another was likely Katie's, but it almost appeared as if there were others in the mix. He'd chosen this particular room for Danny because it hadn't been touched since their arrival. Its remoteness had been meant to discourage any of the others from disturbing him. Dec would have to talk to the group again and make it clear they were to leave Danny alone.

He wasn't asleep. Staring unblinkingly at the ceiling, Danny mouthed some silent speech meant only for him. Dried blood crusted at the edges of his lips. Dec knew without further investigation that it was Maya's.

"You smell of her." Danny's voice was subdued, surprisingly so. "She's delicious. Like cherries jubilee made with only the very best brandy. Hot and sweet and sumptuous, all at the same time."

Though his mouth watered at the accurate description, it took most of his self-control not to throttle the younger vamp then and there. "She's your doctor," he replied tightly. "You're not supposed to think of her as food."

"Try that on someone who doesn't know you as well as I do." Slowly, he turned his head, but if he noticed the syringe in Dec's hand, it didn't register in his face. "Besides, it's not like you haven't tasted her, so the holier than thou attitude won't work on me. Not this time."

"Maya's here to help you."

"So, it's *Maya*, is it? She told me to call her Dr. Sheldon. How do you merit first name basis?" A sly grin creased his features, and a wicked glint brightened his eyes. "Oh, that's right. She's fallen for the Guardian Angel act. All eager to please just so you might deign to give her some attention. How pathetic."

Dec's palms itched. He knew Danny was just goading him, that the effrontery of his words was a symptom of the disease, but it didn't lessen their impact. Even before his illness, Danny had been an expert at finding just where to strike where someone was weakest.

"So, does she get hot for any vampire?" Danny continued. "Or is it just you? Because I'd love to have another go at her—"

“Stop!” The order was a gruff bark, uttered before Dec could otherwise react. He felt his vampire features struggle to emerge, his fangs descending, his skin tingling. “You don’t know anything about Maya. She’s here to cure you, nothing more.”

The giggle that escaped Danny’s mouth made the hair stand up on the back of Dec’s nape. “It’s killing you I got to her first, isn’t it? You never could stand sharing, let alone coming in second.”

“We’re not doing this.”

“Does she know?” He was unrelenting, his eyes now bright silver from the fervor taking hold of his body. “Please tell me she doesn’t. Stuck at the bottom of the well with the lowest of the low, just because Declan Jericho has a god complex the size of Greenland. To see her face when she finds out that all of this is because of you? Now *that* would be delicious.”

His control was gone, and before he could stop, the syringe had snapped between Dec’s fingers, the sedative spilling over his skin to drop silently to the floor. “Damn it,” he muttered, and watched the blood from the broken glass swell in crimson beads atop his skin.

Danny watched in glee. “Guess you’ll just have to make more cocktails,” he singsonged. “Maybe you should make enough for the whole class this time. It’s not nice to be so stingy.”

Pivoting on his heel, Dec fled from the room, Danny’s laughter floating from behind him. There would be no talking to him at this point. He’d crossed the line from reasonable conversation to the capricious dementia that always won when he got a taste of human blood. Extra care would have to be taken to protect Maya. There would be nothing holding Danny back from attacking her again. If anything, his lust for her was compounded by the jealousy the illness seemed to exacerbate.

Dec sagged against the wall, trying to block out the sounds coming from the other side of the door. He just wanted all of this to be over. He wanted Danny well. He wanted to be able to turn back the hands of time and start his life over again from the day he’d been turned. He wanted to go back to his room and find out that Maya had stumbled across the antidote without any problems and was leaving him to implement it, taking away the temptation she presented every time he looked at her.

Dec wanted a lot of things.

Dec had long ago grown accustomed to not getting them.

* * * *

She didn’t question why it took him so long to return, and she didn’t question why his hand was bandaged when he did, but the curiosity regarding both nagged at Maya throughout her examination of the child Dec had brought for her needs. More than once, she caught him staring at her, his eyes dark and inscrutable, and she had to bite back the desire to demand what was so fascinating.

At least she had the novelty of a new puzzle to distract her. The mysteries of the poison presented almost as soon as the ten-year-old boy stripped down to his underwear.

“What’s this?” She pointed with a gloved finger at a rash on the boy’s—Samuel, Dec had introduced him as—left shoulder blade. It was two inches across, clustering in a radial pattern around a darker scarlet patch, with a distinctive lump at its center.

“That’s the first sign,” Dec explained. “That’s how we know who’s got it.”

Taking a scalpel from her kit, Maya lanced the tip of the lump, and then swabbed the drops of blood that flowed from it. "They all have this?"

"All of them."

"Does it hurt?"

Samuel shook his head.

"I thought you guys had super healing abilities."

"We do."

"But these never go away?"

"No."

"I should get a look at Danny's. Maybe, if he's asleep, I can get you to roll him over so I can look at his shoulder."

"That won't do you any good. Danny's isn't there."

She frowned. "It's not localized in the same place?"

"No." She didn't understand why his face seemed so bleak all of a sudden. "It's localized where the poison first enters the blood stream."

"What about size?"

There was a pause, and then, "It gets larger as the disease progresses. When I first found many of them, the rashes were about the size of a quarter."

"And Danny's?"

Another pause. "Covers the back of his thigh."

There were no other physical manifestations she could find. When she asked, Dec and Samuel delineated the symptoms in more abstract terms.

"I'm always hungry," Samuel said, his eyes hollow. "Nothing ever fills me up."

"Those affected are also atypically stronger and more violent," Dec said. "A non-human diet stems that to some degree. That's another reason I've been weaning everyone."

Food for thought. Maya instructed Samuel to get dressed and waited until he'd gone before speaking again.

"I need to get this blood analyzed ASAP. I need to know what's going on in their bodies before I can start narrowing down what kind of treatment options I have."

He took the swab she'd been holding before she could argue. "You just need a toxicology scan?" He ripped open a fresh gauze pad and wrapped the coated end in the bandage, effectively protecting it from further contamination.

"It's a start." Chewing the inside of her cheek, Maya watched Dec grab his leather coat in preparation for going out again. "How old is the oldest of the sick?" His evasion of certain topics was growing increasingly obvious; she wasn't sure she could tread here without taking caution he wouldn't run away.

There was a hitch in his shoulders as he slid his arms into his jacket. "Sixteen. That's Danny. And before you ask, the youngest is eight."

"That's their human age, right? What about vampire years?"

"I can't answer that one. I didn't know most of them until I brought them here."

"But you knew Danny. He's family."

This time, he stopped completely, and swiveled slightly to level a stormy gaze at her. "What did he say to you?"

"He didn't. I have eyes. I can see the resemblance." Peeling off her rubber gloves, she set them aside before rising to her feet and crossing to stand in front of him. "Is he

your brother? Is that why you're so interested in helping these kids?"

Maybe she was just getting better at reading him, but she could've sworn she saw the pain burn brightly in his eyes before his usual shields came slamming up. "My baby brother," he elaborated. "I was sixteen when he was born, and then I moved out just a couple years later to go to college. I didn't see very much of him after that, until our parents died."

"I'm sorry."

He released a short bark of laughter. "Don't be. That was sixty years ago. They'd be dead today, anyway."

She was hesitant to pose her last question, but her curiosity was too great. "You don't think it's unusual that both of you are now vampires?" she commented.

"Not really. I'm the one who turned him." He moved beyond her reach before Maya even realized she'd stretched a hand to touch his arm. "I've knocked Danny out again. He'll be out at least until nightfall. I'm going to leave the door unlocked so you can have access to the kitchen and bathroom." Dark eyes lifted to hers, and the naked pleading in them sucked the air from her lungs. "Please don't take advantage of it and leave. These kids need you."

"I won't," she promised, and meant it.

He'd taken one step out into the hall when he turned and came back to her. Strong hands cupped her face, tilted her head back so his mouth could meet hers with a zealous thirst. She responded instantly, lips parting to allow his demanding tongue entrance, every swipe and every probe dizzying her in a whirlwind of sensation. Maya clutched at his shirt front, holding herself steady, and when the greed of his kiss softened, when his mouth pulled just far enough away to ghost over hers, all she heard was the pounding of her heart inside her veins. Until he spoke.

"Thank you." One last caress across her mouth. Gentle, this time. Grateful, with just a hint of the distinct ache for each other they shared.

Then, he was gone.

Chapter Ten

Though she had the freedom to move about, Maya didn't take advantage of it until she absolutely had to, choosing instead to resume poring through the books Dec had in search of anything that might remotely resemble the symptoms at hand. She had to remember to ask Dec for a sample of his blood when he came back. She needed a basis for comparison. Since he had no problems getting toxicology done, it had now moved to the top of her to do list.

When the books got to be too much for her, Maya took a break from her reading to more closely explore her surroundings. With the toiletries he'd given her earlier, she found a smattering of underwear, a long skirt, jeans, and a few shirts she could've sworn she'd lost over the past few months. There was even a small bottle of an unfamiliar perfume, but when she sniffed at the stopper, Maya smiled at the hint of lilacs it contained. Somewhere along the way, he'd learned that lilacs were her favorite flower. It wasn't a detail that she would've thought would be important to a doctor's skills, but then again, she wasn't convinced Dec only wanted her around because she knew her way around a stethoscope.

She didn't go through his belongings. That would've been too much of an invasion of privacy, and since she wasn't in immediate danger, she wasn't going to abuse his trust by looking for some secret diary that declared exactly what his intentions were. All she needed to know about him, she could learn through simple observation.

She was back at the books when she heard the footsteps outside the door, and looked up from where she was curled on the couch to see Dec slip silently inside. He froze when he saw her, and glanced curiously down at his watch.

"Why are you still awake?" he asked. "It's past two in the morning."

He seemed more relaxed than he'd been when he'd left. A faint flush colored his cheeks, softening his usual ivory pallor, and his eyes were inquisitive without being angry. Maya decided she liked this change.

"Research." She unfolded her legs from beneath her, surprised when they started tingling from the disuse of having been stationary for so long. "Ow," she complained, and stamped her foot against the floor to wake it up. "I think I'm getting too old to be abusing my body like this."

"Here." Stepping forward, Dec crouched in front of the couch, lifting her heel to slip off her shoe.

Maya winced when he began rubbing the arch of her foot, the prickles increasing almost painfully before easing into a soothing burn, and closed her eyes as she leaned backward against the cushions. His voice floated through the growing ether of her fatigue, deep and resonant with concern.

"I'm sorry if you were waiting up for the results," he said quietly. "They won't be ready until tomorrow."

She waved a tired hand in negation of his worry. "I knew that. I was being completely selfish staying up. I wanted to ask if I could have my own room to sleep in tonight."

His hands stilled in their massage, and Maya opened her eyes to see him gazing at

her in bewilderment. “You know you can’t. It’s not safe.”

“Oh. Right. I guess ... never mind. I’ll just sleep on the couch, then.”

His frown deepened. “What’s wrong with the bed?”

“Nothing. I just wasn’t looking forward to another night spent in my clothes. But I guess hostages can’t be choosers, huh?”

“I still don’t understand.”

Maya pointed at the wardrobe, where she’d hung up the clothes he’d brought for her. “You forgot pajamas.”

He rose to cross and stare at the carefully folded items she’d put away. His fingers danced across the bright colors, going back more than once as if to re-inventory what he’d already counted, and then reached across to grab a dark shirt she didn’t recognize.

“You can wear this,” he said, turning to hold it out to her.

Her gaze followed the folds of the shimmery black silk as they fell over his fingers like an obsidian waterfall, before lifting back to his face in disbelief. “That’s yours.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, but—”

“I’m taller than you, so it should be long enough to cover ... what you want covered. And it’s soft. It should be more than acceptable for a substitute.” When she failed to take it, Dec sighed, his dark hair falling across his brow as he looked down at the black silk in his hands. “It’s just a shirt, Maya. And you need your sleep. This is the best solution, all around.”

She was being stubborn, and she knew it. But didn’t he see what an intimate offer he was making? If she accepted it, what would that say about her? Then again, did that really matter?

His gaze never wavered. Open. Trusting. Intent. He was looking for a compromise. He’d only had her welfare in mind during her entire tenure at the refuge, and now here she was, making it difficult for him by reading more into a simple gesture than the concern he meant it to be.

“OK,” she said, and stood up, stretching her back when she did so. “I’ll be right back, then.”

But he didn’t release his grip on the shirt when she reached for it. “That wouldn’t be smart. If anyone else saw you, dressed like that...”

He let the innuendo go unspoken. The image of being considered seductive prey by one of the others made Maya’s cheeks flame, and her nostrils flared as she attempted to hide her embarrassment. “Turn around,” she said, her voice high as she yanked the shirt from his grasp. Thank god he didn’t have mirrors in the place.

She was pushing her jeans down her hips when he spoke again.

“You don’t have anything to be ashamed of.”

His words made her freeze. “What?”

“You’re beautiful, and you don’t even realize it. You keep trying to hide as if what you’d have to show would make the rest of the world go blind. Trust me. It wouldn’t.”

Her fingers were trembling when they started moving again. “I’m not hiding.”

“You don’t believe that. *I* don’t believe that.”

Pulling her shirt off over her head, Maya hesitated before unhooking her bra. “I dress so that I’m comfortable. Try working my hours and see how much *you* want to spend an hour putting on makeup and going through your wardrobe to find something sexy to

wear, because, of course, children notice that kind of thing.” Swiftly, she undid the clasp and dropped the scrap of white lace to the side before sliding her arms into the black silk. “It’s not hiding. It’s being practical.”

Her heart rate went up another notch when he turned at that, his dark eyes drinking her in, lingering on the flat of her stomach that was exposed by the open shirt before following down over her legs. He’d been right about the length. The bottom hem hit at mid-thigh, but it still made her feel naked. Of course, that could have something to do with the fact that it was still unbuttoned.

Or the fact that he was looking at her like she was dinner.

His gaze jumped up to settle on the exposed bite marks on her neck.

Correction. Dessert.

“Danny thinks you’re a groupie.” His voice had shifted, become darker, rich with a longing that made Maya shiver. “He thinks I’m exploiting that to get you to help me.”

She was transfixed as he stepped closer. “He said the same thing to me.”

“Know why?”

Maya shook her head. Dec’s eyes never left the sight of the throbbing pulse in the hollow of her throat.

“Because I don’t do this. It’s the only explanation that makes sense to him.”

She swallowed, because the sandpaper that was her mouth wasn’t going to make speaking easy. “Don’t do what?”

“Have humans around. Especially beautiful female ones.”

He stood before her now, and Maya could’ve sworn that his body was radiating heat. Maybe it was just hers being reflected back at her. Was she really that hot?

“I’m not—”

His fingers flew to her lips, stopping the denial from escaping. “Yes, you are.”

He wasn’t moving his hand, so she fought against the steel locking her limbs and lifted hers to do it for him. “I bet you say that to all the women you’ve bitten,” she tried to joke.

“I don’t do that any more.” The hand she’d pulled away now traced the pale line of skin of her sternum that was visible between the strips of black. “But you ... what is it about you that makes even the damned start to believe again?”

“Don’t say that.” There was no fight left in her. There was only the need to convince him he was wrong. “Look at what you’re trying to do for these kids. That’s not the work of an evil man.”

“I’m not a man. And as for being evil...” He pushed aside the silk, exposing her full breast to the cool air, her nipple already hard and puckered and waiting for his touch. His palm glided across its tip, but it was the only contact he allowed himself. “I’m damned in ways you can’t even imagine, Maya.”

She knew he spoke the truth. Dec had years of history, decades where he’d lived as a vampire, slaughtering innocents and feeding on their life force with no thought but his own survival. By his own admission, he’d killed and turned his own brother, though his reasons for that were still unknown, and Maya was sure there was more he deliberately kept from her.

“So are the kids I see every single day. Do you think they ask for the cancer to eat at their insides? And a lot of them aren’t nearly as good about accepting it as you might think. They get angry, and they get sad, and they take it out on everyone around them.”

She gasped when his head bowed to allow his tongue to snake along the side of her neck, ending at where he'd bitten her but avoiding direct contact with the pinpricks. Her hand shot up to curl into his shoulder, keeping her steady as a surge of want made her legs tremble.

"And yet, you don't give up on them." His hand cupped her bare breast, while his other arm slid beneath the silk, around her back, lean fingers tracing the line of her spine without the hindrance of a fabric barrier. "And they are the better for it."

"Not always."

"Often enough." Lifting his head, Dec looked at her with such defenseless desire that Maya's mind spun. "We're ... friends, right?" he asked. "That's what you said. Friends?"

"Yes," she breathed. It was hard to think straight. The world was bleeding around her.

The single word seemed to satisfy him in some way. "I haven't had a friend in a very long time." His hands were still moving, still learning the curves and lines of her body as if they were as necessary to him as blood. "It gets lonely."

This, she understood. The ache of doing everything for everyone else, expecting nothing in return, and wishing that someone, just once, would be the one to take care of her.

She swayed closer, her hips brushing against the hard lines of his jeans. The air between them rippled, thickening until she couldn't breathe properly, but somehow, she found the fortitude to say, "It doesn't have to be."

The burst of surprised delight in his eyes, a clamor of blue and silver and everything in between, brought a smile to her lips. It was devoured within seconds when Dec's mouth crashed into hers, voracious, wanting, taking from her what he'd so obviously been craving, until there was no space left for her to deny how badly she desired this.

No thought. No reason. Only the delicious meld of hard against soft, his tongue entwining with hers, his hands doing decidedly wicked things across her flesh. She burned from the growing roughness of his touch, straining to get nearer, to feel him closer, and clung to his broad shoulders with every ounce of remaining strength she had left. When Maya accidentally raked her nails across his nape, the rumble of a growl reverberated through Dec's chest, drawing his arms tighter around her until her feet were no longer on the floor.

Carrying her to the bed, Dec eased her onto the mattress, breaking from the kiss to hover over her. "You can still tell me no."

She shook her head. "I can't."

For a split second, she thought he was going to bite her again, but instead, his teeth remained blunt when his mouth resumed suckling at her skin. He moved quickly away from her neck, lower, and lower, and lower still, chasing the swell of her breast to stop at its hardened nipple, halting as if to appreciate its simple beauty, making her thrum from the expectation of what he was about to do.

His tongue flicked across the tip.

Withdrew.

She waited.

Waited.

He tasted her again.

Just the smallest of movements, across one of the tiniest parts of her body. But still,

the anticipation for what would come next made her squirm.

Another lick, this time around the dusty pink aureole, and Maya's skin erupted in goose bumps.

"Dec," she whispered. Her fingers lifted to twist into his hair, trying to draw him closer to her breast, but his strength was too great for her to overcome.

"I'm savoring this," he said in unnecessary explanation. The cool air from the exhalation of his words tickled where it skated across her.

"This is driving me crazy."

He chuckled. "Then I guess turnabout is fair play, considering what you've been doing to me over the past few months."

Her mouth opened to protest, but the argument was choked by the teeth that caught the very tip of her nipple, tugging, pulling, the electrical charge he created connecting her breast straight to her clit. In spite of his words, his game of cat and mouse was over. Dec's hands began to knead roughly at the curve of her hip, his mouth swallowing down as much soft flesh as he could reach, and Maya arched away from the bed in a silent plea for more.

She was wet, wetter than she could remember being in a long time without the aid of something plastic and vibrating directly between her legs. But though that was now where he seemed to be heading, there was nothing artificial about the way Dec touched her, or the way he growled in the back of his throat when he discovered a fresh patch of her skin to taste, or the probing of his fingers as he determinedly pulled her thighs apart. He never said a word, his mouth too busy etching a path down her navel, and she tensed as she felt his fingertips brush over her cotton-covered mound, tracing her slit with a surprising delicacy.

"Let me," Maya breathed. She started to lift her hips to shimmy out of her panties, but Dec's powerful forearm stopped her, clamping down around her waist while he sat up to gaze down at her.

"Don't," he ordered.

With his eyes never leaving hers, Dec waited until Maya relaxed back into the mattress before lessening his hold. Then, his fingers slid beneath the elastic of the waistband, tickling across her tummy, catching a stray curl before hooking at the sides to slide the cotton down from her hips. The blast of cool air across her soaking slit quickly vanished as his body returned to cover her from the waist down, his mouth back to feasting on her skin. Every swipe of his tongue and every catch of his teeth elicited quivers deep within Maya's stomach, until by the time his hands were stroking down the insides of her thighs, she was reduced to a mass of infinite ripples and desperate for anything he would give her.

Pulling his mouth away, Dec slid his hand down the muscle of her leg to grasp her ankle, arcing her knee to curl it around his shoulders. "Don't hold back," he instructed, and when she lifted her head to gaze down at him, his eyes glowed with savage silver glints, his tongue running along the edges of his fangs.

"What are you going to do?" Her throat was tight, her chest tighter. It was a stupid question. She knew very well what he was about to do. She just wasn't sure how far he was going to take it.

His nostrils flared as if a new scent had penetrated his awareness. "Taste you." His voice was rough, and as she watched, he lowered his head just enough to sweep the flat

of his tongue across her outer lips, not once breaking eye contact.

The sudden brush against her sensitive slit made her buck, but the lift of her hips only served to drive her pussy closer to his mouth. Dec growled at the unexpected invitation, and his eyes closed as he lapped at the free-flowing juices, bringing his hand up to stroke along her inner lips. His fingers slid around her opening, avoiding her clit, while his tongue explored the soft folds, and it took everything she had not to start screaming right then from the dizzying pleasure.

Maya's head fell back onto the pillow, her nerves in chaos as her breathing grew more ragged. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she grew aware that he was being careful with his teeth, but the knowledge he'd specifically started this with his fangs extended only heightened the feverish anticipation for when that care would be discarded. But then, even that was driven out of her head when all she could feel was the exploration of his tongue, the slick slide of his fingers as they descended down to the crack of her bottom, the smallest of nips as he caught her clit between his tongue and the edge of his teeth.

Unbidden, her hands went to her breasts, toying with her hardened nipples in a matching rhythm to his tongue's attention. When one of his slippery fingers began probing the entrance to her ass, her breath caught, held, waited to see what he would do. And then, it came, the gentle press inward just as a second finger sank into her pussy.

The air in her lungs came out in a rush, a gurgled cry as she began grinding against his deliberate thrusts, forcing his mouth closer, deeper, harder. Oblivion fast approached, the world tunneling to concentrate all sensation on her, on him, on the increasingly rough drive of his fingers and tongue and teeth.

"Dec ... Dec ... Dec," she chanted, each utterance of his name an exhalation of her ever-accelerating breath. She kept slipping on the black silk pooled beneath her body, but the sensuous glides across the curve of her buttocks only served to add to the crescendo crashing through her veins. Her muscles tightened, until she could no longer keep her hands away from him, her fingers reaching down to coil through his hair to hold him firm between her legs.

He must've felt her orgasm coming. Seconds before his fucking and sucking sent her careening over the edge, Dec's mouth slid down and away, his jaw dropping, his teeth grazing over the soft skin of her inner thigh before finding the spot where it was most sensitive. Maya felt the distinct prick of his fangs sinking into her flesh, but it was the first almost painful pull that catapulted her into coming, unfettering her as her climax picked her up in fiery waves and rocked her through its wake, everything spinning out of control around her as she rode it to its finish.

Maya was only half-aware of Dec disengaging from the bite. But when he slid up her body, his weight pressing her more firmly into the mattress, she turned automatically into his kiss, tasting herself on his tongue as she moaned in satisfaction. "That ... was..." she started to say when they broke apart, but the rest of it escaped her.

Rolling to her side, Dec smiled. The fangs were gone, his pupils back to their normal warm blue, and there was a definite softness to the curve of his mouth that hadn't been there before they'd started. "You're not mad?"

"Mad? At getting a mind-blowing orgasm? Um, that would be no." Playfully, she poked him in the chest, burrowing closer. "I don't normally do this, you know. You've got to think I'm the easiest girl in the Bay area."

“No.” His lips brushed across her temple. “I’ve been studying you, remember? I *know* you. You’re the most tantalizing woman I’ve met in decades.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” Her eyelids drooped, her body exhausted in the best possible way. His chest was soothingly solid beneath her cheek, and she swallowed the yawn that threatened to erupt. She didn’t want to go to sleep, not yet.

His arms tightened around her, pulling her in even closer. “Go to sleep,” Dec whispered, as if he’d been reading her mind. “You’ll want to start fresh with your work in the morning.”

“But ... you didn’t...”

“If that sentence is going anywhere near the idea of me not being satisfied with you, you can stop right there. I got my taste, didn’t I? That’s all I wanted.”

It was getting harder to fight the exhaustion. “I didn’t know ... my blood tasted different ... when I’m coming.”

“You don’t. That wasn’t the kind of taste I wanted.”

She smiled at that. And, as the shadows of unconsciousness began to settle inside her head, Maya felt the soft brush of his knuckles against her cheek, as if he couldn’t quite believe that she was really there, in his bed, in his arms. It was all right for him to think that, she decided. After all, she didn’t quite believe it herself.

Chapter Eleven

He held her within the circle of his arms, unable to sleep but not really wishing to. Last night, it had been the distraction of her presence that kept Dec from rest. Tonight, though, while the soft hum of her body's rhythms—the sigh of blood surging through her veins, the soothing whisper of air filtering through her lungs—reverberated in an unfamiliar harmony through his flesh, it wasn't that which kept him awake.

The taste of her still lingered on his tongue. This was not how he'd envisioned his return. In his scheme, Maya would've already been asleep, taking away any temptation, and he would've finished out the night getting her things ready for the next day. She was asking all the right questions. In Dec's mind, it was only a matter of time before she discovered the correct path to an antidote. Of course, that meant, too, it was only a matter of time before she asked the one question that would drive her permanently away from any intimacy with him. He really wasn't looking forward to when that occurred. Especially not now.

Maya stirred against his chest, her breath seeping through his shirt to heat his skin. He couldn't deny how good this felt. It wasn't necessarily about the blood, though that was most definitely a delicious perk. It was about being wanted, about seeing the desire for him in her eyes, hearing Maya beg for more when he touched her. His body was hard with the need to possess her more fully, but it would be worth the wait when he finally got her. *If* he finally got her.

As he watched her sleep, his fingers traced along her spine. Part of him was tempted to wake her and finish what they'd started. The other part didn't want to throw away this moment of peace. He'd had few of those over the past decade, and even less since bringing in the last of the children. More than anything else, he was desperate to cling to these stolen seconds for as long as he could.

He was drifting off when someone rapped insistently at the door. Blinking blearily at his watch, Dec frowned. "Come in," he said quietly. If it was one of his, they would hear him without problem.

The door cracked, and Katie slipped through the gap. The skirt she wore was torn, and blood flowed freely from a series of scratches on her cheek. She didn't seem surprised to spy a sleeping Maya nearly naked and stretched out beside Dec, but something was clearly agitating her.

Carefully, he extracted himself from the embrace, and slid off the bed to cross hurriedly to Katie. Grabbing her chin, he jerked her head to the side to more closely examine her injury. "What happened?"

"Got into a fight. Can't you tell?" She pulled away, taking a step back. "I've got something you need to see."

She didn't wait for an answer, just whirled in a broad sweep so her skirt swept around her, and slipped out as quietly as she'd come in. Dec followed, a frown already deep on his brow, but when she took him in the opposite direction of the others, toward the stairs that led up and out, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to a halt.

"What's going on?" he growled.

"I thought getting laid was supposed to make you more easygoing," she sniped,

yanking free from his rough grasp. “By the way, biting the doc to make sure the others leave her alone was a stroke of genius, but if they find out you’re *feeding* on her, you’re going to have a mutiny on your hands.”

“I’m not!”

“Oh, so that’s *not* blood on your breath I smell?”

“Leave Maya out of this.”

“I wish I could.” Flouncing away, she continued on down the hall. “*You’re* the one who dragged her in.”

His footsteps boomed over hers as he gave chase, but drew to a rough stop when Katie pushed open a door near the stairwell. It wasn’t a room that was used; Dec was reluctant to have any of his covey this close to the exit. Here, he couldn’t guarantee that they wouldn’t attempt to break out of the refuge, and the chaos that would likely ensue if they made it above ground would be too much for him to contain.

Splinters of wood crashed into the wall near the door, sending a shower of slivers into the air. Instinctively, Dec ducked. He thought he’d purged the refuge of most of the more breakable wooden furniture, but obviously, he’d forgotten the rooms this close to the stairs. He would have to do something about that.

Katie’s muffled curses were followed by another crash, and Dec heard the distinct sound of two bodies falling to the floor. “Are you going to help me or what?” Katie yelled out to him, fury in her tone.

Hurrying through the doorway, Dec squinted into the darkness before reaching to flick the light switch by the entrance. A pale yellow light haloed the pair that grappled in the middle of the room, and it took a few seconds of scrutiny for him to see what exactly was going on. When he did, all doubt fled, and he darted forward to pull Katie’s attacker free from the fray.

It was a young girl, whippet-thin and fangs at the ready. Long, matted hair hung in her face, hiding most of her features, and the jeans she wore hung off her undeveloped hips. She couldn’t have been more than eleven, and Dec’s arms stilled to a deadly authority around her slim shoulders.

Picking herself up from the floor, Katie brushed at the worst of the dust that clung to her cheek. “Welcome to Casa de Jericho,” she said with a sneer to the girl. “Home of the damned, and your last shot at seeing your next sunset.”

“What’s this about?” Dec asked her through gritted teeth.

Katie’s flinty eyes jumped from him to the girl. “Show him.”

The girl began wriggling in his grasp, which only served to forge his hold into steel. “Let me go,” she gasped.

“So you can have another go at Katie? I don’t think so.”

“I can’t show you if you don’t let go!”

He looked to Katie, who nodded. With a snarl, Dec opened his arms with a rush, watching the girl go sprawling to the dust. She glared up at him, her eyes silver, but her lips pressed together as she yanked the threadbare jacket from her shoulders.

She wore a thin tank top underneath, her chest flat, her skin deadly pale. Turning her back to him, she curled a finger through her strap and yanked it down, exposing the bony shoulder blade for his inspection.

There, near her armpit, was a quarter-sized scarlet rash.

His skin crawled. “That’s not possible.” He reached out, his fingers trembling, and

brushed across the surface of her skin, as if to determine that it was actually real. “No, it can’t be.”

“Can and is.” Grabbing his arm, Katie twisted Dec around to face her. Her visage was a brew of rage and betrayal. “You said he was dead. You said this wouldn’t happen any more. You *promised*.”

“He is.” What else could he say? “I killed him myself.”

“Well, obviously you didn’t kill him dead enough.”

Furiously, Dec spun to face off with the young girl again. “When did this happen to you? Do you know who did it?”

She swallowed, jerking her coat back on. “Last night. I was hanging out in front of this club, and someone said there was a girl getting it in the alley, so I went around to see if I might be able to score some supper. You know, in case she didn’t die straight away.”

“And?”

“And there wasn’t a girl, just this old guy. He creeped me out, so I ran.”

He already knew how the rest of the scenario was going to play out; he’d heard nearly the same story from each of the others in the refuge. He just had never expected to hear it again.

“How’d you find her?” Dec asked, glancing at Katie.

“‘Her’ has a name, you know,” the girl said petulantly. “Tasha.”

“She caused a scene trying to sneak into the club I was at,” Katie replied, ignoring the outburst. “I saw the rash when someone pulled her coat.”

“Put her in Annie’s old room.” He pivoted on his heel and headed for the door. “Give her a good feed before you lock her in.”

“Hey! I’m nobody’s prisoner!”

“Dec!”

Not even the short bark of Katie’s voice could stop him. He was two steps down the corridor when she slammed into him, driving him face-first into the opposite wall, and effectively kept him from walking completely away.

“How is this possible, Dec?”

Her voice was desperate, and though he knew he could easily get free, he remained still, doing his best to tamp down the helplessness that was threatening to overwhelm him. “I don’t know,” he bit out. “It shouldn’t be.”

There was silence, and then some of the rigidity uncoiled from her body, a drawn-out sigh tickling across his ear. “What’s the point of helping Danny and the others if it’s all going to just start all over again?”

“It’s not. I won’t let it.”

“Turns out you couldn’t stop it the first time. What makes you think you can now that it looks like the guy can’t even stay dead?”

“I don’t know,” Dec admitted. He tore away from her, his shoulders hunched. “I have to think, sort this out.”

He couldn’t look at her. He knew what he would see. It was the same despair that blackened his own heart, devastated hope that there was an end in sight when it looked like the nightmare was beginning all over again.

“Take care of the girl,” he ordered, marching down the hall back to his room. “I’ll fix this. I promise.”

As he felt Katie’s eyes bore into his retreating back, Dec prayed this time it was a

promise he could keep.

* * * *

She woke up feeling cold.

Burrowing deeper into her pillow, the silk shirt she wore slipped in cool waves across her skin, bringing back into sharp relief the memories of what had happened with Dec. An unconscious smile curved her lips. Unexpected was probably the best word to describe the sex, though hardly unwanted. Vampire or not, Dec had never been anything but fair to her, and his physical attraction was inescapable. If he'd approached her in a more neutral environment, she had little doubt that their relationship would've progressed in exactly the same way.

With her eyes still closed, she reached across the bed for him, eager to return to his arms, but was met with only the soft down of a pile of blankets. Her lids parted, and she blinked against the dim light to see the disappointing emptiness surrounding her.

He was gone. Where did he go? Was it morning already?

Sliding from the bed, Maya felt another blast of cool air rippling across her flesh and shivered, her fingers flying to do up the buttons of the shirt. She spotted her panties fallen to the floor and scooped them up as she searched for her watch, remembering only after she'd stepped back into her underwear that she'd left it with the books on the couch. Half a dozen steps later, she was frowning down at the dial, wondering why Dec had left her on her own at four in the morning.

Maybe there was another emergency. Maybe Danny got free again and was having to be subdued. Or maybe one of the others had advanced to needing restraints in order not to hurt anyone.

Padding quietly to the door, Maya strained to hear anything on the other side. The silence was deafening. Would he have left the door unlocked? Her fingers played with the knob. It took only a moment for her to decide testing it wouldn't hurt anyone.

It swung open with ease, and Maya edged into the hallway, glancing up and down its length while she tried to determine if anything seemed different. The silence was heavier out here, weighed down with the dust and age of the buried haven. Not a whisper floated back to her, and though she shifted her attention between both directions, neither right nor left offered any answer to Dec's disappearance.

Common sense told her to return to the bedroom and wait. Beyond the few rooms nearby, she was still unfamiliar with the layout of the place and any wandering would get her lost. Dec would do nothing to intentionally leave her in danger, so if he'd left the door unlocked, it was because he trusted her.

But common sense was usurped by other, more alarming thoughts. What if somebody needed medical assistance? What if it was Dec? Could she stand idly by while people were getting hurt?

Of course not. But that still didn't mean she had any idea where he'd gone. For as much as she knew, he'd gone above ground and was out in San Francisco.

Carefully, Maya crept down the hall, keeping her tread as light as possible, hugging the wall in the event someone came barreling around a corner and knocked her over. In this place, that was more than a possibility. She wasn't wandering off, she reasoned. She was trying to determine which way he'd gone. Then, she'd know if it was a situation in which she could help.

“What are you doing up?”

His furious tone made Maya jump, twisting to turn and see Dec glowering at her from the opposite end of the hall. “You were gone,” she stammered under his piercing gaze. “I was looking for you.”

He strode determined toward her, the sound of his boots pounding into her ears. “Dressed like *that*?” As his eyes raked over her, silver sparkled in their depths, his growing ire palpable. “I told you it wasn’t safe.”

She bristled under his implications, pulling herself straight as she stared him down. “I’m not stupid. I was just checking to see if I could figure out what direction you’d gone.”

She cried out when he grabbed her arms, his movements fluid as he shoved her against the wall. Though his touch was rough, it didn’t hurt. It was more the shock of being snatched and shifted so quickly that elicited her response.

“Do you have any idea what you look like?” His body was unyielding where it pressed her to the wall, solid and steadfast as it kept her immobile. One hand released its hold on her arm to curl around the back of her neck, forcing her to tip her chin back and look up at him. His nostrils flared.

“They can smell you, you know.” His voice had deepened, coarsened, rasping over her with little thought to delicacy or caution. “And not all of them are that young. One or two of the older boys could get a whiff of how delicious you are and come out in search of it. They wouldn’t be able to help themselves.”

She felt his thumb drawing tiny circles beneath her ear and wondered if he was even aware that he was doing it. When she tried to shift, to ease some of the pressure on her back, Dec moved with her, his pelvis pushing against hers to stop her from running.

Maya’s heart sped up when the evidence of his arousal ground into her.

“I was just looking for you,” she repeated. “I was worried.”

The stroking hesitated. “About what?”

“You, of course. You weren’t there when I woke up.”

For a second, his gaze fell to her throat. “Don’t start counting on that.” His lips were dry, and she watched as his tongue darted out to moisten them. “I’m not nearly as reliable as you might think.”

Somewhere in the pit of her stomach, a familiar tingling began to crawl its way down her body, settling in her thighs, creating the compulsion to squeeze them together and increase the pressure on her sex. “You shouldn’t sell yourself so short. Why would I trust a vampire so much if I didn’t believe in what he was doing?”

His eyes flew back to her face. “Even if what he’s doing is all going to hell?”

It was a desperate cry for affirmation. No amount of arousal could hide that. “That’s what I’m here for, remember?” Lifting a hand to his chest, Maya offered him the most reassuring smile she could. “We’ll beat this, Dec. Just keep on believing in me.”

She had only a moment to breathe before his mouth crashed down onto hers.

Chapter Twelve

He'd been ensnared the moment he found her wandering the hall.

She was so ripe, still wearing the nectar of her orgasm like a perfume designed specifically to trigger his basest instincts. The fact that she was covered up meant little when he already knew what the black silk hid. In fact, the tantalizing glimpses of ivory skin beneath the dark fabric had just spurred him further.

Then, she'd spoken. Expressed concern. Avowed belief.

And when he'd seen the telltale evidence of her pulse making the gossamer skin in her throat quiver, Dec knew the taste he'd had wasn't enough.

He needed *more*.

The crush of his mouth to hers roused the memory of soft flesh, supple and yielding beneath his, reverting to reality again with the pliant press of her body against Dec's chest. It took a mere moment for Maya to respond, to part her lips, to open to him and let his tongue take what it wanted, as if they'd never stopped, as if he hadn't just spent the last half hour chasing down and then running from a nightmare he'd long thought deceased. As if he was the only thing in the world that she desired.

Dec tightened his grip. He had to. He couldn't let her go.

Her hair twined around his fingers like spider silk, the contours of her skull lost to his touch beneath the tangled waves. The thrum of her pounding heart seeped into his skin, echoed inside his veins, until it felt as if *his* body was the one that was beating. Stolen rhythm, stolen heat, he was a thief of the worst order, taking life from one of the most vibrant creatures he'd ever encountered. Yet, she wasn't fighting him, wasn't denying him, was instead welcoming him in with open arms and spread knees.

He broke from the kiss to hear her gasping for air. "Was it something I said?" she breathed, with more than a hint of a smile.

Dec didn't reply. Letting go of her arm, he slid his hold around her waist, tugging her up and even closer so his erection pressed against the warm cleft between her legs. He searched her face, waiting for the protest, searching her chocolaty gaze for anything resembling fear, but it never came.

She moved first this time, fusing her lips to his. No hesitating, just as he hadn't. Only the swift appeal for him to continue where he'd left off, her tongue tempting him back into the swelter of her mouth, her hands gliding around his shoulders to cling to him with bared nails.

Deep in his throat, Dec growled at the unexpected sting of her ferocity. Surprise after surprise after surprise with this one. It was intoxicating trying to keep up with her.

He stepped away from the wall, keeping Maya fixed against him as he headed back to his room. With the honeyed promise of her pussy grinding against his cock, it took every ounce of his self-control not to fuck her there in the hall, but this was something he didn't want to share. The others were getting her medical acumen, and that was more than enough. Dec wanted everything else for himself.

She tore her mouth away from his before they reached the door, her breath shallow, though she didn't lessen the hold she'd made for herself around his neck. "Why now?"

The question made him pause. A flicker of doubt skated through him, but it was

almost immediately tamped by the turbulence of his desire. “Why not?” he countered, his voice rough.

The apprehension in her eyes eased, but her gaze remained level. “I don’t...” She paused, as if searching for the right words. “Don’t do this because you think it’ll make it easier to get me to do what you want.”

The hand he held at the small of her back turned downward in order to splay across her ass, pressing her more firmly against his aching cock. “You think I don’t want you?”

“You didn’t want this earlier.”

“I didn’t need it earlier.”

She swallowed. Her breathing was starting to even out. “So why do you need it now?”

If he’d been more eloquent, this would’ve been the time to tell her how much she’d brought into his life over the past few months, how watching her and learning about her had shown him the costs of being driven toward a single purpose, how lonely it could be when one closed the door to anything but their goal. He would’ve told her about Tasha, and about how he’d failed, and then begged her not to give up on him just because he’d made this fatal mistake. He would’ve been able to put voice to the burgeoning feelings he had for this beautiful woman, in spite of the fact that she was human, or maybe *because* of it, and how she constantly amazed him with her willingness to look above and beyond.

But Dec didn’t possess a silver tongue, and he had to settle for a simple, “Because you were looking for me.”

It conveyed only a fraction of what he wanted, and it did it in a way that didn’t make him entirely happy, but when he saw her puzzle over his words for only a moment before that full mouth made a silent “oh,” Dec knew it didn’t matter. Because Maya got it. For some reason, she seemed to do that a lot.

Sliding her fingers from his shoulders to his neck, Maya leaned in closer to snake her tongue along the line of his clavicle, just visible beneath the collar of his shirt. The hot trail she left made him shudder, driving Dec into the room, kicking the door shut behind him with a bone-rattling thump as he carried her the distance to the bed. She didn’t stop. With heavy breath, Maya stretched to dart her tongue along the ridges of his ear, ending with a nip at the lobe.

Then, she spoke again.

“Want you...”

He buried his face in the crook of her neck as he relaxed his grip and eased her to the bed. Instead of moving away, Maya reached between their torsos and settled to undoing his shirt buttons, the tips of her fingers blistering his skin as they moved downward, across his abdomen, around his sides as she pushed the fabric away, and then up along his spine with tiny flames as she rid one of the barriers that kept their skin from melding. The taste of her skin was no longer enough, and Dec returned to her mouth, drinking her in as his hands flew to his waistband.

“Let me,” she whispered into the kiss.

The flutter of her fingers on the back of his hands stilled his motions. Every beat of her heart thudded inside his skull, but it was a welcome rhythm, telling him that she wanted this just as badly as he did. Did she need it as badly, too? When he felt her strong hand wrap around his hard shaft, not even waiting until he’d pushed his jeans off, Dec decided that just maybe, she did.

Their nails scratched as they both rushed to shed the rest of their clothing, small shivers of delight every time Dec felt another dance across his skin. He wasn't as careful with hers as she was with his, and buttons skittered across the floor when he ripped the black silk apart, exposing the voluptuous curve of her breasts to his hungry mouth. Dropping his head, he sucked a puckered nipple hard past his lips, reveling in her hiss of pleasure when he bit at the sensitive flesh.

She was the one to fall back onto the bed, pulling at his broad shoulders for him to follow. He did so eagerly, determinedly, taking her wrists in a single hand and twisting her arms above her head. Her ivory skin went taut, her breasts thrusting upward to accommodate the stretch. The added invitation was too tempting for Dec to ignore.

"Oh, god..." Maya panted when his blunt teeth sank into the soft flesh. Her eyes fluttered shut as he sucked at the skin, leaving it unbroken as he indulged in the sensation of her breast against his tongue. "Dec ... please..."

When a cascade of shivers licked down his spine, he realized he wanted more of that, wanted to hear her beg until Maya's need for him made her scream. Reluctantly, he broke the contact between their bodies, pushing up just enough to look down at her.

"Are you going to bite me again?" she said before he could speak.

Though she hadn't specified, he could tell by the hesitant tone in her voice how exactly she meant it. "No. It's not your blood I'm interested in right now."

She tried to lift her legs to wrap them around his hips, but his weight and strength thwarted her efforts. They could both feel the thick length of his cock between their bodies, and while Dec knew that all it would take was the smallest of shifts to position himself at her opening, he wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

His free hand came up to cup her heavy breast. "Absolutely nothing."

"But ... you're not..."

"I'm not ... yet."

He pinched her nipple, and Maya bucked at the surprise sensation, her hips grinding into his. The scent of her arousal permeated the air, and there was the distinct feeling of added slickness near his balls from where she'd rubbed against him.

Dec groaned, in spite of his resolve. "You're a wicked, wicked woman, Maya Sheldon." He pulled her arms tighter, being careful of the bandage that still protected her wrist. "Something should be done about that."

With her muscles taut, and Dec's weight holding her down, she could do nothing but writhe beneath him as he resumed his oral assault. This time, he avoided both her neck and her breasts, craning his neck to run his tongue along the inside of her elbow. A giggle escaped her, and, unconsciously, he smiled. She was ticklish. That was information to store for future use.

Dec added his teeth almost immediately, his body straining toward hers as the moans his nibbling induced called out to him. Taking his time, he tasted, savored, feasted on the curves and swells of her flesh, following the slim line of her arm down her side, arcing below her breast and up along her sternum, lapping at the hollow of her throat before traveling up her neck to the small shell of her ear.

"This is better, you know," he whispered. "Tasting you like this. Blood is one thing, but this..." His tongue traced swirls below her earlobe, sucking slightly at the pulsing skin. "...is worth starving a century for."

When she turned her head to try and capture him in a kiss, Dec deliberately avoided her lips, tracing the corner of her mouth instead. Maya whimpered, her eyes wide and black with desire, and renewed her efforts to free her legs from his bondage.

"Please," she begged.

"Please what?"

Her lashes fluttered closed as he brushed his lips across her brow in a feather caress. "I need you."

It wasn't nearly enough. And even though admitting to such a thing was already a big step for her, he wasn't going to let Maya get away with it.

Dec moved lower, catching her nipple between his teeth for a split second before sweeping his tongue around the puckered aureole. "How do you need me? Say it."

Another whimper. Another concerted thrash as she struggled to get loose. "Inside."

"Inside where?" He shifted just enough to allow room for his hand to slip between them, tangling with the coarse curls on her mound and tugging just enough to make her arch her back. "You can't mean here."

"Yes," she hissed. When her eyelids opened again, a new glint had appeared in the dark, and he saw the change in her happen right before his eyes.

"You know you want me." Her voice was deeper, more controlled, coating him in latent heat with every syllable. She moved the few millimeters his strength allowed, and he groaned as her stomach rubbed along his rigid cock. "You know I want you. What are you waiting for, Dec? Just do it. Give us what we both want." She paused, locking gazes. "*Please?*"

The final word broke him. Slamming his mouth to hers, Dec let go of her wrists as he adjusted his weight, propping himself up to allow her the room to maneuver beneath him. Her bare legs slid around while her nails scratched down his muscled back, and he growled as the head of his dripping cock brushed against her outer lips.

Dec shuddered. In one liquid movement, he sheathed himself in her pussy.

She cried out, her nails digging into his skin as she stretched around his thickness. Before he could even start pulling out, Maya sank her teeth into his shoulder, and he felt the first unmistakable sensations of her second orgasm of the night, her slick channel pulsating around his cock. It drove him to start moving in long, smooth strokes, his mouth back on hers, his hands exploring the curves they were already starting to memorize.

Each thrust ground her clit into the base of his cock. Each thrust had his balls slapping against the crack of her ass. Each thrust created whimpers, both his and hers, until their cries of pleasure were indistinguishable from each other's.

Again, and again, and again, until the in and the out blurred, and Dec was left adrift amidst the fire of her flesh. Maya came yet again, screaming out his name as her hands knotted into the sheets, and it was the combination of that and the convulsive heat of her pussy that finally drove him over the edge.

He slammed into Maya one last time, his back arching up and away as he shot deep inside her. The urge to sink his fangs into her neck was overwhelming, but he held it at bay, recognizing it as more instinct than desire, and rode out the waves of the orgasm with tensed muscles and light heart. Before it had started dissipating, he was already bowing to take her lips in another kiss, this one lingering, this one more about the feeling of the moment than its passion.

Opening his eyes, Dec saw Maya gazing up at him, her fingers ghosting over the planes of his face. "What?" he asked, suddenly self-conscious.

She stopped him from pulling away when his shoulders bunched to do so. "I don't know. I guess I figured you'd bite me again. Isn't that what vampires do?"

He smiled softly. "I told you that's not what this was about for me." Carefully, he pulled out of her wet heat, instantly regretting the absence of her warmth, and rolled to the side, taking her with him to cradle her against his chest.

Maya sighed, nuzzling against his bare skin as her eyes fluttered closed again. "I'm glad you came back."

The memory of what he'd come back from made his arms tighten around her, and Dec buried his nose in her hair, desperate to try and drive the despairing thoughts away. "So am I," he replied. Inhaling, he saturated his senses with lilac, but beneath Maya's heady scent remained the specter of young pale skin riddled with disease, scarlet rashes and silver eyes staring back at him in silent accusation.

He swallowed against the stricture of his throat, and though Maya was already half asleep, he whispered again, "So am I."

* * * *

It had been a productive night. Though he returned to his apartment with empty hands and a rising sun at his back, Stuart Foerster was more than pleased with the results of his nocturnal endeavors. He'd found three more. Funny how they seemed to congregate at the nightclubs when they were obviously too young to get in. Foolish hopes didn't die when one became a vampire, obviously.

His only regret was that he'd lost the girl from the night before. He'd returned to the nightclub where he'd infected her, hoping to catch her and examine the progression of the rash, but he'd been hampered by a surprising intervention. Danny's Katie had stepped into the fight the young girl had provoked, and Stuart could only watch from the bar as she dragged the child kicking and screaming out of the building.

It did give him one very important piece of information. Katie's interest in the girl could only mean that Declan Jericho was still in town. All hopes that Stuart had had that his former protégé had moved on were dashed.

It wasn't a lost cause, of course. There was nothing Dec could do about the young vamps once Stuart got to them. It just meant that he had to be careful of the other man's continued revenge. If Dec was still showing interest in the sick, he was likely still nursing a grudge about Danny.

Absently, Stuart fingered the scar along his jaw. Although it had faded over the past two years, there was still a raised patch that seemed to grow warm when he felt stressed. Vampire healing hadn't been able to repair all the damage from the fire, but he was grateful for the fact that he'd survived at all. The building in which Dec had trapped him and then burned to the ground around him had been meant to be Stuart's grave.

He smiled. It would've been fun to see Dec's reaction to the young girl's illness, the undoing of all that self-importance by the truth staring back at him from the shoulder of a worthless vamp. Dec deserved that and so much more for the pain that he'd caused Stuart. After all, they'd been friends long before they'd been enemies. Partners. Visionaries.

It was almost a shame Stuart was going to have to kill him now.

Chapter Thirteen

She woke feeling cocooned, strong arms holding her tight, blankets that had been mostly disregarded the night before now wrapped closely around their entwined bodies. Dec's hard cock nestled in the crack of her bottom, thick and solid, but his still body told Maya that he was very much asleep. She smiled. Interesting to think that even vampires woke up with morning erections.

There was a pleasant ache between her legs. Part of it was the remaining sting from where he'd bitten her, but the greater portion came from the rigorous pounding she'd received. She didn't think she'd ever been fucked so thoroughly before.

Her slim fingers traced the corded muscle of his forearm. To say this new development was a surprise was an understatement. She didn't need any of her degrees to know sleeping with the guy who kidnapped her was not the smartest choice. But she'd wanted it, and her circumstances weren't exactly the most normal. She'd been taken with a specific purpose. There was no way Dec would hurt her; of that, she was convinced.

What she wasn't so sure of was how this would change things between them. Was he going to pretend it hadn't happened? Somehow, Maya didn't think so. He'd made too big a deal of how long it had been for him to turn this into a casual dalliance.

And then there was the naked longing in his eyes when she'd demanded to know whether sex was going to be a ploy to manipulate her. He could've lied, but oddly enough, he didn't seem to be very good at that when it came to her. He could've tried some romantic line about love at first sight, but her analytical nature would've immediately doubted his sincerity. Instead, he uttered a simple truth, revealing more than she thought he intended in those few words about his loneliness. Denying his physical demands at that point was impossible. Even more importantly, she didn't want to.

Carefully, Maya shifted within his arms, attempting to extricate herself. At the first movement, Dec released his hold, rolling onto his back to give her the room to get off the bed without touching him. His eyes never opened. Sliding down the sheet toward the end of the bed, she'd only gone a few inches when she realized that the blankets had moved with Dec, pulling away from his sculptured chest and winding loosely around his hips. The head of his cock was just visible beyond the fabric's edge, peeking out as if to check to see if the coast was clear.

She smiled. There was something infinitely tempting about seeing Dec like this. Especially since he'd been so adamant about her not paying any attention to his cock the night before.

With her eyes locked on his face, Maya pulled lightly at the blanket, watching for any sign of stirring as she further exposed his nudity, stopping when the covering hit the middle of his thigh. He didn't move, and she paused for a moment, caught in the beauty of his form.

Out of his clothes, his body was even more mouth-watering, muscles seemingly carved from the ivory flesh, broad shoulders somehow broader. Though his chest was bare, fine dark hair started mid-abdomen, thickening into a steady line when it reached his pelvis. His long, thick shaft was almost completely smooth. Only the prominent vein along its underside disturbed its sleek appearance.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. A wicked thought was taking over, one she'd never been daring enough to try before. Of course, with as few opportunities as she'd had to broaden her sexual experiences, it had really been more of a lack of opportunity than motivation. How would Dec react? She couldn't imagine it would be badly. It seemed like a win/win situation to her.

Her fingers trembled as they feathered over the hard shaft. It twitched at her touch, making her jerk back, but when her eyes flew to his face, there was still no sign that he was waking.

An automatic reaction, she chided silently. He was still a man. Of course it would react to being touched.

Tentatively, she tried again, this time making the stroke a little firmer. The softness of the skin surprised her, velvety smooth and cool to the touch. Her hand curled around it, lightly, just feeling its weight, but already, Maya's mouth was starting to water.

Holding her hair back, she leaned forward, being careful to avoid touching any other part of his body, and darted her tongue across the slit.

No reaction.

She grew bolder, this time holding his cock up enough to allow her to slide the tip past her lips. She swirled her tongue around the silky head, allowing her hand to slide down the shaft to grip him at its base.

A moan from Dec's throat startled her, but before Maya could move completely away, his hand was on her hair, playing with the tangled strands.

"What're you doing?" His voice was lazy and sleep-roughened, and she looked up to see him gazing down at her, blue eyes so dark they seemed almost black.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Do you *want* to stop?"

She saw the faint twinkle in the blue now, heard the slight tease in his voice. Two can play this game, she thought.

"Would I have started if I didn't want it?" Holding his gaze, she leaned back in and sucked the head of his cock between her lips again.

Dec's eyes squeezed shut, and his head flopped back onto his pillow. "I think I was right." His fingers were on her nape now, gently massaging the sinew.

She ran her tongue across the tip before pulling off, and was secretly pleased at the drop of fluid that left its tang in her mouth. "Right about what?"

"Wicked girl."

She'd show him wicked.

Licking down the shaft, Maya opened her hand to cradle the weight of his cock against her palm while she finished the route to his sensitive sac. She ignored his groan and swept her tongue beneath it, then parted her lips to suck one of his balls into her mouth.

Dec hissed, his legs parting to expose more of the vulnerable area to her attack. "Do you have any idea what your mouth feels like on me?"

Answering him would've required stopping, so she didn't. Instead, she started pumping her hand, slowly, while she drew the rest of his sac inside her mouth. Every time her hand reached the head, Maya swiped her thumb across the tip, gathering the pre-come to ease the stroke back to the root again.

Dec's hands in her hair began to tangle as he fought to get a hold that wouldn't hurt

her. “Now you’re teasing. All that heat, and you don’t want to share.”

She couldn’t help but smile as she released his balls, running her tongue along the soft skin just behind them before turning her teeth to the inside of his thigh. “Maybe I want to hear you beg,” she taunted, biting at him in nearly the same place he’d bitten her.

Beneath her tongue, his muscles stiffened. “You’re not having regrets about last night, are you?”

The hesitancy in his tone made her wish she hadn’t chosen that particular path for her game. “No. Not a one.”

“I thought—”

“That’s your problem,” she cut off. “This isn’t about thinking.”

Before he could answer, Maya was back above his cock, her mouth open, sliding down along the shaft as far as she could manage. She couldn’t take him as deep as she wanted; the last few inches were too much as the head hit the back of her throat. But she could pump in time with her sucking, moving her hand up and down along the base while her mouth worked and wetted the rest of his hard length.

She could tell by the way he almost immediately started thrusting back that that was enough for Dec.

Closing her eyes, Maya focused on the sensations of his cock sliding past her lips, over her tongue, filling her mouth just as effectively as he’d filled her pussy. Her free fingers trailed along his chest, stroking the smooth skin before finding the hard tip of his nipple and pinching, just to see what kind of reaction she would get.

He bucked, driving his cock deeper. The words that followed were almost incoherent—not words, really, more like sounds—but all Maya needed to hear was the desperate intent behind them. Increasing her tempo along his cock, she added fingernails to where she touched him, scratching lightly across his chest, flicking at the nipple. It was rougher than she was used to, but the thrill of his response was intoxicating, driving her to do more.

Her hand moved from his cock, sliding down to cup his balls. Though it was more difficult to maintain the steady rhythm of her sucking, she kept at it, rolling his sac between her fingers before dipping even lower. Carefully, she traced the tight hole, remembering how startlingly pleasurable it had been when Dec had done the same.

“God ... Maya...” He didn’t tell her no. He just spread his legs farther apart to allow her to continue.

Emboldened by his desire, she started probing the entrance, sucking harder, taking more of his length into her mouth. Her fingertip slipped past the outer ring of his ass. The moment it did, Dec stiffened, halting the thrusts of his pelvis.

The first shot hit her tongue, forcing her to swallow, and she quickly went down his cock so that the next would go more easily down her throat. He throbbed against her lips with every shot, but the moment it started to ease, his hands were scrabbling at her shoulders, tugging at her arms, breaking the seal of her mouth around his shaft to pull Maya onto his chest.

She saw his eyes for only a second before his mouth was pressed to hers, but parted her lips automatically to allow his tongue entrance. Holding her tightly against him, Dec seemed almost to be trembling as they kissed, though she quickly attributed it to the aftereffects of his orgasm. It was incredibly satisfying to make him feel even a fraction as good as he’d made her feel.

When they broke apart, there was a long moment where he just looked at her. One hand came up to push back the hair that had tumbled into her face, gently toying with it before tucking it behind her ear. The other settled at the small of her back, stroking the fine skin it found there.

“That’s the best wake-up call I’ve had in years,” Dec murmured. “Thank you.”

Maya smiled. “My pleasure. Really.” When his hand slipped between them, she squirmed away, sitting up as she wagged a finger at him in reproof. “Nope. You don’t have to do that. I’m fine.”

He pretended to pout as she climbed from the bed, rolling onto his side and propping his head up on his hand to watch her walk to the wardrobe. “Getting your fill of me already? I must be losing my touch.”

“You can make it up to me later, if you want. In fact, I’ll insist on it. But right now, I have work to do. Haven’t you heard of doctor’s hours?”

The reminder of her purpose there wiped the good mood from Dec’s features, his lips thinning. “I’ll get that toxicology report for you first thing this morning.” He sat up, reaching for his jeans that had been tossed on the floor beside the bed, and hesitated when he saw remnants of his black silk shirt next to it. “And something for you to sleep in,” he added. He straightened, holding the silk between his fingers to show her, and his face softened. “Something without buttons.”

“Can it still be silk?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I think I can arrange that.”

A comfortable silence settled between them as Dec got dressed and Maya gathered her things for her shower. She was in the process of wrapping a towel around her to wear along the way when a sudden thought struck her.

“You never told me why you left last night,” she asked.

She was standing by the door, ready to leave, half-turned to look at him as she posed her question. He started, as if he hadn’t expected it, and then proceeded to turn his back on her while he pulled a shirt out from the wardrobe.

“Katie got hurt in a fight when she went out,” he said. “I was helping her get patched up.”

“Is she OK? Maybe I should have a look.”

“She’s fine. Just a few scratches. Scared her, more than anything else.”

Maya nodded, but as she stepped out of the room and headed for the shower, she couldn’t help but wonder what Dec was holding back. He’d been agitated when he’d returned, and though she knew he cared for Katie, it didn’t seem serious enough of a worry to get him worked up so much. Hadn’t the last thirty-six hours proven to him Maya could be trusted with the truth?

She blinked against the sudden sting in her eyes.

The thought that they hadn’t come as far as she’d thought they had ... hurt.

Chapter Fourteen

When lunchtime came and went, Maya justified Dec's continued absence as having to be careful moving about in the daytime. She had no idea how he was getting the tox report, how far he might have to go, and considering sunlight was supposed to be lethal for vampires, she shouldn't have been surprised that it was taking longer than she'd originally expected to get the information she needed.

It was when the hour crept past six and then seven that she started to really worry.

She knew it was ridiculous. He'd been a vampire for *how* long before ever meeting her? And he'd survived. Flourished, even. It was foolish to think anything had happened to him.

Knowing that and keeping the negative thoughts at bay, however, were two entirely different things. Questions kept interrupting her train of thought. Was he hurt? Was he angry? Did he regret what had happened between them? Was it just about the sex? Where that morning she'd been willing to take the positive outlook, now, Maya was ready to believe the worst.

She slammed shut the book she'd been staring blankly at for the last fifteen minutes. She needed to get out of this room. Clear her head. Being confined so closely and not getting anything accomplished were really doing a number on her.

When she reached the doorway, Maya hesitated. Where would she go? The only promise she'd given Dec was that she wouldn't leave the refuge. That didn't mean she couldn't go and see some of her patients. Maybe Danny would still be unconscious. If he wasn't, there were others. She'd examine whoever it was she found first.

A moment later, she had her medical bag in hand, heading down the corridor. She wouldn't go far. With so many twists and turns in this place, she didn't want to risk getting lost. But even a walk would do her some good. Finding another person would be even better.

* * * *

Blood dripped into his eye, but Dec blinked it away, snarling as his fist connected with his adversary's jaw. "I asked you a question." The crunch of bone echoed in the basement, but the other vampire only stumbled backward. "Is it really so hard to expect an answer?"

"You've got a real problem with no, don't you?" The vamp's eyes darted to the door behind Dec, but they both knew it was beyond his reach.

"No doesn't tell me where he is."

Dec swung again, but the vamp danced away, furtively looking around for any sort of weapon. He wasn't going to find one. Dec had chosen this building's basement for the specific reason that he'd known it was empty. He wasn't so stupid to try interrogating someone who might be able to do some real harm in self-defense.

"I know you're supplying him again, Leroy," Dec said, trying a different tactic. "Just tell me what I want to know, and you can walk out of here. Don't, and you can count on haunting this place forever."

Leroy's lips curled back to reveal his fangs in a disdainful sneer. "You don't know anything."

"Oh? See, now, your secretary was *much* more accommodating. She even showed me the invoices."

"That bitch is so dead."

"As will you be if you don't tell me where I can find Stuart. Now."

Slowly, Leroy began backing away until he was merely a silhouette in the shadows. "You gotta let this go, Jericho." His voice grew more hollow-sounding the farther he retreated. "You and Foerster, you were impressive, man. You had everybody running scared. I don't see why you don't just let this vengeance thing go."

"And that's why you'll always be small time."

"Oh, I don't think so." Stray light from one of the narrow windows near the ceiling reflected off a fang, and even in the dim light, Dec could see Leroy's malicious grin. The bastard might as well have been laughing out loud at him.

"You saw Foerster's invoice," he continued. "He's upping his game. This isn't the minor league any more. He's ready to go pro. And I'm planning on going with him."

"Stuart's a killer," Dec shot back. "He'll cut you down as soon as you start becoming a threat to him."

"Hell, we're all killers!" There was something almost gleeful in Leroy's voice, and his cackle rang through the void. "He's just managed to turn it into an art."

Something curdled deep within Dec's gut, rancid and virulent as the voices of the ghosts that had been taunting him for the past twenty-four hours began to grow louder. Whispers became screams. The blur of faces took shape. Through it all, Leroy's goading continued to needle.

"What you two did, man, that's the stuff of legends! What I don't get is how you could just walk away from it. Hell, you and Foerster could've been kings of the hill already if you'd kept your head on about Danny. I mean, so what if Foerster shot him up? Boo-fucking-hoo. You knew your brother fit the profile when you got into the game. You should've—"

But Dec never heard the "should've." The stake had already flown from his fingers, finding its target with grim accuracy. The sound of Leroy's body hitting the floor was a soft muffle in the expansive space, and slowly, Dec pulled the book of matches from his pocket.

His face was devoid of emotion as he struck the match and dropped it on the other vampire. Stepping away from the sudden blaze, Dec watched the body burn with empty eyes, his anger dissipating.

He'd let his temper get the better of him. Leroy would've talked if Dec had only been patient. If he had only ignored the taunts and gibes about Danny, it was very likely he would have Stuart's location now.

Now, he would have to try another way.

But not tonight. Maya waited for him. He wasn't going to disappoint her any further by being any later than he already was.

* * * *

She should've taken a ball of string with her. Or a bag of bread crumbs. Or possibly a compass. Maybe she should ask Dec to get one for her the next time he had to go above

ground. Of course, then she would have to admit to him that not only had she gone off wandering in the refuge, but she'd managed to get herself lost in the process.

No. Better to just figure this out.

Staring helplessly at the myriad doors around her, it was all Maya could do not to throw her medical bag at the wall and stamp her feet in frustration. She was a doctor, damn it! She shouldn't be stuck like a first-year Girl Scout trying to get her wilderness badge. Hadn't she been keeping track of how many turns she'd made? She'd even counted the stairs she'd taken when she found a flight going up a floor. That showed care, didn't it?

Apparently, though, not enough. All it took was the distinct sound of a rat behind a door she was about to open, and Maya had turned on her heel and run back in the direction from which she'd come. Or at least, the direction she'd *thought* she'd come from. Rats had never been her favorite animal, and they were even less so now that one was responsible for getting her turned around.

Taking a deep breath, Maya closed her eyes to concentrate. She directed her senses outward, trying to listen to the building breathe, wishing not for the first time that these vampire children behaved more like human children and made more noise than was wanted. Anything would be welcome. A giggle. A word.

"What does it take to get a meal around here?"

A shout would do just nicely.

It came from deeper in, close enough for the voice to be clear, but far enough for it to be faint. Holding her bag closer, Maya turned toward the sound, walking slowly as she listened for more signs. "Hello?" she called out.

Silence. And then, from behind a door two up on the left...

"Who the hell are you?"

She covered the rest of the distance, but when she tested the doorknob, it didn't turn.

"I said, who the hell are you?"

It was a girl's voice, young, and the second time she posed the question, there was no mistaking the encroaching fear in it.

Maya leaned closer to the door. "I'm Dr. Sheldon. I'm the one trying to figure out how to help all of you."

The lock clicked, and the doorknob turned. Silver eyes gleamed through the crack, almost hidden by dark, matted hair. "You got a badge or something?" the young girl demanded.

She held up her medical bag, offering a friendly smile at the same time. "This is about as official as I get. Can I come in?"

"You didn't bring me any food. Katie said I'd get dinner when I woke up." The eyes narrowed, a sly leer that made her seem all too old accompanying an added gleam.

"Unless ... *you're* dinner?"

Maya knew the quickening of her pulse was audible to the young vampire, but she kept her face impassive anyway. "You know human blood will only make you worse," she said, grabbing onto the information Dec had provided her as her primary defense.

Immediately, the girl backed off, snorting in derision. "Yeah, that's what Katie said," she grumbled. "That's a bitch."

Without the girl blocking it, Maya pushed the door open, stepping into the room. It surprised her with its seemingly human amenities—posters of nearly nude male models

adorned the walls, a stereo with a headphone attachment was on the pink, painted dresser—but then she remembered Dec’s description of how he was trying to help these young vampires. This one was just trying to make it as comfortable for herself as she could, just like Dec had.

“What’s your name?” Maya asked casually. She set her bag down on the open rolltop desk.

“Tasha. What’re you going to do?”

“I just want to look you over. Do you mind?”

“Do I have a choice?”

She stopped in mid-reach for her notepad. “There’s always a choice. But if you want to get better, the best choice is to let me do my job.”

From where she sat perched on the edge of the bed, Tasha glared at her for a long moment. Finally, she sighed, and shifted on her bottom so that her back was now facing Maya. “This poke and grope thing is really getting kind of old,” she complained as she yanked down the thin strap of her tank top.

Maya instantly recognized the mark, though this one was considerably smaller than Samantha’s had been. She took a step closer, pulling on a rubber glove. In fact, it looked about the same size Dec had said the rash was when the vampires were first diagnosed.

“Do you know when you got this?”

She could practically hear Tasha’s eyes rolling. “Two days ago,” came the annoyed reply. “I already told that Jericho guy all this last night.”

Last night. *That’s* where Dec had been. Why wouldn’t he say this was what had pulled him away?

“Let’s pretend he didn’t fill me in yet,” Maya said. “I want to hear what happened in your own words.”

She listened attentively as the girl detailed hanging around the nightclub and then getting chased by the older vampire. “I was way faster, of course,” Tasha said, a hint of pride in her voice. “But he had that blow gun and got me with the dart thingy anyway. I didn’t even put the two together until Katie grabbed me last night and showed me the rash.”

Maya’s mind was awl with questions, but none of them were aimed at the vampire she was actually with. Dec had known all of this, but had specifically chosen to keep it from her, in spite of his assertions that she was there to save these kids. It made no sense.

Tasha interrupted her musings, her tone thoughtful. “Must kind of suck for him.”

“Who?”

“That Jericho guy. He took it out on Katie when he heard, but then, she was pretty upset, too. I don’t think they were expecting to find me.” All of a sudden, Tasha twisted to gaze at her in speculation. “Is that why he sent you here? Did he think I’d tell you something different?”

“No,” she replied automatically. “Dec’s only concerned in helping you.” Except she wasn’t so sure about that any more.

“Yeah, right. Vamps helping vamps? Not in my world.” Her boredom with the topic returned, and Tasha turned her back on Maya yet again. “It’s not like you’re exactly the poster child for impartiality. You’re his freakin’ girlfriend, for Christ’s sake.”

She froze. “Why would you say that?”

Tasha snorted that teenage snort of disdain. It seemed to be a trademark thing for her.

“Well, duh. You smell like him, and you’re wearing his bite like a huge, honking tattoo. I’d say that makes it pretty clear.”

“I’m *not* his girlfriend.”

“Oh, so you’re *not* having sex with him? Right. Try it on someone who can’t smell it a mile off.” She sighed melodramatically, hunching her shoulders forward. It was almost frightening how thin she was. Her bones were all too sharp beneath the translucent skin, frail and fragile like a bird’s. Maya would’ve diagnosed her as malnourished without even doing a physical exam.

“Regardless of what you smell, I’m still a doctor. And I don’t...” Her voice trailed off, a sudden thought striking her into silence.

Tasha was right about one thing. Maya wasn’t being completely impartial. She’d taken everything Dec had said and not pressed, allowing her more pliable emotions for him intervene with her good sense even when she knew he was holding out on her. His evasiveness that morning more than proved that she wouldn’t get any further information, not the kind she really needed anyway. Maybe it was time to stop looking at him as a man, and start looking at him as an overbearing parent. The kind that seemed to think *he* knew best for his children when he didn’t have the medical expertise to back it up. She’d certainly dealt with more than one of those in her career.

“I want you to come back with me,” she said, pulling off her glove and tossing it in the bag.

“Come back? Come back *where*?”

“To my room. I have more equipment there I can better examine you with.” The lie came easily, especially since it was partially true. But there was no reason to tell Tasha the rest of why Maya wanted her around.

She watched her with the wary grace of a caged wildcat, her eyes fading from silver to a dark green. “Am I going to get something to eat?”

“As soon as we’re done. I promise.” Picking up her bag, Maya headed for the door. “Oh, and by the way, I’m going to need that bionic nose of yours to find our way back. I got a little lost trying to find you.”

The girl surprised her by grinning. “This place is pretty messed up, isn’t it?”

Maya stepped aside to let Tasha go out into the hall first. “Yes, it is,” she murmured, but hated that she had to agree.

* * * *

The wound above his eye re-opened when he pulled up in front of the church, dripping into his lashes again and washing the world in crimson as Dec climbed out of the van. He rubbed at it with a weary hand, and while it cleared his vision, it did little to lighten his mood.

Without knowing where Stuart was hiding these days, Dec had gone looking for the next best thing. The med suppliers. Leroy had been the third on his list, and when the secretary had shown Dec the proof that he was selling again, he’d thought there was a light at the end of the tunnel at last.

Only problem was, the light was now a dead bonfire in the old warehouse’s basement, charred remnants of a time he’d prayed was long gone.

Going around to the rear of the van, Dec retrieved the two bags he’d brought for Maya, including the toxicology report she wanted that would show her what was in

Samantha's blood. His deadline was due. If she was going to find an antidote, she needed to know the poison's cause, plain and simple. He'd always known that. It was a symptom of his growing feelings for her that he'd held out this long.

His step was ponderous as he walked around the side of the church. On the one hand, he wanted to see Maya, to take her in his arms and pick up where they'd left off that morning before she'd risen from bed. To have her tending to his injuries, her hands so warm and sure and knowing, and then he'd turn his attention to her, tasting her beneath his tongue, feeling her wrap around his body as she shuddered at the pleasure...

Dec sighed, pulling open the doors.

On the other hand, there was still the purpose of her presence at hand. Maya wasn't there to be his companion. She was there as Danny's doctor, as the doctor to all of them. When she saw learned the whole story, Dec had a feeling all the goodwill he'd cultivated over the past two days would disappear.

The Bible lied. The truth didn't set you free. It just locked the chains that bound you to your lies.

The scent of aging blood mingled with the dust, coating him in more memories as he wound his way down the stairs, through the corridors, toward his room. He passed the room in which he'd seen Tasha, and made the mental note to come back at a later time to finish disposing of the wooden furniture. Better to be rid of it before the others became aware of its presence. If any of them reached the same stage of the disease as Danny, the paranoia could be deadly.

As he walked by the bathroom, his nose tickled at the added aroma of Maya's shampoo, the delicate lilac fighting against the somber age of the refuge. For a moment, he hesitated, and glanced at the closed door. He smiled softly, in spite of his bleak mood. The changes that had been made with her added presence had been subtle, but they breathed with vitality just as determinedly as she did. She gave the place *life*, and even if her efforts were less than successful, Dec would always regard this time he had with her as precious.

He continued on toward his room, preoccupied with thoughts of Maya.

Until the new smell assaulted his senses.

Dec stopped as soon as he rounded the corner in the corridor. To the naked eye, everything appeared the same. Doors shut. Lights on. But the added tang of a new presence warned him it wasn't as he'd left it. Maya was still there, but so was someone else.

It was the someone else that filled him with dread.

He stood there, torn, debating what he should do, how he should handle this. In the end, the decision was taken from him when the door to his room opened, and Tasha stepped out into the hall.

"Told you!" she said, looking back into the room as she pointed defiantly in his direction.

With stomach-churning foresight, Dec's gaze followed the young vamp's. Though only a few seconds passed, they felt longer, stretched by the physics of expectation.

Then, the light from the room was blocked.

Backlit by the warmer illumination from inside, Maya appeared in the doorway, her face half in shadow. There was no welcoming smile, no solicitous gleam in her eye. Just a sober regard, unafraid to match his gaze.

“You’re back,” she said, her voice calm. “You were gone for a long time.”

He nodded, unsure of what exactly she was going to do next. “I had business to attend to.”

“So did I.” For a moment, he thought he saw a flicker of pain pass over her features, but it was quickly lost to the return of her determination. “You and I need to have a *very* long talk.”

Chapter Fifteen

There was a moment when she saw him standing there, that Maya's resolve wavered.

He smelled of smoke, coarse and peaty, and his pale cheeks were smudged in soot. A deep gash above his left eye still ran thick with blood, the scarlet turned into sticky brown paste where he'd obviously wiped at his face, and the immaculate clothes he'd left in that morning now sported more than one rent, baring the bruises forming on his flesh beneath. Though he held himself ramrod straight, she couldn't tell if that was because Dec wasn't actually in pain, or simple Jericho doggedness to ignore his own suffering.

But then she saw his eyes, and she saw the flare of fear deep within the blue as he continued to whitewash his purposes outside of the refuge. That strengthened Maya. She was not the one in the wrong here. She was not about to let him take advantage of her weakness for him again.

"Get inside," she instructed Tasha. It always surprised her that she was so good at this, this calm veneer in the face of potential confrontation. It was a skill that had served her well with truculent colleagues and inflexible parents, countering flailing tempers with a cool façade. Inside, she was seething, but while she knew Dec could hear every beat within her veins, she fought to stay composed. In her experience, it was the best way to win.

"She was supposed to stay in her room," Dec said when they were left alone.

"That's where she was when I found her," Maya replied.

"You went out? Without protection?"

The overprotective tone of his voice made her bristle. "Doctors see patients. Especially newly diagnosed ones. Why didn't you tell me that's where you were last night?"

His eyes jumped to the open doorway. "We're not doing this now—"

"Oh, yes, we are."

"Tasha's new. She doesn't understand the way things work around here. I don't want her to find out this way."

"Maybe you should've thought about that before you decided to turn her into a big secret."

"I'll tell you, but in private." He took a step closer, and though she didn't back away from him, Maya had the sudden reminder of just how much larger Dec really was. "It's time, anyway."

It was a victory, though it didn't entirely feel like one. Maya hung back as Dec strode into his room, setting down the two bags he carried before turning his attention to Tasha.

"When did you last eat?" His gaze swept over her with a discerning eye.

"Forever ago."

"I'll show you where the great room is," he said, but when he turned on his heel to leave, Maya's hand shot out and grabbed his elbow.

"You're not running away from this."

Dec's mouth thinned, but his acquiescent nod was immediate. "Come with us, then. The others haven't met you officially yet, anyway."

“And our talk?”

“After.”

There was no denying the candor in his eyes as she stared back at him, and in spite of what she wanted, Maya believed him. Slowly, she released her grip, and stepped away.

“After,” she agreed, and followed him out into the hall.

* * * *

It was the oddest introduction she ever had to endure.

The great room was just that—an oversized room converted into a combination cafeteria/rec area for the refuge’s occupants. Half the space was filled with tables and chairs, the other half with a TV, bookshelves and a mini-boxing ring. For working out their aggressions without killing anybody, she figured.

Everyone seemed to be there, including Katie, and they all looked up curiously when Dec came strolling in, a sea of wan faces, huge eyes, and hungry mouths.

“This is Tasha,” he said, pulling the young girl forward. He gestured toward the group. “This is everyone.”

She didn’t even greet them before heading to the refrigerator, pulling out a blood bag and sinking her fangs into it with a ravenous snarl.

Stepping back, Dec came abreast with Maya. Though he didn’t touch her, even Maya noticed the possessive lean of his upper body as he introduced her. “She’s here to help you,” he continued, his voice steel. “Which means, you help her by following the rules. First one I find that breaks them, gets staked. No questions asked.”

With the blood still fresh on his face and the tight chill in his tone, there was no doubt to anyone in the room that Dec meant to follow through on his threat. Especially when he gripped her arm and pulled her from the room with intent in every leaden step.

She wrenched free as soon as the doors to the great room clanged shut behind him. “Grandstanding’s over,” Maya said.

“They can still hear you, you know,” he replied, his voice low and cautious.

Her eyes flickered behind her, and she sighed. “Damn it. Have I mentioned that I *hate* your super-hearing?” Pushing past him, she marched back in the direction they’d come, thankful that the great room wasn’t all that far from Dec’s.

He followed and made no attempt at conversation, even after they were back in his room and the door was closed to the rest of the world. Silently, he walked to the wardrobe and pulled out a clean shirt, peeling off the one he wore and tossing it in a ball in the corner.

Maya’s eyes widened at the sight of his broad back. The beating he’d taken was worse than she’d speculated. Blooms of purple and green bruised the normally smooth skin, and near his slim waist, there was a jagged rip, just like the one she had on her wrist. Someone had sunk their teeth into Dec and he’d either pulled them off or torn away, leaving the shredded vestiges of his skin barely clinging to the bloody wound.

“Take your pants off,” Maya ordered before she could think otherwise. When he glanced back at her with a lifted brow, she motioned toward the injury, at the same time, heading for her medical bag. “I need to dress that.”

His hands hesitated at his waistband. “It’ll be fine.”

“Who’s the doctor here?”

Turning her back on him to get what she needed, she heard the soft brush of his jeans

hitting the floor, the muffled jingle of his keys in the pocket. "What happened today?" she asked, keeping her tone neutral.

"I got into a fight."

There was the squeak of bedsprings and Maya turned to see Dec stretched out naked on his stomach, his head up to keep the blood on his face off the pillow. He wasn't looking at her, though. Instead, he was focused on a spot on the wall, his jaw twitching.

"Did you at least win?" she said as she crossed to the bed.

"Only in the way that the other guy is dead," came the cryptic response.

They lapsed into silence as she worked to first clean off the blood from the wound. Bare of the viscous fluid, the bite looked even worse, the flesh exposed and raw in at least two spots. "This needs stitches. Do you want a topical to take off the edge?"

Dec shook his head. He waited until she'd sewn the first stitch before speaking again.

"I was going to tell you."

She refused to let the conciliatory tone in his voice get to her. "No, you weren't. I asked you pointblank about last night, and you held out on me. Why would you do that? What happened to wanting me to help these kids?"

"That hasn't changed."

"But something else has?"

"You're putting words in my mouth, Maya."

"Somebody has to, because you sure as hell aren't." She threw aside the bloody gauze a little more vehemently than she intended, reaching for a clean bandage to tape over the wound. "I can't believe I fell for your whole Mr. Concerned act. What was I thinking? You're a vampire! You don't care about people. We're just food to you, and yet somehow, you managed to convince me you were different, that this wasn't a game, that I just *had* to believe you. Because kids would die. You played me so well, but then again, that was probably half the fun for you."

The tape was snapped out of her hand when Dec sat up, the gauze dangling half-done from his back. "My turn now." Before she could move beyond his reach, he had her wrists in his grip, holding her firmly enough to keep her from yanking away, but not quite enough to hurt.

"What?" she snapped. "You have more lies to tell me? Oh, yes, please. Tell me how this is all just one big misunderstanding. It'll be funny."

"Not funny and no misunderstanding." Sliding his legs so that he wasn't sitting so exposed to her, Dec's eyes never left Maya's, his mouth tight with barely suppressed emotion. She wasn't sure if it was anger, or frustration, or even mirth for getting one over on her, but it was turbulent nonetheless.

"Katie came around to let me know about Tasha," he started.

"You said she got into a fight."

"She did. With Tasha."

"I know this part already."

"Not all of it." His lashes lowered, blinking against the blood that had started to trickle again. "It was a shock. Nobody else was supposed to get sick. That part of this was supposed to be over."

"So, you know. You know about the guy."

"Yes. All too well. But I thought he was dead."

“Why?”

He looked back up at her, and it was impossible for her not to see the misery in his face. “Because I could’ve sworn that I killed him.”

*

He didn’t think she was even aware of how badly she trembled, but at least it wasn’t due to fear. Maya watched him with those wide eyes, and all he saw was betrayal reflected back at him. The hurt. The anger.

But no fear.

“His name’s Stuart Foerster,” he said softly. “A real piece of work. Thinks he’s God, and now that he’s come back from the dead a second time, I’m starting to believe him.”

“A second time?”

“Vampire. Not as old as I am, but you wouldn’t know it from looking at him. He was sixty when he was turned.”

“And ... what? He’s got a grudge against kids?”

She was disbelieving, critical of what he was sharing. Dec didn’t blame her. There were times when he didn’t believe it could be real, either.

“Like I said, Stuart thinks he’s God. He thought child vampires were an abomination, and so he decided to get rid of them.” Slowly, he released his hold on her, wary Maya would bolt. She didn’t move. “The toxin he shoots them with is slow acting at first. The rash you saw is an immediate symptom, but as it gets into their system, it starts leeching off them. Makes it impossible for them to get any nutrition or satisfaction from eating, the hunger drives them crazy until their violent behavior makes them reckless, and that gets them killed.”

Her eyes had steadily grown wider. “That’s—”

“Sadistic,” he finished. “I know. But that’s Stuart.”

The loose tape brushed against his back, and he twisted to press it into place. Maya stopped him with a sure hand, finishing her work before rising to cross to the wardrobe.

“You tried to kill him when he got Danny, right?” She posed the question with her back to him, pulling out a pair of sweats, her fingers holding the cotton just a little too tightly.

“Yes, but—”

“Why couldn’t you tell me this?”

“Because there’s more.”

Her short bark of laughter made him wince. “Of course, there is.” She brought him the sweats and then turned back to her kit, pulling out a clean gauze pad to use on his face. The return of his grip on her wrist, however, prevented her from proceeding.

“Look at me.” Slowly, those eyes that had gazed at him with such want just the night before met Dec’s, and his chest tightened “Stuart had a partner.”

Though her face remained immobile, her pulse doubled almost immediately, waiting for him to finish. It was almost as if she already knew what was coming next.

“Stuart was a theology professor when he was human. When he got the idea in his head about killing off young vampires, he didn’t have the knowledge to pull it off. He needed to find someone who knew about biology, about vampires. Who had nothing to lose. He found me.”

She jerked, trying to get away, but he refused to let her go, absorbing the frenetic cadences of her runaway nerves into his skin as he tried to keep her close.

“Listen to me,” Dec said, his voice more than a little urgent. “Let me explain.”

But already she was shaking her head in denial. “You did this? I thought ... I didn’t ... this wasn’t what I thought you were going to tell me. I thought ... I don’t know what I thought, but it sure as hell wasn’t this.”

“There was a reason I got involved, Maya. You have to hear me out.”

“Why? What possible good could come from that?”

“Because I need you to believe me. I need you to trust me again.”

She looked at him as if he’d just asked her to euthanize one of her patients. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Give me one good reason why I don’t just try and get out of here right now.”

In spite of the way she continued to fight against him, Dec tugged hard enough to make her stumble onto the bed, pulling her into the tight circle of his arms and holding her firmly against his chest. She felt like a fragile kitten, terrified and desperate, and he stroked her back in soothing tenderness as he buried his nose in her hair.

“I don’t just jump into physical relationships,” he murmured. She held herself stiffly, refusing to relax, but he continued the gentling, determined to show her he wasn’t completely the monster she took him to be. “I can’t. But you’re different. Your opinion matters to me, Maya.” Lowering his lips, he pressed a small kiss just below her ear. “*You* matter to me.”

She exhaled, and it was as if her body deflated. “You can’t do that. You can’t tell me you’ve condemned these kids in one breath, and then in the next, tell me you *care* about me. That’s not fair. That’s not right.”

“I just want you to listen. Hear what I have to say, and then afterward, you can pass whatever judgment you want.” He paused. “I’ll even let you go, if that’s what you decide.”

She was quiet for so long he thought his admission hadn’t made the slightest difference. Then, her hands came up, her palms pressed to his chest, and she pushed, firmly, determinedly, until he eased away.

“All right.” Her voice was even, but her eyes were still bleak. “But not like this. You’re going to get cleaned up and changed, while I get ready for bed. Then, you’re going to sit here, and I’m going to sit over on the couch, and you’ll tell me everything I need to know. No more games. No more lies. No trying to sway me with...”

She couldn’t finish the last, but he knew what she meant. Releasing her, Dec nodded, and watched as she slid away, going to the wardrobe before realizing she didn’t have nightclothes there. “I bought you some today,” he said, pointing to the bags left abandoned near the door.

Without looking back, Maya grabbed her toiletries bag before heading for the door, grabbing the sacks and taking them with her. When the bolt clicked shut, Dec sagged back onto the mattress, ignoring the twinge from the bite wound.

He would only get one shot at this. If he couldn’t convince her of the truth, he would be killing all these young vampires a second time.

Even worse, he’d lose Maya for good.

Chapter Sixteen

It took longer to change than Maya expected.

Part of it was the tumult Dec had created inside her head. She'd been prepared for a lot of possibilities, but the thought of him being so deeply rooted in the cause of the disaster he was now trying to solve had never even crossed her mind. He'd been so earnest about his desire to help them, so passionate and determined, that it seemed almost inconceivable that he would only be so because of his role in this particular drama. Motive aside, she couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever really known him after all. Even more frighteningly, she wondered now if she really wanted to.

The other part stared back at her from fabric-covered hangers, perfumed with the delicate aromas of exclusivity and dark secrets. True to his word, Dec had brought her choices of sleepwear, all made of the softest silk, all bereft of buttons. Three short gowns, more indicative of nights of passion than the interrogation she was going back to conduct. In the end, Maya chose the one with the most fabric, a chocolate-colored poet's blouse that hit at mid-thigh. The ruffle-trimmed neck exposed more than a bit of breast, but the sleeves were long, and she could always tuck her legs up beneath her to feel less exposed. Any other occasion, and she would've been delighted to wear such a luxurious garment, but now...

She shoved the ache away. She wasn't going to dwell on her growing feelings for Dec. He had a story to tell, and she needed to be as impartial as she could be in order to listen to him.

He was pacing the room when she returned, long strides etching a sullen path across the floor, his dark hair tumbled down over his brow. Now dressed in a threadbare T-shirt that stretched across his back and the sweats she'd retrieved for him earlier, he jolted to a stop when the door opened, catching her attention for a brief moment before letting his eyes travel downward over her form.

Maya tore her gaze away, and walked over to the couch, aware of his heavy consideration of her every step. "Do you feel any better?" she asked when she was seated. It was a clinical query, she told herself. She'd been tending his wounds before she'd left to change and asking now was just follow-up. It had nothing to do with how she felt about him.

"Better is relative." He nodded toward her. "Do the clothes fit all right?"

Realizing her legs were still there for him to stare at, she hastily curled them up beneath her. "They're fine."

The silence returned, stiff and uncomfortable, until Maya couldn't stand it any longer. "Can we get this over with, please?" There was an unwanted entreaty in her voice, but she didn't have the wherewithal to counter it at the moment. "You wanted me to listen, so here I am. Listening. Except you're not doing any talking, which kind of defeats the whole purpose of this exercise, don't you think?"

"I just ... I'm not sure where to start," Dec admitted.

He looked so much like a lost child then, that Maya's heart leapt with the instinct to help him. She had to knot her hands in her lap in order not to act on it. "They say the beginning's always a good place," she said.

“Beginning. Right.” His pacing began again, his head bowed as he watched his own path. Every step sank him deeper into some fugue, until Maya wondered if he even realized she was still there with him.

“I’m not going to lie and say that I was some noble savage,” he said. His voice sounded like it was being dragged over sandpaper, each word rough with whatever torment ate at him. “When I was first turned, I did what all vampires do. I got lost in the new thrills, the power of life over death, the new freedoms it gave me. The physical drawbacks in being a vampire were inconsequential to the benefits, and I spent a lot of time just reveling in it.”

He paused, lingering by the bookshelves. “But the one thing you don’t think about in the beginning is time. How it keeps on moving when you don’t. When I turned Danny, I thought I was helping him. Our parents were dead, the government thought *I* was dead, and without any other family, they would’ve placed him in foster care. We were a good team, but it took me almost twenty years of that to realize how things weren’t quite as easy for him as they were for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was sixteen when he was turned. He’s going to look sixteen until the day he gets killed. And he’s always looked young for his age anyway.” Dec began moving again, his pace this time more lugubrious. “There are things he can’t do that I can, liberties he can’t take. It’s the same for all the kids that get turned. They grow up, but their bodies don’t.”

“Why would vampires do that to kids?”

“Lots of reasons. For kicks. Some use them for jobs they can’t do themselves, like getting into tight places or pickpocketing. For me, it was for a sense of family.”

Maya frowned, forgetting about hiding herself from his scrutiny as she mulled over his statements. “I don’t think I’m getting the connection with what this has to do with the sick vampires.”

“It was just how it started for me,” Dec said. “Over time, I became more aware of the younger ones, looking for them, watching them.” He turned his head, meeting her eyes with his own haunted gaze. “That’s how I met Leanne.”

Her mouth went dry, but it didn’t stop her from vocalizing the question that popped immediately to mind. “Who’s that?”

“She was the last woman I was with. Before you. She’s dead now.”

“I’m sorry.” The apology was automatic, but while it hurt hearing him refer to his former lover, she meant it. The pain etched across his face at the mention of Leanne’s name made it impossible not to.

Dec was silent for a long moment, his gaze searching hers for something she couldn’t quite define. Finally, he sighed and looked away, resuming his pacing.

“It was seventeen years ago. She ran a youth hostel, helping runaways, kids that found themselves homeless. Danny made friends with some girl Leanne was helping, which is how I ended up meeting her.”

“You loved her.”

“Yes.” No hesitation. A simple statement of fact. “Though that’s probably only part of the truth. I was obsessed with her. She was the first human I’d had a relationship with since I was turned, and it was ... it was like nothing I’d ever felt before. Vivid, I think is the best way to describe it. And surprisingly enough, she loved me, too.”

His voice trailed off, the memories of this other woman overwhelming his story.

Watching him, Maya couldn't help but whisper, "Not so surprisingly."

The hushed words startled Dec from his reverie, and his head jerked back to stare at her. He took a step toward Maya, but then hesitated, running long fingers through his hair in frustration.

"Leanne and I were together for six years," he said, continuing his tale. "Even Danny started cleaning up his act, killing less and helping out at the hostel. But then, Leanne ... she ... she'd learned a lot being with me, but, sometimes, her heart was bigger than her head, and she..."

He didn't have to say it out loud. "She was killed by vampires, wasn't she?" Maya prompted.

Dec nodded. "One of her girls got turned and brought back the gang that did it. Leanne didn't stand a chance."

Though she could see where he was going with this, she just had to ask. "What did you do?"

His laugh was brutal. "What do you think I did? I found the bastards and ripped their throats out, right before I set the whole lot of them on fire. I watched them burn for hours, and every time it looked like the flames would go out, I'd stoke it back up again. I couldn't make it last long enough, though. They were ash all too soon."

Even now, the glee at hurting those who'd killed his lover lurked beneath the fervor of his story. She'd been lucky so far in not seeing too much of that side of his vampire nature, but witnessing it like this was almost too intimate.

"It wasn't enough." He'd closed off again, wandering among the dead bodies of his past. "I woke up in the basement where I'd had my bonfire and I felt ... hollow. Because I knew she was gone. And I didn't think I had anything left to go back to. I stayed there for three days going over what I could've done differently, how I could've protected her, how she'd still be alive if it wasn't for knowing me. I was a real mess when Danny finally found me."

"If you weren't with her, then—"

"*Don't* tell me this isn't my fault, Maya." His eyes flashed as he glanced at her. "I knew what kind of life I was introducing her to, and I didn't care as long as it meant we were together."

"But you said it yourself. She loved you. That makes all the difference."

"No, it doesn't."

The stubborn set of his jaw told her that he wasn't going to budge on this point. "How did you get from Leanne dying to meeting Stuart?"

"Blood. Lots and lots of blood." Long fingers curled into fists as he moved, his forearms bulging from the force of his tension. "It was Danny's idea of grief therapy. Get out, get drunk, kill anything that moves. Only I tended to gravitate to anybody who looked like they could've been part of the gang that got Leanne. Danny used to give me hell about it, saying I was just pulling the scab off every time I killed another one." He snorted, shaking his head. "It was one of the few things Danny ever got right, but I kept rationalizing it by telling him that the younger vamps were better off dead anyway."

"How long did this go on?"

"Too long. Years." Dec paused to consider his answer. "Everything blurs until about five years ago. That's when Stuart found me, and made me an offer I didn't think I could refuse. I didn't even hesitate."

“You just wanted them dead.”

“It seemed foolproof. He said we would be able to target those vampires who were only of a certain age. Make their deaths quick. *That’s* why I gave Stuart my expertise.” When he looked at her now, his eyes flashed with silver from the vehemence of his belief. “I never wanted *this*.”

She shrank slightly at the display, aware again of the scantiness of her clothing. “What’s your expertise, Dec?” she asked quietly. “You weren’t a doctor, were you?”

His self-deprecating smile gave her chills. “Not quite. That’s what my father wanted, but I couldn’t go through with it. I took my pre-med and became an administrator instead. Better hours, less life and death. Boring, really, but it meant I knew a little about a lot of different kinds of medical issues, and that’s all Stuart cared about. He heard what he needed to hear, and then seduced me with the rest.”

His voice was low as he recounted their work. “It had been decades since I’d spent so much time studying. But Stuart had only been a vampire for a little over a year when we met up, and he’d been steeped in university methodology for nearly forty years prior to that. He was convinced it was a matter of education. The knowledge was out there. It was just up to us to find it. So, we spent almost three years gathering every bit of information we could find on vampire physiology, studying the lore. Anything, really, that we thought would help us meet our goals.”

“And you came up with the drug that’s infecting Danny and the others.”

“No.” His voice was bitter. “Stuart did that, all on his own. I didn’t think we were that close to it yet. We’d found drug combinations that could kill, but nothing as spectacular as we’d wanted. And all of them too slow. I wanted to do it in one fell swoop and then walk away. Get my life back. Turns out Stuart had other plans.”

“So, *he* found it?”

After a moment, Dec nodded. “He was conducting his own experiments on the side. He’d taken what I’d taught him and twisted it to create what you see now.”

“Why?”

The shrug of his shoulders was just as much a sign of defeat as it was an answer to her question. “I never found out. I confronted him about it, and he just laughed in my face. That’s when I told him I was quitting.”

The rest of it made sense now. Danny had been poisoned as a way to get back at the partner who’d abandoned their project, and a vengeful Dec had gone back one more time to kill Stuart. Except he’d failed.

“So, he’s still alive,” she surmised. “Picking up where he left off.”

His whole body sagged as he sat down on the edge of the bed. “That’s what it looks like.” When he turned to face her, her heart twisted again at the anguish in his eyes. “It’s going to start all over again, Maya. I spent so long finding as many of the sick kids as I could, and now, it doesn’t even matter because he’s not going to stop. Tasha’s just the beginning.”

She rose without even thinking, crossing to stand before him. “That’s what you were doing today, wasn’t it?” Her fingers ghosted over the bandaged cut on his brow, remembering the other injuries she’d tended, the explanation he’d given her about his whereabouts while he was out. Faced with the return of an enemy, Dec had immediately taken action. Before hearing this tale of his past, what else would she have expected?

“Did you find him?” she prompted, when he remained silent.

“No. I had a lead, but...” His eyes searched hers. “Are you leaving now?”

Chewing at her bottom lip, she answered him with a question of her own. “Would you really let me go if I wanted to?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. Standing, Dec brushed past her to go to the wardrobe. Though his tone was neutral, the tension she could see in his back betrayed his true feelings. “You can even go tonight, if you wish.” Just as he had the previous night, his fingers skimmed over the soft lines of her clothes. “I can drive you where you want.”

“You don’t have to. I’m staying.” When he turned to look at her, hope lighting his face for the first time since coming home, she held up a warning hand. “I have conditions.”

“Of course.” He said it quickly, expectantly, letting the wardrobe door fall shut as he gave her his full attention. “Whatever it takes.”

“No more holding back on me. From now on, if I ask for something, I get it. Full cooperation. I don’t care how uncomfortable it makes you.”

“Done.” He took a step toward her.

“And I want you to write out everything you remember about this little cocktail Stuart has. What’s in it, how much, how you made it. Everything. I can treat these kids best if I know exactly what I’m dealing with.”

“Done.” Step.

She took a deep breath. “And I want an answer to one specific question right now.”

“Name it.”

“Are you sorry?” Her throat tightened when he froze, and Maya swallowed to try and clear it. “If you had the chance to do it all over again, would you still try to get back at all those kids because of what they did to Leanne?”

His silence was damning. What was even worse was the way he averted his eyes.

Squaring her shoulders, Maya thrust aside the pervasive disappointment that suddenly wanted to drag her down, and marched over to where she’d dropped the bags. “It’s going to be a late night,” she said, all business again. She pulled out the tox report and tried to read it, blinking against the sting of tears that blurred the words on the paper. “If you could get me some coffee, it’ll make this a lot easier.”

She kept her head bent until the door whispered shut behind him. Only when she was alone again did Maya yield to the seductive pull of her disenchantment, gulping at the air to try and assuage her burning nerves.

It was going to be a very long night, indeed.

* * * *

He sent Katie back with the coffee. The prospect of seeing the disgust in Maya’s face was more than Dec could stomach at the moment.

Instead, he prowled the refuge’s halls, listening to the muted conversations behind closed doors, phantoms of the past flickering around the periphery of his awareness with even more urgency than the norm, and tried to remember why exactly he was doing this. As much as he hated admitting it, Maya’s query about regret had taken him by surprise. He’d expected accusations, hatred, anything but the questioning desire for him to convince her that he was now a better man. That had blindsided him. His relief that she was willing to stay had stopped Dec from seeing it coming.

It was pointless to deny it any longer. He didn’t want her to go. And it wasn’t just for

the sake of those he'd condemned. He wanted her for himself.

However, the fact that he wouldn't change the past, that he'd still go back and avenge Leanne's death knowing it would ultimately take him down the same path, was the death knell to any potential relationship that might've developed between him and Maya. It didn't matter that she'd responded to his advances as she had. What mattered was the truth of the monster that was the reason for her presence in the first place.

She couldn't love a monster. There was too much life in her to ever allow such a thing to happen.

Not even if that monster was already more than half in love with her.

Chapter Seventeen

The knock at the door surprised Maya.

"Come in!" she called out from her seat at the table. She frowned when Katie entered, balancing a covered tray gracefully in one hand. "What's that?"

"Dec said you wanted coffee. He said you were planning on working late, so I tossed in some snacks, too. It didn't look like you'd grabbed anything for dinner."

Maya chewed at her lip as the contents of the tray were laid out amongst her research. "Where's Dec?" While part of her was relieved she wouldn't have to face him for awhile, another was taut with regret. She hadn't thought he'd be so evasive now. What more could there be for him to hide from at this point?

"I don't know." Katie started to turn away and then thought better of it. "You could show a little compassion, you know. He's doing the best he can."

The abruptness of the vampire's tone made her stiffen. "What're you talking about?"

"He told you about Stuart, right? You know everything that's going on now?"

Flushing at the naked admonition, Maya turned back to the book she was using to cross-reference the results of the toxicology report. "I know enough."

She gasped when the book was slammed shut in front of her, her attention reverting to a now-angry Katie leaning over the table toward her. "He thinks you're God's gift, even now, so the sooner you get off this high horse of yours and start appreciating what exactly he's doing here, the better off you're going to be."

"I don't think this is any of your business."

"Dec's family. That *makes* it my business."

"I think he'd disagree."

Silver flashed in Katie's eyes. "Fucking him doesn't mean you know him. You don't know what he's gone through to get to this point. You have no idea how much he's given up."

"Anything he's done is his own fault," Maya countered.

"And don't you think he *knows* that?" Katie shoved so hard from the table that several books went flying, making Maya jump in spite of her resolve not to. "Just because he's a vampire, doesn't mean Dec's stupid. In fact, he's one of the smartest men I've ever known, and if you haven't figured that out for yourself by now, then maybe you're not as brilliant as Dec keeps claiming you are."

The two women regarded each other, tempers frayed, nerves off-balance by the shift in their relationship. "Why do you stick by him?" Maya asked. "You're not sick. You could go and do all the vampire stuff you want."

"Because he promised me he'd cure Danny." Her voice was still tight, the muscles in her face still tense, but there was a new element, an ache that testified to the truth Katie spoke, that reached into Maya's gut and twisted. "I know you think you've met Danny, but you haven't, not really. He hasn't been himself since he got sick. And I swore to Dec that I'd do whatever he wanted if he could give Danny back to me."

"Oh..." Her eyes widened. It hadn't dawned on her that their relationship had been anything but platonic. The age difference had thrown her.

Katie saw it in her face and shook her head. "He's only sixteen on the outside," she

said. "He's lived over three times as long as I have. He's seen parts of the world I've only dreamt about. Think what you want about me and him, but I'll guarantee you that you'll never understand it."

"I wasn't—"

"Yes, you were. But that's OK. I don't expect someone who's never been in love to get it."

Maya's anger began to seethe again. "*Now* who's jumping to conclusions?" she demanded. "If you don't want me assuming things about you, then don't do it to me."

"I'm not assuming anything." Pivoting on her heel, Katie headed for the door. "I know for a fact that it's true."

"Oh? And why's that?"

"Because if you had..." She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes dark. "...you'd understand why Dec's done what he has."

The door whispered shut behind Katie, leaving Maya staring at it blankly. She didn't see the heavy wood. She saw the ghost of Dec's face as he'd told her about Leanne, remembered the conviction of his feelings.

It left her shivering.

* * * *

He found himself standing outside Danny's door, listening to the rattle of chains from the other side as the younger vampire played with the give in them. The thought of another confrontation with his brother left Dec feeling weary, but the hope that maybe he might be in one of his more lucid moments, that maybe they could talk as they used to before Stuart had ever entered the picture, was unnaturally keen. It wouldn't hurt to just check on Danny, he rationalized in the end. After all, he was supposed to be protecting *all* of the sick kids, wasn't he?

The scent of cold blood made the dusty air thick, and Dec made a mental note to move Danny to a new room now that he had a fresh supply of sedatives to keep him malleable. His gaze shifted immediately to the bed, tamping down a mild flash of disappointment at seeing his brother's eyes closed, but before he could pull the door shut again, Danny's voice slithered to greet him.

"Am I being punished?"

Dec froze, his heart plummeting. Hearing such innocence from Danny was never good. The residual effects of having human blood, even as little as he'd taken from Maya, sometimes did this to the kids, drawing out their more ingenuous qualities by messing with their brain chemistries. It almost always indicated the long, dark slide back into the uncontrollable aggression. Dec would have to come back with another dose if he didn't want to risk another breakout.

"Dec?" Silver eyes turned to prevent his departure, a tired tongue darting over dried lips. "Where are you going?"

"I..." He sighed and closed the door, blocking out the light so that the luminosity of Danny's gaze was dulled. "Nowhere. I'm right here."

The dust clung to the bottom of his feet as Dec edged nearer to the bed. Though he might appear vulnerable, Danny was still dangerous, able to turn violent at the slightest provocation. Even chained, Dec had to be careful.

"How do you feel?" Dec asked.

“Hungry.”

“I’ll have someone—”

“Can I have Dr. Sheldon? She was delicious.”

He girded himself against the desire to lash out at Danny. “We’ve had this discussion. Maya’s not ... she’s here to help you. Remember that.”

With a sigh, Danny did his best to roll away, closing his eyes again and burrowing deeper into the chains that bound him to the bed. “We both know that’s not going to happen.”

“You don’t know Maya, then. She’s the best doctor I’ve seen in decades. She’s not going to give up on you.”

“You mean, she’s not going to give up on *you*, Dec. She doesn’t know me from Adam.”

“I’m telling you—”

“Save it.” Peering at him through slits, Danny sniffed pointedly at the air. “How could you come around here smelling like that? You won’t let me feed, but you’re practically swimming in her blood? How unfair is that?”

There was no way to answer that without making the situation worse. So Dec just stood there and waited.

“She’ll leave when she finds out the truth, you know,” Danny observed.

“She already knows.” He held himself a little straighter, oddly proud of the next declaration in spite of remembering the disappointment in her face. “And she’s staying anyway. Maya’s not the kind of woman that just walks away from her patients.”

It took a little bit of the wind from Danny’s sails. “Congratulations. You must be very proud of yourself.”

The deprecating tone of his brother’s voice pulled Dec closer to the bed. “It’s not the way that you think.”

“Don’t try telling me you don’t care about her. I saw you before Leanne, and I saw you after. I know the signs.”

“How I feel has nothing to do with why she’s here.”

“So, you *do* care.”

“That’s not—”

“Where is she now? If she’s supposed to be my doctor, why hasn’t she come to see me again?” A sly intelligence crept into Danny’s eyes. “Afraid of sharing?”

There would be no coherent conversation tonight. “You know why,” Dec said, backing away from the bed. “And if you’d learn to keep your fangs to yourself, I’d let Maya examine you again.”

“My, aren’t we being alpha male tonight,” Danny hissed. “Couldn’t hold on to Leanne, so now you’re closeting away your precious Maya. It won’t work, you know. You’ll fuck it up again.” He rattled his chains, lips curled back into sneer. “I’m your proof of that.”

Dec fled. How could he answer the accusations he knew to be true? Danny would see right through him if he tried to deny the veracity of his brother’s claims. He always did.

* * * *

Though she didn’t touch the food, Maya downed the pot of coffee quickly, filling her

veins with the familiar thrum of caffeine as she scribbled her notes along the margins of the tox report. Taken on a purely intellectual level, it was a fascinating problem to solve. The combination of drugs that still lingered in Samantha's blood should never have worked together, and yet, the proof stared back at her with hungry silver eyes. She was almost excited about seeing what details Dec was going to share with her about the poison Stuart had created. She was intrigued to see if the theories she was already gathering were correct.

Consuming the coffee so quickly, however, meant that she was fast without anything more to keep her going, but Maya waited until she felt the lethargy starting to return before rising to go to the kitchen. She was just getting into a good rhythm with her work; interrupting it for something as mundane as a caffeine break seemed like such a waste of time. It would have to be a quick trip. In and out so she could get back to the books.

She almost tripped over Dec when she hurried out into the hall. He sat on the floor outside his room, long legs sprawled to cover the width of the corridor, his head in his hands. He looked up automatically when she emerged, and she was shocked to see the glimmering tracks of tears down his cheeks before he wiped the evidence away.

"What's wrong?" she asked without thinking. "Did something happen to Danny?"

Slowly, he shook his head, as if the effort was excruciating, but no other explanation was forthcoming.

"Why are you just sitting out here, then?" Maya questioned.

His eyes slid to the open door behind her. "I didn't think you'd want to be disturbed."

Seeing him so broken made her forget about her tiredness, and she crouched at his side, her hand resting on his thigh. "We're partners. Wasn't that the whole point of coming clean? I thought we established that."

His muscles tensed beneath her fingers, and she caught Dec's quick glance at her mouth before he lowered his head again. "Yeah," he mumbled, though the single word carried more bitterness with it than she would've thought possible.

It took several seconds of him just sitting there for Maya to realize that he wasn't going to move. "Don't do this," she admonished.

"Do what?"

"Give up. I'm not."

"I know." He still refused to look at her. "Thank you for that."

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong? And remember, you promised me no more lies."

He didn't move for a long time. Then, when Maya was about to challenge his agreement to her conditions for staying, his hand lifted from where it had been knotted with its mate in his lap, and slid the few inches across to hover over the one she still rested on his leg.

"I went and saw Danny." It was all he needed to say. With his earlier revelations, she now understood the true depths of what his brother's illness meant to him.

Loosing her hold on his thigh, Maya lifted her hand until the back of it brushed against his palm. Automatically, his fingers laced through hers, stealing the heat, and she felt that familiar sense of home touching him always brought on.

"Why did you stay?" He asked the question before she could respond to his declaration about Danny, making it clear that thoughts of her were just as prevalent in his

mind as anything else.

“Because I want to help these kids.”

When he looked at her, she couldn't see the blue of his irises in the dim light of the hall, but it wasn't necessary in order to know the depth of what he was going through. “Is that all? Nothing else?”

“What do you want me to say?” Though her voice was just as quiet as his, it seemed to echo between them.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a ghost of a smile. “I'm almost afraid to say I want to hear the truth. But ... yeah. The truth.”

“About us?”

“Is there even such a thing for you still?”

The flood of everything that had happened since her arrival washed over her. Dec doing his best to protect her, to make her comfortable. Katie's determined allegiance to the vampire who promised to give her Danny back. The chorus of pale faces watching Dec in the great room, so trusting and expectant. And all the moments when he'd been with Maya, touching her, believing in her, taking what she gave so freely to assuage his lonely existence.

Everything he'd told her about his past, about his involvement with Leanne, about how he'd been so blinded by grief that he'd sought retribution by the methods he knew best ... it made him more tangible, more *real*, than he'd been when she'd first arrived. Most importantly, it made him fallible, and it was that imperfection that made Maya realize how much he really had exposed of himself by bringing her here. He'd had no assurance that she wouldn't have run off during the day or gone to whatever authority had dominion over his kind. Even tonight, he would've let her go without question or harm.

Wasn't the fact that he was now trying to amend what he'd inadvertently helped create all that really mattered?

Her throat was dry from taking so long to answer him, and she swallowed as she weighed her words. “Why does it matter to you what I think? I'm just the doctor you need to help these kids. I don't have to be anything more than that.”

Carefully, Dec lifted his other hand and reached around her hip, pulling her from her crouching position so she sat astride his lap. He never took his eyes off her, waiting for any sign that what he was doing was unwanted.

She never gave him one.

“You're not *just* their doctor,” he said quietly. “I know everything's changed for you now because of hearing the truth about all this, but that's not the way it is for me. I thought you were an amazing woman before I ever had the chance to get to speak with you in person, and now...” He released her hand, letting his own rise to ghost over her features, a breath away from her brows, her nose, her lips, before falling back into their laps. “I don't want to think about what my life is going to be like when you're not in it any more.”

Her pulse pounded in her throat, her cheeks hot. Slowly, Maya leaned forward to brush her mouth across Dec's, pulling back before he could even consider deepening it. “You scared me with all of it,” she said. When he tensed beneath her, she pressed her palm to his chest in reassurance. “But you knew it was going to scare me, so I get why you didn't want to tell me. Before, this would've been a really easy question to answer. I

don't just fall into bed with guys. I would've said, 'Of course, there's an us.'"

"But now...?"

"I don't know," Maya admitted. "I'm still wrapping my head around everything. But I *can* tell you that I didn't stay just for the kids. I stayed because I think there's a chance. A small one. For us."

The softening of his eyes was accompanied by the hard line of his body tensing to rise. Rather than letting her go, though, Dec kept his arm around her waist, pulling Maya to her feet at the same time. "A chance is more than I would've asked for."

Deliberately, she pushed his hands off her hips, taking a step back. It left her feeling cold, but Maya braced herself against the loss. "We have work to do." The calmness of her voice surprised her. On the inside, she felt like staying firmly entrenched in his arms and letting it all continue the way Dec wanted. "Are you up to helping me?"

He nodded. "It's better to keep busy anyway."

He followed her back into the room, and while Maya was aware of the caution he exercised in every word he uttered, every move he made, she was even more aware of the relief that had been unknotted inside her.

A chance. All they had to do was be patient. Diligent. Focused.

For all of their sakes.

Chapter Eighteen

He fell asleep first. Even with decades of nocturnal living behind him, Dec's long day and draining night weakened his defenses, coaxing him into slumber with the promise of oblivion. The last thing he remembered was watching Maya stretch to reach a book from the shelves, her nightgown riding up to reveal the soft swell of her cotton-clad bottom. He drifted off to fantasies of taking her shopping for some new panties to go with the sleepwear.

His rest was deep and surprisingly free of tormented dreams. When he awoke, it was immediate, his senses sharp, but the slight euphoria lingered only as long as it took him to open his eyes. Memories of the night before came crashing back, and Dec sat up on the couch, avidly searching the room for Maya, somehow convinced that she'd only wanted to wait until he was unconscious before slipping away.

He relaxed when he saw her sleeping at the table. She must've only meant to put her head down for a moment. Her cheek was pressed to an open page, and in her right hand, she still grasped the pen she'd been so furiously taking notes with all night. A curtain of hair hid most of her face, but the swollen pout of her mouth peeped from behind the chestnut tresses.

Silently, he rose and crossed to her side. Sliding the pen from her fingers, he waited a moment to see if she would rouse before venturing to take her into his arms, unconsciously smiling when she turned her face to burrow it against his chest. He didn't move. The heat of her, rapturous and deepened from sleep, burned through Dec, sending him careening through those moments when she'd been stretched out beneath him, writhing and twisting as he buried his cock inside her. He hadn't been hard when he woke up, but he was now, the desire to take advantage of her unaware state rearing its shameless head.

"Dec?"

All thoughts of ravaging her fled, and he glanced down to see her peering at him with sleepy eyes. "Go back to sleep," he said softly. He resumed his original route to the bed. "I'm just making you more comfortable."

She nodded in agreement, her lids fluttering shut again. It wasn't until he was laying her out on the mattress that she made another sound, this time whimpering in the back of her throat when he pulled away.

"Stay," she breathed, fumbling for his hand.

Dec stilled. "What?" He couldn't have heard her correctly.

"Stay," Maya repeated. This time, her fingertips found his, and her eyes opened just enough to turn and look at him. "You need to sleep, too."

He didn't want to tell her that he'd already rested, but he didn't want her to wake up and accuse him of taking advantage of her weakened state, either. The line they walked was tenuous enough. One wrong step and he would drive her completely away, ruining the final chance she had granted him.

"I'm fine," he managed to say, but before he could step from the bedside, Maya rolled toward him to more firmly take her hand in his.

"The couch couldn't have been comfortable." She was growing more alert, and Dec

was beginning to wish that he'd just let her be in the chair. "Your legs are too long for it. You looked all bent when you were sleeping. I almost woke you up more than once to get you to move to the bed."

"It was..." he started, and then stopped, the full import of what she was saying registering. "How long were you watching me?"

A shy smile curved her lips. "You're not getting me that easy."

"I thought ... but what about last night?"

Shadows darkened her eyes, and Maya dropped her head to the pillow. "I haven't forgotten, if that's what you mean."

"Have you changed your mind?"

She sighed. "That would imply I'd made it up one way already." Weariness was creeping back into her voice, and her eyelids were sagging again. "I didn't think it would be such a big deal for you to get some decent sleep. I'm sorry. Forget I mentioned it."

But he couldn't. He just stood there, long after her hand had fallen from his, gazing down at her in confusion. He hated being so indecisive, but fear held him back, crippling him where he was normally so sure.

In the end, it was one simple fact that compelled him to move.

She had been the one to ask him to stay. She wouldn't have done so if she didn't want it.

Dec was stiff as he slid beneath the blankets, and even more so when she rolled over to curl into his side. Her warm breath fanned across his chest, seeping through the thin cotton of his shirt, but the rhythms of her heart didn't accelerate to indicate she was waking. Gradually, he let himself relax, bowing his arm to wrap around her back, and watched the delicate curve of her mouth as she slept, all the while wondering what would happen when she finally woke up.

Perhaps he was the one who was dreaming, Dec mused. And if that was the case, it was a dream he was sure he didn't want to end.

* * * *

Waking up with Dec was growing increasingly familiar, the hard press of his chest beneath her cheek, the powerful camber of his arm around her back. In those moments before she stepped fully into consciousness, Maya couldn't escape the sense of security being held by him created, nor did she really want to. She'd spent far too long on her own, being the strong one, not to enjoy these stolen seconds where she could temporarily pass over that power.

Then, she remembered. She remembered why she was in the refuge in the first place, how Dec had confessed every damning detail, how Katie had accused her of being short-sighted and emotionally stunted.

And she stiffened against him.

He must've been awake because he reacted immediately. The soft cotton of his shirt disappeared as he slid out from the embrace, and Maya blinked against the dim light of the room to see Dec rise.

"What time is it?" she asked.

He reached for his watch without looking back at her. "Just after midnight."

"You're going to have me on vampire time before we're done with this," she joked half-heartedly as she pushed back the blankets.

That drew a quick glance, but it was too swift for Maya to see anything more than a glimpse of his profile. “Do you have plans for what you want to accomplish?” he asked, ignoring her attempts at informality.

She frowned, watching as he stood at the wardrobe and pulled out clothes with a grim determination. “You obviously do. Are you OK? Didn’t sleeping on the bed help?”

“I didn’t sleep very much.”

“But...” The terseness of his voice was throwing her off. “...why did you join me, then?”

There was a pause, the knuckles of his hand bone white as he gripped the wardrobe door. “Because you asked me to.” He turned then, and the tightness in his body matched that in his face. “*Why* did you ask me to?”

“We went over this—”

“And I don’t think those answers work any more. Not after feeling you wake up like that. If you didn’t want me there, why ask?”

Maya sighed. “You’re blowing this all out of proportion.”

“I don’t think so. You made it perfectly clear last night that the truth about me bothered you, and then you turn around and ask me to sleep with you? What am I supposed to think, Maya? You can’t have it both ways. Make up your mind and then let me know, because trying to figure it out for myself is giving me a headache.”

He slammed the wardrobe door shut, splintering the wood around the hinges from the force, and pivoted on his heel to stride from the room. Before he reached the door, however, Maya leapt from the bed, darting across the floor to grab his arm.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said, tugging him to a stop. She glared up at him. “I’m not letting you get away with this, this time.”

“Get away with what?”

“Leaving. Walking away. Pretending you can just turn your back on whatever it is that’s driving you crazy and that it’s going to disappear.” Without letting go of his arm, she slid around to stand between him and the doorway. “Remember what I said? About that chance I thought we might have? Well, if you walk out that door now, you’re throwing it away. You have to be prepared to meet me halfway here, Dec. Unless, of course, you don’t want to, in which case, this is the easiest resolution to the issue of us I could’ve imagined.”

His eyes jumped from her to the door behind. “I don’t run,” he said, almost petulantly. “And given the choice, I’d rather have you around than not. So, I guess we’re doing this your way.”

“No,” she said. “This is *our* way.”

“Semantics.”

“Don’t—”

“What do you want me to say?” Pointing back to the unmade bed, Dec’s voice became fierce as he let loose. “Tell me you weren’t upset when you woke up. Tell me that I was wrong when I felt you tense.” He didn’t even pause for an answer, barreling forward. “You can’t, because then you’d be lying. You asked me to join you, and then when I did, you woke up scared of me, which is *exactly* why I didn’t want to get in that bed in the first place. So, for the sake of my sanity here, what in hell do you want?”

“You.” It had been bubbling inside her, desperate for release, and the force of his demand made holding it back any longer impossible. “You want to know why I asked

you to sleep with me? Fine. Because I like it better when you're there. When you didn't come back yesterday, I *missed* you, even though everything in my head tells me that's crazy. And then last night, you went for coffee and I got Katie instead. Who, by the way, needs to keep her nose out of my business if she knows what's good for her. I don't care if she's a vampire or not."

Mention of Katie took him aback. "What does she have to do with anything?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I was just ... it's nothing." She could tell by the calculating gleam in his eyes that he wanted to press the point, but Maya took the opportunity away from him by changing the subject again.

"It goes without saying that I got upset when I found out what your part was in this," she said. "But then, I see what you're doing now to fix it, and how much you mean to everyone here, how much they believe in you, and I start thinking that maybe I was right to believe in my first impression of you after all. The details are different, yeah, but the truth, I think, stays the same." She took a deep breath to calm her fluttering nerves. This was more than she'd thought she'd have to vocalize to him yet, and though she knew she was the one to instigate the confrontation, Maya was more than a little anxious about how he was going to react to it. "I accepted that truth before. I want to accept it again."

There was the unmistakable glimmer of hope back in his eyes, but Dec hesitated, retreating a step as if the words she'd uttered now took up too much space between them. "You have to mean it," he warned. "No games. You have no idea how badly I want to believe you, Maya, but I know you. I know you can't just forget about what I've done. Life is too precious to you—"

"What you're forgetting," she interrupted, "is that it's precious to you, too. You wouldn't be trying to save these kids if it wasn't."

His head dropped, already shaking in disagreement. "That's about making amends. Leanne wouldn't have wanted to see me just turn my back on them."

Taking back the distance he'd placed between them, Maya reached up to touch his face. "Leanne's been dead for a decade," she said softly. "Not all of this is for her sake."

He didn't flinch from the heat of her skin, but neither did he turn into it, only lifting his dark lashes enough to meet her gaze. "Is this our chance? Because if it is, you can't pull away from me anymore. I won't be the only one who wants this."

"You're not."

She didn't wait for him to speak again. Stretching, Maya brushed a kiss across his jaw, slipping her hand from his cheek to the back of his neck as she met his mouth. The caress was almost chaste, a profession of her commitment to the choice she'd made, and she sighed when his arms slipped around her waist to pull her tightly against him.

Dec buried his face in her hair, and his exhalation tickled along her neck. "Does this mean I can tell you how delicious you look in this now?" He skimmed his fingertips across the brown silk, cupping her bottom. "I knew you would. I only wish I could've said something when you were curled up on the couch. It was killing me thinking I'd never be able to."

Closing her eyes, Maya lost herself to the sensual strokes of the gown against her skin, the slight pressure of his touch reminding her of how cosseted she'd felt when she'd first woken on his chest. This was the right decision. She'd spent her entire life listening to her instincts, and they'd yet to let her down. She would trust them now with what they said of Dec.

“Let me show you,” he was saying. His hands were growing more insistent, his mouth bolder.

“Show me what?” Just forming that simple question took all Maya’s effort. Every nerve ending seemed to have chosen that moment to make its presence known, jumping to the foreground at the slightest invitation of his touch.

Dec’s mouth slid down to her ear, his tongue tracing the delicate shell before catching the lobe between his teeth. “That this is right. Let me show you how good we can be.”

She had barely uttered the words, “I’m not pulling away any more,” when his lips found hers again.

Chapter Nineteen

Her sanction shattered his reserve. Hands that had been tender became more resolute, one squeezing the lower curve of her ass while the other found the hem of her nightshirt and tugged it upward, exposing the heated skin of her thigh to his probing fingers. His mouth was just as firm, his tongue sliding in to tangle with hers as soon as her lips parted, and Maya curled her arms around Dec's neck to hold herself steady against the determination that accompanied his caress.

Being held like this made it impossible to remember why it was she'd doubted him, even for a second. The evidence of his want for her pressed firmly into her stomach, but the care tempering every stroke of her skin disclosed the extent of his deeper feelings. Dec touched Maya as if she was the most desirable creature he'd ever known, hands never stopping, fingers never ceasing their exploration, tickling over the more sensitive spots along the front of her thighs, then sliding beneath the elastic band of her panties to dip into the junctures of joint meeting muscle. His arms trembled, but she dismissed the questions it raised, focusing instead on the whirlwind of sensations his attentions created.

Her feet left the floor, and it took Maya a moment to realize that his hands had stopped their quest long enough to scoop her up against him, that the room was moving by as he carried her to the bed. Not once did his mouth waver, his kisses swallowing her down with a brilliant hunger that made her feel like she was burning from the inside out, and it wasn't until she felt the soft slope of the mattress on the back of her bare legs that she pulled away to gasp for the breath he'd stolen from her.

"I was so afraid I'd lost you," he said as he nuzzled her neck. Pressing her back onto the bed, he slid down her body until he knelt at the side of the bed, and settled his strong hands on her knees to gently pry them apart. "It would've been hell having you so near and not being able to touch you like this."

Maya shivered as his fingertips skated up the inside of her thigh, pushing back her gown to bare her legs. "It wouldn't exactly have been a cakewalk for me either." She groaned as he began nipping at the tender flesh along her inner knee, and lifted her hips to help him free her of her panties.

"Don't leave," she heard him whisper. "Don't ever leave." The litany was interspersed with a series of blistering nibbles he trailed up her thigh, each just a little harder than the one previous, each whetting the edge of Maya's desire just a little bit more. She was squirming by the time the tip of his tongue darted out to assuage the bite he placed along her outer lips, and curled her calf over his shoulder to expose her sex more to him.

The possessive bend made Dec chuckle, her skin vibrating in time with the deep rumble. "Patience." She felt the flat of his palm press into her stomach, holding her in place while his tongue traced her opening, and he dipped into her fluids with an audible moan of delight.

"Do you want this?" he asked. His blunt teeth caught her clit, making her hips buck against his strength. "Do you want *me*?"

Her mind was everywhere and nowhere, all at once. "Yes. You know I do."

His hand now probed her entrance, and he moved his mouth away from her heat to

nuzzle the inside of her thigh. “Even knowing what I am?” The sharp sting of his fangs was accompanied by the smooth thrust of his fingers into her wet heat, and Maya cried out from the jolt of pleasure that shot into her pelvis.

His teeth retracted almost as quickly as he’d bitten her, and she opened her eyes to see him gazing at her over her mound, silver irises glittering with desire. “This is me, Maya,” he said, never breaking the rhythm of his fingers sliding in and out of her. “You can’t delude yourself into pretending otherwise.”

“I’m not.” With a resolve that surprised her, Maya pushed herself up. Her hands curled beneath his biceps and tugged upward, pulling his hand free from her pussy so that he could meet her eyes on a level plane. “I know exactly what you are.” Slowly, she leaned forward and kissed him, darting out her tongue to deliberately catch the edges of his teeth.

She wasn’t sure which one of them tasted her blood first, but it took only a moment for Dec to groan and crush her to him to deepen the kiss. His fangs nicked the tender skin of her lips, but the mild sting was eclipsed by the swelter building inside her flesh, making the world spin around them as their hands clutched and scratched at the other’s back. Dec’s muscles rippled beneath her touch, shifting with their own life as he rose and urged her to the mattress, and Maya spread her legs to accommodate his length when he stretched out atop her.

By the time they broke apart, he’d already returned to his human visage, looking down at her with eyes whose color had been swallowed by black. “I’m a selfish bastard,” he said quietly, his hands continuing to dance along the curves of her side. “You make me start thinking I can have a life again. And that with you there, it would be a good one.”

“There’s nothing selfish about wanting to be happy.”

“There is if it means walking away from everything else.”

She didn’t have time to respond to that before his mouth was on hers again, his hands pulling at the brown silk while hers pushed at his sweats. There was a moment where the thick cotton caught, then suddenly slipped away as the head of his hard cock sprang free of the elastic waistband. “Want you.” Her hand wrapped around his erection and squeezed. “Want this.”

He answered by sliding his mouth along her jaw, ending at the hollow of her throat while he lifted his hips to kick off the pants the rest of the way. Though she suspected Dec wanted more control, she refused to give it to him, keeping hold of his cock and guiding it to her soaking entrance. “Do *you* want this?” she asked, teasing him with his words from earlier as she brushed the tip along her inner lips.

He wore a ghost of an amused smile when he lifted his eyes to look at her. “You mean *this*?” With a sharp thrust of his hips, he broke free of her hold, driving his cock deep into her pussy.

Her back bowed at the sudden fullness, satisfaction radiating outward from the pit of her stomach to warm her even more. When Dec didn’t move right away, she glanced up and saw the full-blown grin now creasing his features.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, bending to kiss her again.

“And you’re incorrigible,” she replied, right before their mouths joined again.

He chose a gentle rhythm this time, rocking in and out of her heated depths as if they had all the time in the world to enjoy each other. The tangle of their tongues slowed to

match, each languid thrust drawing shivers to the surface of Maya's skin, and she strengthened her hold around his back, suddenly terrified that if she let go, he would disappear.

This wasn't entirely what she'd expected. The intense attention to her body, yes. Both the power he let loose and that which he caged, most definitely. But now, as his hands caressed and claimed, whispered and wandered, along her neck, down her sides, everywhere and everywhen, all at once until the pleasure blurred into a rapturous kaleidoscope, the underlying tenderness in each stroke took her by surprise. Whether it was because of her acceptance of his darkest secrets or something else entirely, Maya had no idea. But it was there.

In his touch.

In his hungry kisses.

And then...

"Tell me this means something to you."

Her lashes fluttered open to see him gazing down at her, his body never breaking its cadenced tempo. The words had been so faint, she wasn't entirely sure she'd heard them correctly, but before she could question him, Dec was already bowing to brush his mouth across her jaw.

"Tell me *I* mean something to you," he whispered huskily. "Tell me ... tell me—"

But she didn't let him finish the last, turning her head to catch his lips yet again. Scoring her nails down his sinuous back, Maya stopped her hands when she reached his hips, gripping him tightly to coax him into quickening. Only when his thrusts became more forceful, swifter with their impending orgasms, did she break from the kiss to answer.

"Nobody's ever made me feel as alive as you do." She buried her face in his neck, breathing in the fiery scent of his skin, and felt her thighs start to tremble, her body careening toward climax. "Only you, Dec. Only you."

It seemed to satisfy whatever need he'd had in asking. Pushing himself up, he began to pound even harder into her pussy, grinding against her clit with each stroke, his hand stealing between their torsos to slide beneath the chocolate-colored silk and find her puckered nipple. The shot of electricity from the unexpected pinch went straight to her pelvis, and Maya cried out as she came, arching away from the bed as she fell through the white-hot pleasure erupting throughout her body.

Vaguely, she was aware of blunt teeth sinking into the sinew of her shoulder, but it was just a precursor to the final slam of Dec's hips as he joined her in her orgasm, shooting inside her in convulsive thrusts that drew a guttural groan from somewhere deep within him. When her eyelids lifted, she half-anticipated seeing his sharp fangs at the ready, but instead met the blazing blue of his eyes for the split second before his mouth came crashing down to hers.

Wrapping his arms around her, Dec rolled onto his back, keeping Maya stretched out atop him without either slipping from her slick channel or stopping the kiss. It slowed, deepened, lost time entirely as they came down from their respective climaxes, and it was with great reluctance that they finally broke apart.

He grabbed her hips when she started to ease herself off him. "Don't," he said softly. Their eyes met. "I like this."

Maya propped her chin up on her folded hands on his chest as she settled against

him. "You like me on top?"

"Technically, you haven't been on top yet," he replied with a shy smile.

"We'll have to fix that next time."

Her words had a sobering effect on him, fading the light in his eyes. Loosing his hold on her bottom, Dec reached up to touch her swollen mouth, lightly tracing the generous curve of her lower lip. "I meant it. I *am* selfish. I want you all for myself. It kills me knowing Danny's tasted you. Just the thought that he's marked you in any way makes me see red, and I..."

His voice trailed off, his eyelids closing to hide his thoughts from her.

"You what?" Maya prompted.

The muscles in his throat worked as he swallowed. "I think that maybe I could just walk away from all this. Forget about Danny, forget about the cure, forget about everything but you and me."

"But you won't do that." She smiled gently when he opened his eyes to look at her. "You couldn't. It's not in you."

He didn't say a word, just leaned upward for a gentle kiss that chased away the last doubt about her decision to trust him. This was the right thing; *he* was the right thing. It was time to believe in her instincts again.

* * * *

Katie stepped away from Dec's closed door, silent as she disappeared into the shadows leading to Danny's room. Her stomach burned, her eyes stung, but it wasn't until she knew she was safe from Dec's detection that she allowed the rancid tears to fall.

She'd suspected Dec's feelings for the pretty doctor for awhile, but like a good first lieutenant, she'd held her tongue. She hadn't commented when he spent hours at the hospital talking to everyone who knew Maya, and she hadn't said a word when he'd asked for Katie's help in his kidnapping plan. She'd even defended him to the bitch when Maya was making him miserable.

But now, hearing from his own mouth that he would even *consider* not helping Danny, after all this time and just for a piece of ass that should've been an easy meal for him instead of something more ... the betrayal of it all singed every corner of Katie's being. She'd believed in him, done everything he'd ever asked without question, and this was how he was going to repay her? Danny was the one who deserved his loyalty, not Maya, and if Katie thought for a second she could get away with killing the bitch, she would do it without blinking an eye.

But that wouldn't do Danny any good. Especially if Dec expelled her from the refuge for going against him. Or worse.

She should've just walked away when she'd realized they were inside arguing. She should never have stayed and listened. Everything would be all right if she'd only ignored her curiosity and left them to their making up.

She hadn't, though. And now she knew the truth.

And the truth was a bitter mistress.

Furiously, she wiped away the evidence of her tears before she reached Danny's room. This wasn't the time for weakness. If Dec and Maya weren't going to make Danny a priority, then Katie had to find someone who would.

She wasn't going to give up on him, even if his brother already had.

Chapter Twenty

They rose from bed early the next morning with renewed purpose.

"I know you want to go looking for Stuart again," Maya said. "But I'm hoping I can talk you out of it for a day."

She stood behind him at the open wardrobe, her arms around his waist, her cheek pressed to his back. Touching him as often as possible suddenly seemed an imperative, as if losing that contact would somehow shatter the reality of the past couple hours. Thankfully, Dec seemed to be of the same mind, and casually stroked the hands that were splayed along his abdomen.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"I need you to finish writing out what you remember about the drugs Stuart used. And I want to draw blood for tox screens on everybody else in the refuge. Including you and Katie. I need the basis for comparisons."

He took her reference to his role in the situation in stride, the muscles shifting like liquid beneath his skin as he reached for a clean shirt. "Stuart's moving around most at night anyway. I'll have a better chance of finding him then. Sticking around here for the day won't be a problem."

"How quickly can you get the reports back?"

"If I drop them off tonight, then it'll be late tomorrow before you can see anything." He glanced over his shoulder. "Is that soon enough?"

"It'll have to be, I guess." It was the answer she'd been expecting, but now came the proposal she wasn't nearly as sure about, and Maya took a deep breath before speaking again. "I was kind of hoping I could go out with you tonight, too."

True to what she'd suspected, Dec stiffened and pulled away to face her. "What are you talking about?" His face was dark, his brows knitted together. "I'm not letting you anywhere near Stuart. It's too dangerous."

"That's not what I'm asking for. I was just thinking that, since we've come to this agreement, that you'd trust me now to leave whenever I wanted to."

"Why?"

The single barked word was like a bullet through the air, honing through the carefully constructed arguments she'd spent the last half hour formulating in her head. It ravaged her sensibility, throwing up Maya's defenses, and left her bristling.

"Don't you trust me?"

"That's not the point."

"What *is* the point, then?"

Taking a step forward, he took Maya by the shoulders, leaning in to stare at her intently. "It's dangerous out there," Dec said, his voice noticeably lower. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm not asking to be involved in looking for Stuart," she said. "I'm not so stupid to think that I'd actually be of any help to you in that. What I'm asking for is a little freedom to do what you brought me here to do."

His eyes narrowed. "What're you talking about?"

"I have resources at the hospital that can help me. Books, and my laptop. I know this

guy in New York. If I could just e-mail him—”

“No.” The force in his tone was nothing compared to the flare in his aspect, and he released his hold on her the instant she felt his grip tightening. “Nobody else knows about this, and that’s the way it’s going to stay.”

“He could help. He’s a specialist—”

“In vampires? I doubt it.”

She had known it was risky bringing it up. Lying in bed with Dec, mulling over why she was at the refuge, what her future was going to be, it had occurred to Maya that this shift in their relationship might open up the possibilities for her research. Dec’s library was impressive, but there was a whole world out there, filled with brilliant minds that could help her find the answers she needed to help these children. If he could trust her to step beyond the refuge walls, there was no telling what she might be able to do for Danny and the others.

Laying a gentle hand on his arm, Maya closed the distance between them again, waiting long seconds until the tension in his body eased. “Listen to me,” she said, her voice subdued. “I know you want to think I can do this on my own, but isn’t the important thing here that we find the antidote? That means we have to be smart about this. We have to use what resources are at our disposal. If you trust me like you say you do, then why can’t I go back to the hospital? I’m not going to tell anyone about this place.”

“I know that, and it’s not that I don’t trust you.” He pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek, the softness of his fingertips belying the firmness of his tone. “Stuart knows I’m on the watch again. Nothing medically related within the Bay area is going to be safe.”

“What about the tox reports?”

His lips pressed together. “That’s different. Stuart can’t get to those.”

With a heavy sigh, she turned away, eyes flicking over walls that suddenly seemed too close, the books too inadequate. “So what you’re saying is that I’m stuck here.”

“I’m saying...” Dec pulled her back against him, curling his arms around her as he bent to press his mouth below her ear. “...please be patient. The day after I kill one of Stuart’s biggest drug suppliers is not the best time to be roaming around the city, asking questions about sick vampires. The time will come. It’s just not tonight.”

He wasn’t going to budge. She heard that plain enough. But before she could voice her disappointment in his decision, he was turning her around and prodding her toward the wardrobe.

“Get dressed,” he said. “I want to show you something before we start working.”

“What is it?”

His smile was enigmatic. “You’ll see.”

*

He’d panicked when she mentioned leaving the refuge. He could admit that. But Dec thought he’d recovered from it quite nicely, explaining to her as calmly as he could why it was he couldn’t let it happen, though seeing the quiet determination in her face had made him wish he could ignore his better sense and grant her request.

That was why he was doing this. To make it up to her. It was a compromise, even if she didn’t exactly know what was up just yet.

Her fingers were laced through his as he led her through the refuge corridors. Maya

hadn't said a word since they'd left his room, but the slight quickening of her pulse betrayed her curiosity about his plan, speeding even more when they started climbing upward.

They weren't the same stairs they'd descended that first fateful night, but Dec knew that particular detail escaped Maya's notice. She hadn't been in this part of the buried building enough to learn where its meandering halls could lead. The one he currently guided her through had a different destination than the doors in the alley. He deliberately chose not to look back at her as he pushed open the final exit, pulling her from the dusty shadows into the pitch of the tiny room.

"OK," Maya said, finally breaking her silence. Her voice was muted, but the close walls and lack of light made it boom. "You got me. Where are we going? Because this is just..."

Her words trailed off when he led her through another doorway. Now, Dec risked glancing back at Maya, releasing her hand to let her continue on into the vestibule, staying behind in the murk that masked the closet door from the casual onlooker. Light filtered through the stained glass to turn her skin scarlet. The brilliant slash of her smile said he'd done the right thing.

They stood in the empty foyer of the church above the refuge. When it had first been built, pained efforts had been taken to make it look as rustic as possible, and the plain walls and wooden floor did their best to uphold that image. Only the stained glass windows that lined each side of the structure gave it any adornment, but their vivid colors and intricate detail more than compensated for its otherwise pervasive homeliness.

Maya's footsteps echoed as she paced the circumference of the room, and she paused in the entrance that led down the church aisle. "There's nobody here," she mused. She turned inquisitive eyes to where he lurked in the shadows. "Is it abandoned?"

"It doesn't have a very active congregation," Dec explained. "Not even the minister comes around during the week. It stays pretty quiet most of the time."

She seemed to realize that he wasn't venturing out to join her. "Can you even be here? Isn't there something about vampires and hallowed ground?"

"Myth. Crosses, symbols of faith, though, those are true."

"So why stay back there?"

He gestured to the light patterns on the floor. "Sunlight being deadly is one of the true things, too."

Her gaze jumped from the illumination in the vestibule to the dimness of the church's interior. "Come on," she said, going back to take his hand. She led him around the edge of the room, taking the long way in order to avoid the windows, and pulled him into the protection of the nave. "It's better in here anyway."

It wasn't the first time Dec had been inside the church proper, but it was the first time by day. The windows were higher here, and though there were more of them, the angle of the sun left the right half of the wooden pews sheltered from the worst of the danger, cloaking both him and Maya in familiar warmth as she drew him deeper into the interior. As nervous as the proliferation of religious artifacts made him, the solitude of the sanctuary had given him solace on more than one occasion. It was why he wanted to share it with her.

She kept him away from the altar, letting go of his hand as she slipped into one of the pews. "In my line of work," she said quietly, "I've seen way too many churches. Been to

too many funerals.”

Dec sat in the seat behind her, leaning forward to rest his arms on the back of hers. “It’s what sets you apart, you know.” His fingers trailed over the side of her neck. “Most doctors wouldn’t bother.”

Leaning into his touch, Maya sighed. “I bet you say that to all your girlfriends.”

In spite of the tease, a tiny thrill of electricity surged through him, hearing her refer to herself as his girlfriend. “Will this do?” His mouth took his hand’s place on the curve of her nape, watering at the familiar salt of her skin. “I don’t want you to feel like the refuge is a prison.”

“This was wonderful.” She turned her head to meet his lips for a soft kiss. “Thank you.”

The caress deepened, their tongues seeking out each other’s in a tangled duet. When he tried to pull away, the reminder of their responsibility returning to temper his desire, Maya’s fingers curled into his hair and held him close, attacking his mouth with a renewed vigor.

“So...” she said between kisses, “...being in a church ... this is like ... *taboo* for you, in a way.”

Dec grinned, in spite of himself. “I never pegged you for a bad girl.”

She twisted in the pew, getting up on her knees to face him. Her cheeks were flushed in pink-hot flame, and the blood crashed through her veins. Small but capable hands reached forward, grabbing his shirtfront to tug him upward, but her eyes never left his, even when he was standing, waiting, holding unneeded breath while he waited to see what she was going to do.

“I guess we keep surprising each other.” Her fingers flew across his waistband, undoing the buttons, and before Dec could say anything, she’d pulled his hard length free of the denim and was stroking it up and down in a tight grip.

“Wait.” Wrapping his hand around hers, he loosened Maya’s fingers, almost whimpering when her heat disappeared. He quickly compensated for it by scooping her against his chest and pulling her over the back of the pew, settling with a thump into his lap when he sat back down.

She squirmed against his hips, her skirt riding up so that the tip of his cock rubbed against her damp underwear. “So I finally get to be on top, huh?” When Dec reached between them and ripped the thin cotton to toss it to the floor, she held up a warning finger. “That’s two pairs you owe me.”

“I’ll make it four,” he said before poisoning his cock at her wet entrance. He was planning on drawing it out, coating his erection with her fluids before thrusting into her, but Maya spoiled his plan by slamming down onto him, burying him as deep as the confines of his jeans allowed.

She cried out when her ass scraped against the rough edges of his zipper, but he knew right away it was a cry of pleasure as opposed to pain. Her knees slid against the smooth wood of the pew as she tried to find her balance, her nails digging into his shoulders. Soon enough, her writhing evened out as she regained her purchase, her body rising and falling while she began to ride his length.

Where their earlier sex had been smooth, this was rough. Where his bed had offered a soft retreat, the hard pew reminded him with every thrust just where they were, what they were doing. Dec pushed Maya’s blouse up and out of his way, exposing her lace-

covered breasts to his seeking mouth. More texture, coarse and rasping along his tongue, while beneath it was the silken promise of her skin, taunting him with its nearness. Just had to get nearer, just had to have more, all of it rolling around inside his skull and along his skin like a dervish of pleasure unable to find a resting place.

When her hands clutched him even closer to her chest, Dec's fangs extended automatically, slicing through the delicate fabric to break down the final barrier. Her breath hitched when he nicked the tender skin, and for a moment, her rhythm faltered.

"Are you...?" she started to ask, but then stopped, resuming her up and down tempo as if he didn't have his teeth ready to sink into her soft flesh.

Her prolonged silence tore his attention from the succulence before him to the dark aspect of her eyes. "I won't hurt you."

"I know," she said, just as breathless, and then smiled. "My underwear's another story, though."

They laughed together, the cadences rolling through their bodies to join with the hammering pulse of their lovemaking, and Dec buried his face between her breasts, nuzzling the soft skin as it brushed over his cheeks before turning to catch a hardened nipple with his sharp teeth, sinking them into the supple flesh.

Maya gasped, stiffening in his lap as her inner muscles started rippling with her unexpected orgasm. Her head fell back, drawing taut the skin of her breast, but all Dec was aware of was the rich taste of her blood sliding down his throat, the raging heat of her pussy tight around his cock. Though he'd retracted his fangs almost immediately upon biting her, the blood still flowed, augmented by her racing heart, and combined with her throbbing flesh to smash him into a thousand pieces as he shot deep inside her.

They stayed locked like that for what felt like forever, rocking against the wooden pew in smaller and smaller undulations until the movements were so small as to be entirely still. The gentle flutter of her fingers uncoiling from his hair sent an aftershock shuddering through Dec's body, and he clung to her, shaking, as the world heaved in scarlet around him yet again.

"I've got to say," Maya panted, "as a way of distracting me? This definitely ranks as my favorite of your methods."

Somehow, he found the strength to reply. "Funny, but it felt like you were the one who started distracting me."

She pulled back, her skin sticky from sweat, and looked disparagingly down at her clothes. "I think I have to shower before getting those blood samples," she grouched, plucking at her shredded bra.

"I hope that's an invitation."

"Do you *really* not want to get anything accomplished today?"

"If you're making me choose—"

She cut him off with a quick kiss. "No more choosing. There'll be time for that later."

He let her climb off his lap without any more argument, helping her adjust her skirt and blouse to hide the missing lingerie. The temptation to push the issue was great, but Dec knew she would have none of it now. Just as she'd accepted his firmness on not leaving the refuge until it was safer for her. It was one of those compromises that each was willing to make for the sake of the tenuous accord between them.

They held hands as they returned to the stairs that connected the church with the

refuge beneath its basement. Neither spoke, but there was no need for it, no need to do anything but enjoy the company of the other before they settled down to their work again.

Work found them instead.

Rather, it crashed into them.

When they entered the corridor to his room, both Dec and Maya heard the insistent pounding of fists against wood, Samuel's voice shouting for Dec to "Open up!" Exchanging a quick look, they broke into a dash, only to be met by a careening young vampire who'd heard them almost at the same time.

Blood streamed from a nasty gash on his cheek, and he was shaking so hard Dec had to grip him by the shoulders to get him to look Dec in the eye.

"What is it?" Dec demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Danny," Samuel gasped in between panicked sobs.

Maya's pulse accelerated just as his body went cold.

"What about Danny?"

It took a few more gulps for anything coherent to come past Samuel's lips. "Out. He got out. He-he-he killed that new girl. The skinny one. Just ... tore her head right off."

Images of Tasha danced across Dec's mind, but he was already moving, already racing down the hall before any of them could take root. "Find Katie," he ordered. Somewhere behind him, he heard Maya following. "Tell her what's happened. I'm going to need—"

"I can't."

The defeat in Samuel's voice dragged him to a halt, and Dec turned to meet his stricken gaze. "Why?" he asked carefully.

He swallowed. "Because Katie's gone, too. She took Danny and left."

Chapter Twenty-One

Tasha wasn't the only casualty.

When they arrived at the great room, the children and teenagers huddling behind the overturned furniture exploded from their hiding places, throwing themselves at Dec with fists and fangs and sobs of anger. The smell of blood was thick, coating Maya's throat as she hung back in the doorway, and her eyes scanned those bodies that hadn't moved upon their arrival.

A dark-haired girl with her face sliced open, her cheekbone exposed in pale splinters. One of her arms lay cast off to the side, and the blood still trickled across the floor from the slab of wood that had been shoved through her chest, almost as wide as she was.

Another girl, crushed beneath one of the tables. She watched the scene with empty eyes, her neck at an odd angle from where it had been snapped. With her body obstructed, it was impossible to determine how exactly that one had been killed.

And Tasha. A pile of bones almost, left forgotten near the doorway. Her head had been tossed aside like a broken toy.

It was more carnage than Maya had ever witnessed, even when she'd done her rotation in Emergency. Though she swallowed back the bile that rose to her throat, she still had to fight the urge to turn on her heel and run far, far away from this place. Return to her haven of internal disease where her patients' symptoms left far more to the imagination. She had to tighten the grip on her medical bag in order to quiet the trembling in her hands.

Dec stood among them, seemingly impervious to the chaos milling around his legs. The vampires buffeted against him, all hands and pale, bloody faces, but not once did he raise his voice, not once did his face register anything but complete command of the situation.

When he turned to look at her, his eyes told her that was a lie.

"I'm going to set up in the corner," she said, pre-empting his need to give her the instruction. "Send me the worst ones first."

His nod was as much gratitude as it was acknowledgment, and he resumed his assessment of the situation with his gaze away from hers. Blocking out every bit of sensory information she could, Maya took her place at the opposite wall of the worst of the wreckage, pulling out her bandages and needles as she waited to start her impromptu triage session.

Once she began, the room blurred, and time rolled past with alarming speed. One after another, the young vampires appeared before her, most with only cuts and scratches from their attempts to flee Danny's crazed attacks, but a few with more serious injuries that took more time and concentration for her to mend. Though she knew their advanced healing capabilities would do most of the work for her, she also knew what Dec hadn't needed to tell her. That this was just as much about psychological healing as it was physical. If they could see someone would care for them when they were hurt, perhaps it would make it less likely they'd wreak the same type of violence should their circumstances be reversed.

Dec's shadow appeared over her as she bound up the last one. "Go eat," he instructed

the boy, jerking his head toward the others who'd set the room back to order and were now clustered around a single table with steaming mugs in their hands.

The boy scrambled away, and Maya wiped her hands on her ruined skirt, already writing off the entire ensemble for the day. "You should eat something, too," she said. "You're not looking so good."

He wasn't. Blood stained his face and clothing, and though she knew it wasn't his, it only added to the deathly pallor that had settled across his features. "Later. Right now, there are more important things for me to do."

"You're going out to look for them."

Dec nodded. "It's still daylight. They couldn't have got very far." Reaching, he took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "We have to talk. But not here."

With one last look at the others, Maya followed him from the great room and into the hall, continuing on in silence until they were back in the corridor outside his room. Only then did Dec relax his grip, though he remained quiet as he opened the door and held it for her.

"What's wrong?" she asked as soon she was inside.

Running long fingers through his hair, he began to pace, the anxious energy he'd so diligently contained while dealing with the kids now leaking out beyond his control.

"Danny didn't escape," he said. "Somebody let him go."

Her eyes widened. "Why would they do that? They know how dangerous he is."

"It was Katie." The matter-of-factness of his voice did nothing to hide his confusion. "I don't know why, but she unlocked his chains. Samuel said Katie was in there all night. They heard crashes and arguing, but nobody had the nerve to do anything about it. Then, the door opened, Danny came out, and that's when everyone made a break for the great room to hide from him." He sighed. "He got to them anyway and would've killed even more if Katie hadn't shown up with one of his sedatives."

"And she didn't put him back in his room?"

He shook his head. "She told Samuel they were getting out while the going was still good." Stopping, Dec reached out and pressed his palm against the wall, leaning heavily against it, his back and head bowed from an unseen weight. "Katie told him to run while they could because I was going to set them loose to the wolves any day now. Told her ... not to believe anything I said because all I did was lie."

She stepped forward, touching her hand to the stiff musculature of his shoulder.

"That doesn't make any sense. Katie was the one yelling at me about how I needed to trust you. Why would she turn on you like that?"

"I don't know."

"Could Samuel be lying?"

"For what purpose? And you saw the bodies, Maya. That was Danny's work, through and through." With a heavy sigh, he pushed off from the wall. "I've got to go. The longer I take to get out there, the further away they get."

He took two steps before pivoting on his heel and coming back to her. Hugging her to his chest, he buried his face in her hair. "Don't go out if you don't have to," he warned softly. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Then, he was gone, the door slamming shut behind him before she could say a word.

* * * *

She almost took Dec's van for keeps. The desire to get back at the lying son of a bitch and cripple his mobility burned in Katie's gut, driving her behind the steering wheel and down the street before a hint of remorse started to scratch back into her consciousness. She was six blocks away and idling at a red light before she swore out loud and swerved off the road, twisting and turning until she was parked safely in the covered parking lot of a Holiday Inn.

The van would make it too easy for Dec to find them. She had to ditch it and get another car, something that would make it easy to transport Danny.

Not now, though. It would have to wait until nightfall. The odds of finding another car with blacked out windows were slim, and she couldn't risk the sunlight exposure.

She checked on Danny before sneaking into the hotel. Even after their fight and subsequent lovemaking, he'd surprised her when she'd undone his chains, breaking free and heading straight for Dec's room. Katie suspected he was after the doctor. After all, she was the only fresh meal in the place. But the scent of the other vampires had distracted him, the opportunity for mayhem too alluring to resist, and he'd taken the detour to the great room while she went scrambling for the rest of Dec's sedatives.

He was out cold now. He would be for a while. She'd given him a double dosage just to make sure.

A room was out of the question. A room would leave a trail for Dec to find, and she couldn't risk that. Instead, Katie settled on a deserted storage room in the hotel's basement, building a makeshift bed for Danny before returning to the van to carry his unconscious form inside. Nobody saw her, which was a step in the right direction. It was about time something went in her favor.

She collapsed, exhausted, against the wall opposite the bed, burying her head in her hands. With the rush of the escape now dissipating, it was impossible to ignore the sting that remained from Dec's betrayal. How could he have picked the doctor over Danny? She wasn't even family. Just a warm body with a yen for the undead. It wasn't right.

Katie didn't care that Dec was in love with the bitch. Deep down, Katie *liked* Dec. She wanted him to be happy. If that meant catering to his fetish for breathing girls, then so be it. But that didn't mean he could turn his back on the one person who'd been by his side almost since the beginning. Danny deserved better than that. Danny deserved to be the number one priority in Dec's life, especially now that he was so sick. How was he supposed to get better without Dec's help?

Katie was going to find the answer to that. Before they blew this town, she was going to find the one other person to know as much as Dec did about the stupid poison. And once she got the answers she wanted, she was going to kill him.

* * * *

Dec's mood plummeted even further when he realized the van was gone. Of course, she'd taken it. How else was she going to get a knocked-out Danny away from the refuge?

Worse, it made searching for Katie nearly impossible. As he stood in the shadows of the church, watching the sunlight crawl across the sidewalk, every thought and every wish that he'd had about giving up on this insanity came pounding back, filling his veins with an acid that Dec was sure would eat him alive. Maya was wrong. He *could* walk away from it. She gave him reason to. She gave him an alternate path, one where he

could choose for himself and not for others that had nothing really to do with him.

But Maya was also right.

Just because he could, didn't mean he would. Because if he did, Dec had no doubt he would lose what little ground he'd gained with her.

Seeing her tending to the injured vampires had convinced him he'd done the right thing bringing her to the haven. She took every ounce of professionalism and compassion she possessed and turned it to her own benefit, stitching up cuts and wrapping up wounds with an aplomb that should've been impossible for any other woman in her position. Even when she'd said she would stay, Dec had had reservations about her commitment to her choice. Words were one thing, actions another.

Though he'd known all along that Maya lived just as much by her deeds as she did by her tongue, bearing witness to it firsthand, in circumstances as extreme as these, just drove the point home for him.

She was an amazing woman. It was no wonder his feelings for her had snowballed so rapidly.

It didn't make what he had to do any easier, though. Dec hated admitting defeat, hated having to rely on others for help. It had taken him months to come to accept he would need outside aid in finding a cure for the young vampires, and now here he was, about to take an even greater stride in handing over his control. A test of faith, when he'd long ago abandoned any such thing.

Maya seemed to have it in abundance. Would hers hold out in the face of his request?

He stood outside his bedroom door for a long moment, listening to the soft sounds emanating through the wood. She was reading. Pages whispered as they were turned, and the gentle sigh of her breathing pulsed as she sat absorbed in the text. The lack of audible note-taking told him it was likely she sat on the couch, her legs curled up beneath her. Maya seemed to have this instinct to make herself as small as possible while she worked. Perhaps it was a side effect from being around children. Getting on their level. Relating to them. If so, it worked to her advantage.

His fingers brushed over the door. After Leanne, he'd given up finding such a relationship again, and while this with Maya was already different in so many ways, fundamentally, much was the same. He wouldn't make the same mistakes this time. He wouldn't lose the second chance he'd been given.

She looked up when he pushed open the door, and he felt a small beat of satisfaction at seeing her posed on the couch exactly as he'd imagined. "What's wrong?" she asked, immediately setting aside the book she was reading and rising to her feet. "Did you...?"

But the query she was about to make went unspoken, her reluctance to give voice to the possibility that Dec had been too late all too obvious.

"Katie took the van," he explained. "Going out on foot right now is foolish."

"Oh." She stopped before him, her hands fluttering up as if to touch him in reassurance, and then drifting back down to her sides as she seemed to think better of it. "What're you going to do?"

"Ask for your help again." Her brows drew together slightly at the hesitation in his voice, but Maya remained silent as Dec continued. "Katie has limitations," he said. "Even with the van, she's got Danny to deal with, and she's going to need to feed him. She's not stupid. She knows she can't give him human blood or he'll become even more

unmanageable. But her options during the day are limited. She only knows how to contact our blood broker at night, and she can't risk leaving Danny alone for long periods of time to go looking for someone else."

"So? What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to be my eyes." Brushing past her, Dec crossed to the wardrobe, opening the doors and reaching inside to pull out a small strongbox that had been nestled in its rear. He felt her gaze on him as he slid a key into the lock and heard her slight intake of breath when he lifted the lid to expose the stacks of bills inside.

"This should be enough," he said, pulling out a few hundred in twenties.

"Enough for what?"

He held the money out to her, waiting to reply until she'd taken it. "To pay for a cab to get you back to Sisters of Mercy. Your car is still there. I'd like for you to go get it and bring it back here so that you and I can go find Katie. Together."

Chapter Twenty-Two

After everything he'd said, after all his words of warning, chiding her for even considering placing herself in jeopardy, hearing Dec ask for her help left Maya stunned, standing there gaping at him as if he'd grown a second head.

"What happened to it not being safe?" she asked.

Though he never once looked away from her, the supplication in his eyes unmasked his fear far better than anything he might've said. He'd worn the entreaty like a shroud when he'd stepped through the doors, but Maya had assumed it was there for Danny. It was frightening to think that it was there because of her.

"It's not," he agreed. "And if I thought there was any other way to do this, I would never have come back here. But I can't think of it. And the longer I try to protect you, the greater the possibility Danny will do something dangerous."

Tentatively, he reached to stroke her cheek, the first attempt at physical contact he'd made since returning from his search. She could see Dec trying desperately to remain stalwart in the situation, but beneath it all, his trepidation raged like a river sweeping him helplessly along. If she closed her eyes, Maya almost thought she'd be able to feel the tremor beneath his skin as his nerves betrayed him.

"You are the strongest woman I have ever known," he said softly. "The only chance I have in getting through this without completely losing my mind is if you let me borrow some of that strength. Because if I believed for a second you could forgive me, I'd say to hell with all this and run as far away from here as I could get."

"I'm not that strong." She smiled, hoping to cut through his doubt. "I just hate to lose."

He bent his head at that, brushing his lips across hers with a gentleness that amazed her, considering the circumstances. The whispered touch of his hand cupping her face was testimony to the tether he held on his emotions, but the spark that seemed to jump between them at the caress of their mouths made his hand tighten, dragging a tiny moan from Maya's throat.

Slipping an arm around her waist, Dec yanked her up against his chest, encouraging her legs to wrap around his slim hips. "Want you," he rasped when she finally broke free for air. His fingers slid beneath the tattered skirt she still wore, running along the soft cheek of her ass to find her wet slit. "Please," he begged, and thrust two fingers deep inside her as he asked.

Her back arched, and Maya would've lost her balance were it not for the powerful vise of his arm. "You already have me." Bending back toward Dec, she clutched his shoulders while she rode his probing fingers. Snaking her tongue along his exposed neck, she nibbled the sinew with each excruciating inch, allowing the taste of him to flood her mouth.

Shivers accelerated across her skin as Dec proceeded to do the same to her. "Just come back," he said in between bites. "That's all I ask. Come back."

"Yes," she hissed, but his blunt teeth chose that particular moment to sink into her shoulder, and Maya wasn't sure if he realized exactly which her affirmative was for. So, she said it again, pulling away to gaze into the sapphire depths of his eyes as she did so.

There was a second where something in him crumbled. She saw it in his face, the shards of a mask he probably wasn't even aware he wore being stripped away by such a simple confession. Everything about Dec stopped. Fingers still buried deep inside her. Thick lashes motionless as he stared back at her, stunned. Mouth transfixed and swollen from the hunger of their kisses.

And then they were moving, flying really, as he twisted around and pressed her into the wall, hands tearing to remove the barriers that separated them, her skirt floating in pieces to the floor. More kissing, blinding her to what he was doing, but she didn't care, couldn't care, too lost in their mutual need to know anything but the command of his body, the insistent slide of his cock along her outer folds as he freed his arousal from his jeans. There was no pause to see if she was ready. The moment he found her opening, Dec slammed his hips forward, filling her pussy as the air was driven from her lungs.

Maya cried out as he began plunging in and out, taking what he wanted with a fierce greed that left her clinging desperately to his shoulders. He silenced her with more kisses, wet, needy, startlingly ingenuous, hands gliding over her soft curves with maddening determination, pinching a nipple here, scratching across tender skin there. It created a cacophony of sensations, each more potent than the one previous, and all she could do was give herself over to them.

Bone crushed to bone. Skin stuck to skin. More than once, Dec thrust so violently that her pleasure mingled with pain, but it was fleeting, an echo of the greater emotion beneath the act. With every drive, he released another fragment of the fervor he'd contained throughout the morning, pounding it into her with a steady staccato that left Maya panting and gasping for more. The word even escaped her lips in between kisses, and he swallowed it down with immutable promises that left her quivering.

Her orgasm bound her to him, her inner muscles rippling around his cock, her arms tight around his shoulders. It took only seconds before Dec shuddered, slamming so deep that the shock against her clit made Maya come again, and she clawed at his muscled back to keep from falling. His grip tensed, holding her closer, and she buried her face in his neck, devouring every last taste and smell and touch she could gather before he set her free.

Long after she felt the last twitch of his cock, Dec held her there against the wall, nuzzling the soft curve of her ear, his tongue occasionally darting out to catch a taste of something that only mattered to him. It was as if he was just as reluctant as she to shatter the spell of the moment. If he let her go, would all of the ground they'd gained disappear like some dream?

"See what you do to me?" His head lifted, and she opened her eyes to see him gazing softly down at her. "I didn't mean for this to happen, but I touch you and—"

"I know," Maya replied. "I feel it, too."

She did. Whether he was referring simply to this single act, or the entire development of the relationship between them, she understood completely the inevitable sinking, the way being around him sucked her in, made her forget about the outside world, as if the only things that counted were the two of them, the rest of the world be damned.

He kissed her at that, sucking at her bottom lip to send a tiny electric thrill down to her pelvis. It was almost more vivid than the sex had been, and she was trembling when he pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” The blue of his eyes had darkened with his concern. “Did I hurt you?”

There was genuine fear in his voice, making Maya quick to answer.

She shook her head. “I’ve never...” But that was a confession she wasn’t quite ready to make. “It’s a little overwhelming,” she said instead.

Dec nodded, and carefully eased her away from her perch against the wall, his still semi-hard cock slipping from her slick channel. “I shouldn’t have done that. Now isn’t the time for thinking of myself. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. There’s no reason for it.” She looked down at her ruined skirt, and gave him a rueful smile. “Though me going anywhere is now slightly delayed due to fundamental presentation issues.”

His eyes swept over her appreciatively, pupils dilating further before he reluctantly pulled away. “Go shower.” He pushed her gently toward the wardrobe. “I’ll get a cab here for you and draw a map so you can find your way back from the hospital.”

She gathered her toiletries with a lighter step than before he’d returned. Though her body felt raw, aching in ways she thought only happened in relationships that weren’t hers, it dawned on Maya that she hadn’t ever felt this alive. Their lovemaking before had been vigorous, tender, passionate to say the least, but this, as carnal and base as it had been, somehow told her more than all of the rest of it put together.

He needed her. More importantly, she needed him.

She would do everything in her power not to let him down.

* * * *

The trip to Sisters of Mercy was surreal. When Maya first stepped into the alley, she blinked against the indirect sunlight, pausing a moment to adjust to the glaring differences between the outside world and the shadowed refuge. On the stairs far below, Dec waited for her to step away, but when she didn’t immediately, he called out in question.

“No, I’m OK,” she assured. “Just ... getting my bearings.”

A honk from the street announced the arrival of the cab, and she barely had time to close the heavy doors that led to the building beneath before rushing out to meet it. No more time for delays. The day was already careening by, and she had to be quick if she wanted to be back in time to be of any use to Dec.

The journey passed in a blur, much faster than Dec had warned it would take. All too quickly, Maya was in the hospital parking lot, staring at her tiny car parked in the distance, his map weighing heavy in her jeans pocket. It was only three in the afternoon. Darkness was still hours away, and even taking into consideration rush hour, she would be back at the refuge long before it would be entirely safe for Dec to move around freely.

Her eyes strayed to the hospital behind her. His words of caution came floating back, prodding Maya with tiny pricks of alarm about her so-called safety, even here where she’d always felt most secure. She’d been earnest in her statements to him regarding what resources she had available, and now here she was, only feet away from retrieving them. Would it hurt the situation so badly just to run upstairs and get them? Dec might be angry with her for taking the risk, but part of her couldn’t help but think that it would pay off for them in the end.

As long as she got back to the refuge in one piece, wasn’t that all that mattered?

Her feet were moving before she'd firmed the decision. Though Dec had told the administration she'd be away due to a family emergency, Maya knew nobody would look twice at her for showing up when she wasn't scheduled. She was notorious for her too-long hours. That worked to her advantage now.

What surprised her was how many smiles she got from the people who passed her on the way up to her office. Her first thought was that perhaps something was amiss about her appearance. Without a mirror, she could only go on Dec's word that she looked presentable. But the goodwill seemed genuine, people offering their salutations and well wishes with remarkable aplomb. It wasn't until she ran into Karen Ponti at the nurse's station that she got a clue about what was going on.

The older woman's eyebrows shot up when Maya rounded the corner. "For some reason, I actually believed that you were going to stay gone the whole two weeks this time," she remarked as Maya drew near. "That young man made it seem quite serious."

"Dec makes everything seem serious," she replied with a grin.

Karen's eyes narrowed as they scanned over Maya's form. "At least he's making sure you get some rest. You're looking better than you did last week. Well, a little pale, maybe. Get some sun. That'll make up for it."

"How is everything holding up around here?"

"The usual. Nothing for you to worry about." But Karen wasn't done with the other topic just yet. "I didn't know that young man was a friend of yours. I saw him around the hospital, but I don't think I ever saw you two together."

"Friend of the family's." She paused. "An *old* friend. He was here for other reasons. We didn't realize our paths had come so close to crossing until later."

Karen shook her head. "You're going to have to work on that story if you want anybody to believe it." She turned back to the file she'd been perusing before Maya had approached. "People are going to know the truth even before you open your mouth. You've got 'I'm happy' written all over you."

Well, at least she knew now what was causing the good vibes she was getting from everyone. They were reflecting off her.

"I'm just here to pick up some stuff from my office," Maya said, moving on down the hall. "Don't tell anyone you saw me, OK?"

She was stopped by a weathered hand on her arm. "It's not a bad thing," Karen said when Maya looked back. The older woman's face had softened, concern shading her tone. "The way you work, you deserve whatever happiness you can get, and if this is it, there's no reason for you to be ashamed of it, you understand?" When Maya nodded, Karen smiled and patted her arm. "Good. And if that young man of yours comes in again, I'll make sure and tell him the same thing. You're just lucky I'm not thirty years younger. I might decide to give you a run for your money."

The sly wink that accompanied the statement made Maya laugh out loud, and she was still smiling as she stepped away and down the corridor. Though she hadn't given much thought about what would happen after the two weeks was up, knowing that Karen already accepted Dec—even if she didn't know the full story about him being a vampire—made it somehow easier to envision a future. She just didn't know what that future was going to be like.

It only took a few minutes to gather the books she wanted and stuff them into a spare bag she had in her bottom drawer. She glanced at the clock on the wall. Twelve minutes

had elapsed since she'd stepped from the taxi. There was still plenty of time for her to get back without Dec being any the wiser. If she was quick, she could get online and look through a few of her favorite resources, maybe print out some extra materials to take with her. Information was power; she had to get as much as she could while she had the opportunity.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, ignoring the notice at the bottom of the screen that she had waiting e-mail. The search engine for the journal she thought might help the most came up and Maya quickly typed in the first of the drugs she remembered Dec mentioning.

Nothing.

She tried a different one.

Still nothing.

Maybe she was being too focused in her search, she thought. Opening a second window, she went to a pharmaceutical company site the hospital did business with, and entered the accounts page. This one was restricted to doctors interested in following drug studies; Maya spent a lot of time here when she was doing research. It posted ongoing results from the studies they were conducting, and there was a forum for professionals to discuss anything regarding the drugs in question.

There was no result from the studies, but when Maya did a quick search of the topics in the forum, one thread came up in response to the second drug she typed in.

Its content was brief, just a short request from a doctor in Texas about the regenerative capabilities of the drug in question. She didn't recognize the username, but that wasn't uncommon. This particular board got a lot of traffic.

The thread was a few weeks old, and nobody had bothered to respond to it, giving Maya nothing more to add to her knowledge base. She was about to close the window and give up on trying to find anything online, when she decided that it wouldn't hurt to drop the doctor a short message. She'd promised Dec not to pursue help from her friend in New York, and she was holding true to that. Dec's fear about the truth of the vampires coming out was valid.

However, she wasn't giving anything away about them with this particular e-mail. This was merely a friendly request to Dr. Dogan, the doctor in Texas, to forward any information he might have gathered on the drug. She didn't say why, just that she was curious about the possibilities his query had posed. It was completely innocuous. There would be no reason for Dec to get upset, especially since it was entirely likely that nothing would pan out from it anyway.

Logging off, Maya decided to leave her laptop at the hospital for now. Dec had taken the first step in allowing her the freedom to leave the refuge, even if he only did it because he needed her ability to move about so easily in the sunlight, and she wasn't going to abuse that trust by revealing her foray to her office. The books could be explained by being in her car; the computer would be much harder to justify. Once she got him used to the idea of her being safe going out, she'd come back and get it. Hopefully, there would be a response from Dr. Dogan by the time she did.

Satisfied, she locked the door and headed back to the parking lot. Dec was waiting for her. She didn't want to be late.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The sun was low on the horizon by the time she found the church again. Though she'd lived in the Bay area for years now, most of Maya's time was spent at the hospital, with little opportunity to explore beyond the boundaries of official functions. The meager social life she'd had was limited to the movies and a handful of restaurants, so winding her way through the steep hills of San Francisco was something new to her.

She left the books in the car. They were tossed haphazardly in the back seat, as if she'd put them there ages ago and forgotten. Maya hoped that Dec's initial reconnaissance hadn't extended as far as memorizing the contents of her Honda. She already had a niggling of doubt about this particular deceit anyway. If it wasn't for the fact she was convinced it was for the greater good, she was fairly certain she would've spilled the truth to Dec within seconds of seeing him. As it was, it would take everything she had to make it seem nonchalant. She hated the idea of deceiving him.

When she pulled open the doors that led beneath the church, Maya stopped from descending when his outline emerged from the shadows. "Have you been waiting here the whole time?"

"Just ten minutes or so." His eyes flickered past her, noting the dim illumination in the alley. "Do I still need something to protect me from the sun?"

She nodded. "It won't be safe for another hour." Her smile was impish. "As long as you can navigate from underneath a blanket, we'll be fine."

Even with something to cover him, Maya chose to pull the car as close to the mouth of the alley as she could. She was surprised when he slid into the back seat, though, her heart jumping when he unceremoniously pushed the books to the floor. "I didn't know you had a fetish for being chauffeured."

"This is easier," came the muffled reply. "I have more room to stay covered up while we wait for the sun to go down."

He guided her to the tiny butcher's, drawing the map in the air from memory. Other than issuing directions, Dec didn't make conversation, and she left him to dwell in whatever thoughts obsessed him. Danny, most likely. Self-recriminations, definitely. It was easy to read him, even when he was hidden. After all, some of the same thoughts plagued Maya.

Along the way, she kept an eye out for the van, but saw nothing close enough to his description to merit bringing to his attention. Frankly, Maya thought it would be stupid for Katie to go to the same butcher Dec used, but he'd been adamant that she'd do exactly that.

"She doesn't have any other options. Danny needs to eat, and this is the only way Katie knows to keep the illness at bay. She'll be there."

But she wasn't.

It was a tiny hole in the wall near the Wharf, completely invisible from the street, as if whoever owned the shop wanted the world to forget it was there. Dec moved so quickly from her car to the shadows of the doorway that Maya's head spun, and was already waiting inside by the time she'd locked her door.

"It's kind of an emergency," he was saying to someone as she stepped across the

worn threshold.

She had to peer around him to see who he addressed. The man was tiny, probably not even five feet tall or a hundred pounds soaking wet, with skin that glowed like ebony. Though the closely shorn hair on his head was dead white, his face was remarkably smooth, as if time had decided not to make its presence known there. But his dark brown eyes betrayed the truth of his age, glittering with the knowledge of too much seen and too much done.

"It's always an emergency," the man said. His voice rumbled like heavy wheels over railroad tracks. He jerked his head toward the open door that led behind the counter. "Come."

Maya followed Dec from the bright illumination of the main shop to the cold and dank backroom, shivering at the unexpected change in temperature. When the little man twisted back to close the door, she pressed into the wall to get out of his way, smiling at him feebly when he turned his worldly eyes to hers.

"You're new," he commented before swiveling back to Dec. "I thought the sick ones were all kids."

"They are."

"I'm their doctor," she interjected. She thrust out her hand. "Maya Sheldon."

Rather than shaking it, the man took her hand in his and bent at the waist to press his dry lips to her knuckles. When he straightened again, a frown creased his forehead.

"You're not a vampire."

"No. All human, all the time here."

"Interesting. But then, I should expect nothing less from Declan, now should I?" His curiosity momentarily appeased, the little man began striding toward the stainless steel door in the back wall. "How much do you need?"

"I'm not here for blood," Dec said. When the butcher stopped, he added, "I'm actually here for some help, Walker. It's about Katie."

"Don't tell me she's gone and got herself into trouble again."

"More than that. She ran away. And took Danny with her."

Walker's eyes flitted to Maya, and she squirmed under the scrutiny. "Didn't like not being the only hen in the henhouse any more, did she?"

Dec didn't rise to the bait. "I don't know why she left. I just know she's going to need supplies. And you're the only one she knows who'll help her. Has she been around?"

Walker shook his head. "I haven't seen her since your last delivery, actually."

"Can you give me a call if she comes in?" Grabbing a pen from the nearby desk, Dec bent to scribble down a phone number on a scrap piece of paper. "Any time. Doesn't matter."

He took the proffered number with a contemplative nod. "You want me to keep her here until you show up?"

"If you can. Don't do anything that might make her suspicious, though. I don't want to spook her."

Again, Walker glanced at Maya. "Satisfy an old man's curiosity here. If she ran once because of your new ... doc, what makes you think she won't again?"

Dec's face was bleak. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

She watched him from the shadows across the street, the blanket he used to hide beneath as he made the run back to Maya's car flapping from his speed. Something deep within Katie crumbled, as the lifeline she had for Danny snapped. Walker was the only butcher she knew who could supply her with animal blood, but Dec had beaten her to the punch. No way could she get any now, not without it getting back to Dec. Walker was too loyal not to do whatever it was Dec asked.

There was always the possibility of killing Walker and just taking what she needed, but while Katie had no compunctions about the violence that would be involved, it did bother her to leave behind such an obvious trail for Dec to follow. She didn't know how long it would take her to track down Stuart. The lower the profile she kept while she was still in the area, the better.

She watched Maya slide behind the steering wheel, twisting slightly to address Dec in the back. Though she couldn't hear the words, Katie could see the soft set of the doctor's mouth, the smile that lingered even after she'd started the engine. What she wouldn't do to rip those lips of the bitch's face. Everything had been just fine in their little world until Maya came along. Katie would give anything to get it all back.

It was too late now. Dec was head over heels. Which meant the only person Danny could rely on was her.

As it should be.

* * * *

It was dark enough for him to come out without his blanket by the time they reached their next destination. Maya frowned at the young people who lined the street, waiting to get in the nightclub. All were painted in some sort of Goth palette, black eyes and black lips startling against their pale skin. Though they didn't give Dec a second look, the disdain they shot Maya was palpable, leaving her feeling suddenly very old in her faded blue jeans and cream pullover.

"Maybe I should just wait in the car," she said, folding her arms across her chest.

"Nonsense." Dec took her hand firmly in his and pulled her toward the entrance, ignoring the throng.

"What're you doing?" She tried tugging away, but his grip was too strong.

"We're going in."

A mere nod to the bouncer seemed to be the only requisite for entrance, and too soon she was thrumming with the beat of the music inside, the night already well underway for the young people determined to party as if it was their last on this earth. Bodies jostled her from every direction as Dec wound a path across the floor, seeking out his goal with a grim determination that left her fingers aching. She didn't say a word, though, her nerves alight as she tried not to look as out of place as she felt.

They stopped before a closed door marked "Employees only." The crowd was thinner here, and Maya's first thought was Dec meant to leave her in relative safety while he did whatever it was he intended. Instead, he twisted the door knob, pulling her from the heat and buzz into a gloomy hall that stretched into nothingness.

The thick air wrapped around her like a down comforter, drawing the sweat to the surface of her skin with alarming haste. She swallowed once to try and clear the sudden swelling of her throat, but to no avail, her head already growing foggy from the disorienting atmosphere.

A door opened, and a thin young man in black stepped out, unaware of their presence. He jumped when he saw them, but when he lifted silver eyes to stare at Dec, Maya's pulse exploded.

"You can't be sneaking around and shit!" the young man complained. "What's with you?"

"I'm looking for Katie," Dec said without preamble.

"Yeah, well, she ain't here. I haven't seen her since she helped break up the fight the other night." For the first time, he seemed to notice Maya, and a note of cunning lit behind his eyes. "Don't suppose you brought her to share?"

Too fast to see, Dec pinned the young vampire up against the wall with a powerful hand around his throat. "Nobody touches her," he hissed, and before Maya's eyes, his face shifted, his fangs distending as he bared them at the smaller man.

"Right, right," the vampire croaked. His feet flailed, his fingers clawing at Dec's hold, but neither had any effect.

"Let's try this again, then." Dec leaned in, his face just inches away. "Where's Katie?"

"Don't ... know..." He fell to the floor in a heap when Dec released him, glaring up in defiance as he scooted away. "You need to get a fucking sense of humor."

Without a flicker of emotion, Dec dropped a piece of paper on the young vampire's chest. "That's my cell number. If Katie shows, you call me. Or next time, your head won't be attached when I drop you."

She scurried after him when he whirled on his heel, returning to the dancing crowd on the main floor. "What now?" she yelled, trying to make herself heard over the din.

He didn't respond right away. Scanning the room, Dec took a full minute before leaning down to speak directly into Maya's ear.

"This is Katie's favorite hangout." The closeness of his voice made her body hum, and she instinctively leaned toward him to heighten the effect. "I want to stick around for a little while and see if any of her friends show up. Someone's got to know something."

"So what do I do in the meantime?"

She could feel his mouth curve into a smile. "Help me look inconspicuous," he said, and then trailed a feathery kiss forward across her cheek to her lips.

* * * *

Danny woke up cramped and smelling of Pine-Sol, his nose wrinkling in distaste as he struggled through the foggiest of his brain. The distinct taste of cold blood lingered on his tongue, and it took a moment of full concentration to remember why it was there. Then, it came flooding back, in full, glorious Technicolor. The screams. The panic.

The blood.

It wasn't the doctor's—it wasn't even warm—but something about the tinge of fear sharpened even the deadest of that viscous fluid, making the long draughts he'd stolen from the children worth the pain of having Katie shove that fucking needle into his arm. Everything went dark then, and as he fought to sit up against his restraints, Danny tried to fathom why exactly it had happened like that.

She'd slipped into his room like she had every other time, but instead of hanging back around the door, Katie had come straight to his bed, kneeling on the floor and bowing her head as she messed around with his chains. He'd started to ask what she was

doing, but then the weight had fallen free, and all Danny knew was that she was letting him go, that for whatever reason, Katie had come back to him, and he'd burst from the bed with renewed vigor.

She'd fought him then, lashing out with an open palm, and he'd slipped into the fight like a favorite pair of old shoes. The fucking was inevitable. He'd never loved any girl like he loved Katie, and though he still hated that she conspired with Dec to contain him, there would never be another like her in his life.

It was after, when she was limp and lax from her orgasms, that he was able to get away. The taste of the doctor still haunted him. Now it was time to finish the meal he'd started.

Then everything had gone to hell with the distraction of the other vampires.

As his senses sharpened, breaking through the fog of his previous sedation, it dawned on him that he didn't recognize this part of Dec's little hideaway. It was too small, for one thing, and the antiseptic smell was not Big Brother's usual *modus operandi* for cleaning up. If anything, it looked like a forgotten closet, and Danny groused at the idea of being shut away like a discarded mop.

The chains shifted as he moved. While the weight was familiar, the pattern of how it rested was not, and he glanced down to see why. Glee immediately sparked his eyes when he saw the loose coil.

The old man's slipping in his old age, he thought as he worked to break the link. It took only a minute, and then he was free again, leaping to his feet and stretching as best he could in the limited space.

He needed to be smarter about this. He'd been distracted with the promise of mayhem the first time, but he wasn't going to let that happen again. Focus. Be stealthy. He could find the good doctor and have his fill without Dec ever being the wiser as long as he didn't fuck up.

He stopped short when he emerged from the closet.

He wasn't in the refuge anymore. The scent of humans cut through the antiseptic, charging his flesh and pulling him forward with secret taunts of glory. What had happened? Where exactly had Katie taken him?

Away. That was where. That was all that mattered.

He was free again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

He suspected his focus on everything but her was starting to wear on Maya. That was one reason he pulled her out onto the dance floor. Part of it was Dec's forced concentration on the problem at hand. He had to find Katie and Danny before it was too late. If anything happened, there would be nobody to blame but himself.

But Dec wasn't blind. He knew that the other part of his distance was his fear that the next time Maya left, she wouldn't come back. It didn't matter she'd said she would, or that he'd swallowed his mistrust enough to give her opportunity to vanish from his life. When she'd opened the doors that led to the refuge, and he'd seen her standing up there with the sunlight filtering behind her in a tawny swathe, Dec had been overwhelmed by the relief that had warmed him, the terror that had been eating his bones suddenly dissipating with the slow spread of her smile. It was staggering, how much power over him she really had. It was also enough to drive him away, to erect the barrier of single-mindedness and concentrate on locating the missing vampires.

That prick Joey's comment on sharing Maya had pushed him back to the brink, though. Dec had reacted without thinking, and if it wasn't for the fact he'd heard Maya's sharp intake of breath at the speed of his response, he probably would've followed through on his later threat, right then and there. Nothing would've made him feel better in that instant than to leave the bastard in pieces.

Except he wasn't willing to let Maya see that part of the monster inside him. Not yet. Not until he was certain he couldn't scare her away.

Amongst the rattle-boned and pallid bodies that gyrated and bumped throughout the room, Maya radiated the life they lacked, drawing his attention over and over and over again, pulling his eyes away from the crowd and back to where she hung on its periphery. She fidgeted awkwardly, hiding her more conservative clothing, hiding her plush curves, doing everything she could do to blend into the woodwork. It was impossible, though. Where the others were negative space, Maya absorbed the flashing lights of the club and glowed.

Her body thrummed in time with the music, tangible even across the distance, and more than once, she swayed with the pounding rhythm. When Dec strode forward and took her hand, he knew from the look she shot him she expected to be towed out of the building. Her surprise at his intended destination pulled her fingers from his.

He turned. Her eyes were skittish, jumping from the crowd to his face and then back like a moth dancing with a single lit bulb. "What're you doing?" she shouted.

He suddenly doubted his choice, but found the justification he needed anyway. "Better viewpoint," Dec said, leaning in again to her ear so that he wouldn't have to yell.

That worked, letting some of Maya's tension seep away. Tentatively, she took his hand again, following him further among the throng, molding against his body when he gathered her close. The song had shifted, the hard cadences of the techno softening into the closest thing this crowd could call a ballad. Notes unhurried and swollen pulsed around them. Just like Maya did around Dec.

Her arms reached, hands creeping behind his neck to tangle with the longer strands of his hair, but when he looked down at her, her eyes were elsewhere, watching the other

dancers instead of focusing on him. It was what he'd asked of her, but at that moment, Dec hated the diversion, and bent his head to skim his lips along her exposed jaw line.

She jerked at the unexpected caress, but when Maya turned her head back toward him, Dec stifled her question with a kiss, splaying his hand down the small of her back so his long fingers brushed across the upper swells of her buttocks, holding her hips against his so there was no mistaking his erection. She quickly fell into the caress, opening her mouth to let her hot tongue tangle with his, and a possessive growl escaped from the back of his throat.

She was his. She might not be completely aware of it, but with each passing moment, Dec sank deeper and deeper into the mire of his need for this woman, the very thought that she might one day leave his side awakening the monster within to rage. He took it out on the tender flesh of her mouth, savaging her with teeth and tongue, and then tightened his hold when she proceeded to attack him back.

Maya was panting when she finally broke away, her full breasts rising and falling to brush tantalizingly against his chest. As their eyes locked, she uncoiled one hand from its hold upon his neck, and slipped it between their bodies, oblivious to the people around them as she brazenly cupped his cock through his jeans. She stroked it once, twice, forcing the hard fabric to scrape along its length, and then stretched to return her mouth to his, chuckling softly as he remained imprisoned within her touch.

"Temptress," Dec hissed between kisses.

"You're the one who dragged me out here."

"I'm going to do more than drag you if you keep that up."

She was still pulling at his hard shaft, but the velvety promise of his words made her falter, her full mouth forming a tiny *O* that Dec was desperate to plunge into. "What about why we're here?"

He knew why she didn't say the names. And the fact that she wanted to erase the two specters of their purpose at the club just as much as he did made Dec love her all that much more.

"Let's go." Peeling himself away broke the contact of her hot little hand, but he compensated for the loss by curling his fingers around her wrist, reveling in the throb of her heartbeat against his skin.

She followed willingly, closely, stumbling into him once when the music's tempo changed course again and the dancers began slamming haphazardly against her. When they were free of the heat, emerging onto the sidewalk to embrace the cool night air, Dec tugged Maya to him, encouraging her to curl into his side as he made the way back to the car.

"Where are we going next?" she asked. Though her voice was breathy, there was a reluctant resignation in her choice of words that revealed her compliance to continue their duties.

"Home." It felt good to call it that. Dec wondered if Maya realized he only thought of it that way because of the warmth she brought to the refuge. "If Katie's still in town, I'll know soon enough. And I can't leave the others unattended for so long. Not so soon after Danny's attack."

They stopped at the side of her car, and Maya began fumbling for her keys. "I can get those samples I wanted from them now," she started to say, but before she could finish the thought, Dec had her pressed to the passenger door, her stomach flat against the

glass, his erection firmly against her ass.

“Not until I’m done with you,” he murmured into her ear. His hands roamed roughly down her sides, finding their way beneath her top. When she shivered, she squirmed against his cock, which only made him press into her harder. “Do you trust me to do with you as I wish?”

A stillness settled over Maya’s muscles, and he could practically hear her thinking over what he had said. The buzz from the waiting crowd behind them edged into a dull roar while he waited for her reply.

“Yes.”

She whispered it, breathing it out in a soft exhalation that was both reverent and roused, her heart speeding even faster from whatever anticipation his question provoked. Slowly, her arm curved back, found the sinewy nape of his neck, and drew him even closer, turning her head so that her neck was further exposed to him.

“Not that,” Dec said, though he trailed a wet kiss along the delicate arc. “I have something else in mind.” He ground his hips against her bottom, smiling when she ground back. “Or I could just fuck you here.” His fingers dug into her sides, feeling the muscles jump beneath his touch. “Bend you over the hood and pound into you from behind with everyone watching. Would you like that?”

Her trembling was starting to grow out of control, but when she spoke, Maya’s voice was surprisingly clear. “I’d prefer not to share you, either,” she said. “Not even with an audience.”

It was his turn to still, frozen by the sincerity in her tone. They both danced around saying anything binding, but when she spoke like that, Dec couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps it was possible for Maya to feel the same way about him as he did her. She had chosen to stay, after all. And she’d chosen to come back. Her actions said volumes.

“I’m driving,” Dec announced, releasing his hold on her as he pulled the keys from her fingers. “Get in.”

Shouts of disappointment floated from the crowd behind them as the two got into the car, but he didn’t hear them. All Dec heard was the hushed surge of Maya’s veins coaxing him to join them.

Soon.

*

Katie slammed her fist into the brick wall, feeling the bones scream in protest from the impact, but stayed silent, struggling not to shout out loud from the frustration. Why was Dec doing this to her? To Danny? After everything they had gone through together, how hard they’d worked to beat this, here he was, sinking to public displays, practically fucking the bitch on her car without caring who saw him. It was a good thing Katie was sequestered across the street. Any closer, and she would’ve torn his throat out for his treason.

She’d been stopped from walking right into him when she ran into Joey at the entrance. He looked like shit, mottled bruises staining his neck, and the second he’d seen Katie, he’d grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the nightclub.

“What the fuck did you do?” he demanded.

Katie ripped free, snarling with anger. “What’re you talking about?”

jabbing a finger toward the club, Joey said, “Dec’s on the warpath, and he’s telling everyone you’re public enemy number one. I’m not even supposed to be talking to you

without letting him know.”

“Damn it,” she muttered. Already, Joey was backing away from her, but before he could get too far, she snatched him close again.

“I need you to do a favor for me,” she said.

“No fucking way. Dec finds out, and I’m the headless horseman.”

“Since when are you so scared of him? You always said he was a pussy.”

“Yeah, well, that was when he was still on his bottled blood kick. Now that he’s getting it from the tap again, he’s back to being a mean son of a bitch. He wouldn’t even let me have a taste of his new toy.”

She’d let him go then, watching him run from her as if his life depended on it, and proceeded to wait it out until Dec left. Maybe she could still find someone inside who would go to Walker’s for her. Except the minutes stretched into an hour. When Dec finally emerged with Maya hanging from him like some cheap slut he’d picked up, Katie knew it would be suicide to try to get in. He’d been in there too long not to have reached everyone who might’ve been able to help her.

She was truly on her own.

With tears stinging her eyes, Katie turned away from the club and slunk through the shadows, ignoring the skittering of the rats running away from her as she wandered blindly into the opposite street. Danny would still be out cold, likely until just before dawn, so she still had time to try and find Stuart. With so many of her avenues now cut off, it might be smart to just skip town the next night instead of sticking around. She could steal whatever drugs she needed to keep Danny sedated and find her own doctor to cure him. Maybe a cute young male. Dec wasn’t the only one who could mess around with humans.

But that would be tomorrow. Tonight, she had to salvage what little resources she had left and try to find Stuart.

* * * *

Cat and mouse had always been one of Stuart’s favorite games. At the height of his and Dec’s reign, they had been the masters at it, toying with both vampires and humans, gathering what they needed and discarding even more. Everyone feared them, because no one really knew them. It had made victory all that much sweeter, and Dec’s betrayal just that much more bitter.

He didn’t really want to have to go after Dec, but his sense of revenge and survival dictated he must. That’s why he’d started his hunt at the most obvious source. The blood. Human would exacerbate Danny’s condition, which meant Dec would resort to animal in order to prolong his brother’s sorry existence. It took only half a day to discover who the new supplier was, and even less time waiting to see his old partner arrive.

The presence of the women took Stuart by surprise. Seeing Dec with a pretty young human in tow was one thing, but seeing Dec’s favorite protégé lurking about in the shadows like some sort of second-class citizen was something else. Katie’s anger was a thick cloud that followed her, captivating Stuart’s fancy with a piquancy that he hadn’t encountered since before the fire, and he set out after her when the others left, curious to know what it was exactly that was sparking her so vividly.

The conversation he overheard between her and the Goth boy explained all Stuart needed to know. For whatever reason, Katie and Dec were on the outs. That meant she

was now the best way for Stuart to get to his old partner. He wasn't so foolish to think that she would voluntarily help him out, not after her devotion to Danny. No, he would have to take other measures to get the information he wanted from her.

She walked the streets of San Francisco, indifferent to the dirty looks she got from passersby when she knocked into them. From a few yards behind, Stuart watched her grow increasingly distracted, her pace slowing, and waited until she'd turned down a deserted alley before closing the gap. Katie heard him too late, though, and was only half turned toward him when he pressed the stun gun into the small of her back.

She collapsed against him, like a blow-up doll with a slow leak, and Stuart looped his arm beneath hers to make it look like she was a drunk friend he was merely assisting home. With a small, satisfied smile, he angled her toward the street and began the short trek back to his car.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The streets rushed by her in a murky fog, streams of candied neon slicing through the dark on the other side of her window. Behind the wheel, Dec maneuvered the car with one-handed agility, ignoring speed limits while he took corners at angles Maya wouldn't have dared. Her heart continued to thud as the expectation of what was to come festered and grew. It didn't help that Dec's free hand had found a new resting place at her nape, his long fingers alternating between stroking the small knobs at the top of her spine and the curve where her neck met her shoulder.

He only stopped touching her long enough to kill the engine and get out, at her door and opening it before she could do so herself. He never said a word. He just took her hand in his and led her to the side doors, so much like he had that very first night.

Maya licked her lips as she followed him down the stairs. Every beat of her body betrayed her nervousness, but not once did Dec call her on it. Though she knew all she had to do was say the word and he would quit whatever plan he had in mind, the anxiety that kept her veins whirring also electrified her in other places. She'd been wet ever since he'd pulled her into that hungry kiss back at the club, and the anticipation for what he might want next only made her more so. Her thighs trembled with every step, the seam of her jeans rubbing against her swollen clit even through her underwear. It was getting harder and harder not to beg him to touch her.

Dec stopped in front of his door, but after he'd undone the padlock and pushed it open, he hung back rather than entered. "Get undressed and wait on the bed," he instructed, his eyes black with desire. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To get a few things." He brushed a thumb over her bottom lip, his gaze lingering there for a long moment before he pulled away. "Be on your stomach with your head turned away from the door."

"Why?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. "So it can be a surprise, of course."

Then, he was gone.

He's doing this to deliberately torture me. Though Dec had proven more than once that he could be infinitely patient, his behavior ever since that kiss had been anything but. If she hadn't made the comment to him about the audience, she was pretty sure he would've fucked her right in front of the club. Their need had been that great.

She stripped in record time, leaving her clothes scattered between the door and the bed in her haste. She debated for a minute whether or not she should make it first, and decided not, uncertain of how long Dec would be gone and unwilling to have it appear that she wasn't willing to trust him enough to do as he asked. Instead, she pulled the blankets off and dumped them out of the way on the floor. Better to have a smooth surface for whatever he had in mind, she reasoned. And if he wanted them, they were only a few feet away.

Stretching out on top of the sheet, Maya audibly groaned at the cool cotton against her hot skin. Even without her clothes, her flesh was overheated, and having so much of it in contact with the soft fabric did nothing to lessen that. She squirmed against the bed,

enjoying the feeling of the pressure on her clit. Did she have time to get off before Dec got back?

The opening of the door answered the question.

Automatically, her head started to turn to look at him, but it was stopped by Dec's firm touch on the back of her neck.

"Don't," he said. "Wait."

"So, what's the big surprise?" she asked, squeezing her eyes shut.

His fingers coiled in her loose hair, combing through the thick strands before brushing them aside. It left her shoulders exposed, and Maya shivered when he began tracing ornate designs on the canvas of her back.

"You know I want you, right?" His voice was barely a husky whisper.

"Yes."

"Do you want me?"

"I told you I did."

His hands moved lower, teasing along her sides before stopping at the upper curve of her bottom. "I think this is one of my favorite spots on your body." The mattress bowed beneath her stomach as his weight pressed into the side, and she jumped when his tongue forged a path across the base of her spine. "It's the power and the promise, all rolled into one."

Maya bit her lip as his fingers slid down between her cheeks, brushing against the wiry curls before dipping swiftly inside. "Can I look yet?" She just wanted to roll over and wrap her arms around him to guide him on top and inside.

His hand disappeared, the mattress springing back as he moved away from the bed. "What if I don't want you to look at all?" There was a rustle, and then Dec was back, something soft and silky being dragged across her ass and up her spine. "Will you trust me?"

Though her eyes were closed, what little light filtering through her lids was suddenly extinguished when sleek fabric masked it off, tightening around her head as he bound what she realized now was a blindfold in place. Instinctively, her fingers lifted to touch it, tracing the delicate creases over her eyes and around her head, hovering over his nimble hands as he tied it off.

"You haven't answered my question yet." He took her fingers and brushed his mouth across her palm, his tongue following the arch of her lifeline. "This can all stop here and now, Maya. If that's what you want."

She rested her head against the pillow, the cotton cool against her flushed cheek. Breathing deeply, she caught the faint scent of him emanating from the fabric and knew her answer. "I trust you."

"Roll over."

It wasn't the first time she'd been naked in front of Dec, but somehow, as she did as she was told, Maya felt more exposed than ever before. Her nipples were hard, both from her earlier arousal and the rubbing against the sheets, and her thighs felt suddenly cold at being bared to the open air. She had the urge to fold her arms over her body to cover herself, but was prevented from acting on it when his strong fingers wrapped around her wrist.

"There are rules to this," Dec said. "And the first of those is you will *not* hide yourself from me."

The command had crept unexpectedly into his voice, and Maya obeyed without thinking, relaxing the tension in her arm to let it fall lax within his grip.

“Rule number two...” His other hand returned to her hips, grazing over her mound with a feathery touch. “This only goes on for as long as you say so. Say the word, and I’ll stop.”

She didn’t know how he expected her to respond when his long fingers slid past her outer lips to coat themselves in her juices. Gasping, she opened her legs to allow him better access.

“God, I love the sounds you make,” Dec said. As he guided her hand forward, she felt the hard edge of his jeans, and the harder line of his erection. “Take me out.”

The angle was awkward, and she fumbled a bit undoing the button. The zipper was easier, though, and Maya pushed at the denim to get at his cock, her mouth watering at the thought of what he might ask of her. Beneath her touch, the muscles in his hips flexed.

“That’s it,” he growled as she squeezed the hard shaft. “Now sit up.”

When she started to release him, his hand shot out and stopped her. “I didn’t say let go. Rule number three. Unless you’re telling me to stop, you do only what I tell you. Understand?”

Her head was spinning from the overload of sensations. “Yes,” she managed to say. The vertigo continued when he tugged her upward, her legs swinging over the side of the mattress as she tried to steady herself. Maya’s knees parted when he stepped closer.

“Let’s do this together. You can let go now.” Once her hands were free, he guided her beneath the fabric, encouraging her to slide around his narrow hips to scoop down over his ass, massaging the firm muscle before continuing downward. It forced Maya to lean forward, and she felt the wet tip of his cock brush against her cheek. “Do you know why you’re wearing the blindfold?”

“You want me to trust you.” She pushed the jeans down to the floor. The power in his legs rippled.

“There’s that,” he conceded. “But by taking away your sight, it forces you to sharpen your other senses.” A soft caress drifted across her cheek and then away, leaving her yearning to reach out and draw him back. “You’ve never done anything like this before?”

She shook her head. It wasn’t that she was sexually inexperienced, but before Dec, the most daring thing she’d ever done with a guy was her sophomore year at college when she’d given a blowjob to her boyfriend while he was driving. After hearing some of the stunts her dorm mates had pulled, Maya realized that her brief dash into the wild life had been more like a half-hearted hop.

His hand found hers again, and he lifted it to wrap around his erection. Together, they pulled at the shaft, pulling him closer to her with every stroke. “Open your mouth.”

She complied and felt the velvety brush of the head of his cock across her lips. A quiver ran through her.

Finally. She was getting what she wanted.

His hands slipped away as she took control, opening her mouth wider to take him fully inside. Dec tensed beneath her touch, a low groan rumbling through him as she cupped his balls. But he did nothing to aid her, standing solidly there while she began sucking up and down on his hard shaft.

Without being able to see his reactions, Maya stretched her awareness to try and pick

up on other clues—the subtle thrusts of his hips as she settled into a regular rhythm on his cock, the tightening of his sac when she explored the soft skin directly behind it, the faint tremble in his thighs when she took him deeper. Every time her nose was tickled by the dark hair at the base, the scent of him was freshened, prickling her to suck harder, her tongue encircling the head every time she pulled back.

Then, he began speaking. And his words were even more of an impetus than if he'd been holding her head in his hands.

"I can taste you when you do this, you know." The sound of his voice was like a man's stubble being rubbed along the inside of her thigh. "Not your blood. You. All hot and honeyed on my tongue." He paused, and she could've sworn she heard him swallow. "Is that what you're thinking about now? My tongue on your clit? Or do you imagine teeth?"

Maya squirmed, the sheet beneath her dragging along her bottom to send more shivers through her flesh. She was so tempted to reach down and start touching herself, but something held her back, most likely the knowledge that the longer she waited, the better it would be.

A hand settled on her shoulder, his fingers twisting in her hair, tugging just hard enough to punctuate the pleasure with tiny shocks in her scalp. "Or do you think of me in other ways? Pounding into you. Sliding in and out so slowly that you scream me for me to go harder. There's a vixen inside those luscious curves, just begging me to let her out. You want it all, don't you? You really would've let me fuck you in front of all those people, watching you go all hot and pink and delicious when you came, isn't that right, Maya?"

And then he was pulling her off his cock, determined hands pushing her back onto the mattress so that she was sinking into it, his lean body stretching out on top of hers so that his wet length was trapped against her stomach. Her mouth's sense of loss was quickly filled when he captured it in a hard, probing kiss, his tongue demanding entrance before she had the chance to offer. An unexpected pinch of her nipple made her gasp, and Maya arched against Dec, desperate for the friction of their bodies to take the edge off her desire.

"Never going to happen," Dec whispered when he broke from the kiss. "I told you. I'm a selfish bastard, and nobody is going to get so much as a glimpse of that glorious body of yours if I have a say in the matter." His lips slid to her ear, his teeth catching the tender lobe in a quick bite. "All mine. Do you hear me, Maya? *Mine*. Remember that."

The world tilted as he pulled away, taking both her wrists in one large hand to stretch her arms above her head while he used his other to ease her fully onto the bed. When the bars of the headboard brushed against her knuckles, Maya clutched at them instinctively, hearing his chuckle resonate against her.

"That's my girl."

She held the bars, her heart pounding in her throat, her lips still tingling from her oral assault on his cock, and waited as the mattress squeaked beneath her from Dec standing up again. The skin along her sides pulled from the almost uncomfortable stretch. Was he watching her? What did he see?

The silk that was so familiar over her eyes now suddenly appeared at her wrists, and Maya stiffened when she realized he was tying her hands to the bedstead. "What are you doing?"

She felt his hesitation as surely as she would have if she'd been able to see him. "Do you want me to stop?" he asked, his voice quiet.

"No, but..." She trailed off, remembering her vow to trust him. Maya swallowed.

"No," she repeated, this time more firmly.

"Good." She heard the smile in his tone and waited as one of the cushions at her side vanished with a whisper. "Lift your hips."

Planting her feet flat on the mattress, she obeyed as gracefully as she could manage. The pillow reappeared beneath her ass, and his hand gently pushed her back down, but it opened Maya up in ways she hadn't expected. She felt displayed, accessible. Perhaps that had been his intention. He *had* said he didn't want her hidden from him.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip when his mouth latched onto a puckered nipple, sucking it hard against the roof of his mouth before biting at the tip. His hand was back between her legs, outlining her wet slit again, but rather than explore her pussy, his fingers slipped between the spread cheeks of her ass. Maya's breath hitched. While he continued to stroke, he also probed at the tight hole, her fluids easing his entry until his index finger was buried inside her.

"Relax," he murmured when she tensed. He began moving his finger in and out, all the while biting and suckling at her breasts. "Remember how hard you came when I did this before? Imagine how good it'll feel when it's my cock pressing into you instead." Somehow, he added a second finger, filling her even more. "Don't tell me you don't want it, Maya. Your body is screaming at me."

"I ... I..." She knew he was waiting for her to tell him to stop, but the words choked in her throat. This wasn't what she'd been expecting. This was bolder, more brazen, than he had yet to be with her. But, there was no denying the pleasure that was seeping through Maya, saturating her muscles in molten heat while they seized in anticipation of more.

"I won't hurt you." It was a prayer against her neck, markedly earnest in light of his earlier command. "I could never do that. Believe me."

"I do. I know."

Another finger, slicked from her pussy, joined the others inside her. The fullness made her ache. If it felt like this just from his hand, it was unthinkable what the real thing would feel like.

"And do you know how I feel?" he went on, though he was edging down the mattress, positioning himself between her spread legs. "Do you have any clue how hard it is for me to try and ignore what you're doing to me?"

When his thick length pushed into her pussy, Maya cried out, straining against the bonds that kept her in place. The lifted angle of her hips had him hitting different spots inside her, but his strokes were measured and slow, and she realized after the first shudders receded that this was merely the preamble. The main act was yet to come.

And Dec was still speaking, as if giving her the added narration would make up for not being able to see him while he moved over her.

"I've died more times than you can even imagine," Dec said. "I never thought I'd feel anything remotely like this again, not after ... not after."

His fingers came out of her bottom, leaving her open and empty. Maya whimpered as she pushed back, desperate for the sensations to return.

Grasping her knees, Dec pushed them up so that her heels were flat on the mattress,

directly below her hips. It opened her even further, and when he pulled out and placed the tip of his cock against her ass, it was all she could do not to beg him to just do it.

“Trust me,” he said, and then there it was, the insistent pressure as he pushed in, achingly slow and slick, stretching her beyond what his fingers had. He didn’t stop and start to allow her to adjust to the added girth, but neither did he painfully force himself, keeping his pace patient and unhurried for seconds that lasted forever.

Maya was panting by the time he was completely sheathed, her wrists sore from where she fought against the restraints. She burned, inside, out, every inch of her bare skin ready to take flame at the slightest provocation. For the longest moment, Dec didn’t move, his heavy balls weighing against her crack, and when his hand shifted from her knee to begin stroking her clit, she exploded.

“Dec!” she screamed, slamming her hips back at him to pull him deeper. Her body undulated in wave after wave of rapture, and somewhere in the fog of her orgasm, she felt him start to slide out, seemingly confident that she was ready for him to proceed.

The shudders continued longer than should have been possible. It probably didn’t matter that she wore the blindfold. She would have had to squeeze her eyes shut anyway to stave the dizziness that chose to take control of her body. Then, amidst the ensuing incoherency, she became aware that she was talking to him—babbling, really—and what came out surprised her with its ferocity.

“Harder ... don’t stop ... please, Dec ... god, I didn’t ... harder ... yes, like that, just like that...” On and on, until his pounding into her ass reverberated through her flesh, crashing her through another orgasm as she rode both his cock and fingers. His hand on her knee tightened painfully, and Dec thrust into her one final time, grunting as he shot deep inside, her name a breath hanging in the air between them.

They held that position interminably, neither willing to break the contact that bound them together. Finally, he pulled out, edging off the bed and leaving her alone.

“Dec?” Her voice was quivery, soft in her uncertainty about what was going to happen now. In the aftermath of what was probably their most intense sex yet, she felt ridiculously vulnerable, and just wanted to be free of the fetters he’d placed on her.

“I’m here.” And he was, already back at her side, something warm and damp in his hands as he began cleaning between her thighs. His touch was light, gentle, and it eased the residual burn more effectively than anything else she could’ve imagined. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No.” She sighed, her limbs heavy with satisfaction. “It was just ... new.”

He removed the pillow from beneath her. “I wasn’t sure. Things got a little blurry at the end there.”

Maya chuckled softly. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it.”

When the restraints disappeared from her wrists, it took her a moment to realize she could move again, relaxing her grip on the bars before slowly pulling her arms back to her sides. The blindfold was next, and Maya blinked against the brightness of the room, concentrating on clearing her vision as she turned her head.

Dec stood next to the bed, scraps of black silk dangling from his fingers. His eyes were soft and steady on her, but it wasn’t until she smiled, holding out her hand for him to join her, that he seemed to accept the truth of her words. Silently, he slid next to her, turning her gently so that she was spooned against him, and curled his arm possessively around her waist.

“Get some sleep,” he said into her hair. His mouth trailed down her neck before pressing a kiss into her shoulder. “It’s been a long day.”

It sounded like a wonderful idea, but she couldn’t help but ask, “What about you? Aren’t you going to sleep?”

“I have to think some things through.” He sounded so lost in that moment that she almost rolled over to give him a supportive hug. “You rest. I’ll be fine.”

And as she let herself drift into the welcome arms of sleep, she heard his whisper like an echo of a ghost...

“I love you, Maya...”

* * * *

As Danny surveyed the scene he’d created, he couldn’t hold back his delighted grin. He loved this. He’d *missed* this. All those years of holding back, taking the coward’s way out because Dec said that was the strong thing to do. He’d been stupid. He should never have let Dec convince him that Leanne’s way was the best way.

There had been a brief respite after Leanne had died. A return to the old ways. Even when Stuart had been around, things had been good.

But now, Dec had the good doctor. And though Big Brother had been determined to keep Danny in his chains while he tried to fix what he thought was wrong with him, Danny knew what was going to happen. It was going to be Leanne all over again. It was going to be the torture of denying what they were, just for the sake of a nice ass and hot blood on tap.

But not this time. This time, Danny knew better. This time, Danny was in a position to do something about it. Even better, he’d already had a taste of Maya. He knew her reasons weren’t really altruistic. She was just in it for the thrill, the rush, the intoxicating sting of walking so closely with death. She was a doctor, after all. They were all obsessed with death.

He’d show her she didn’t need Dec. And he’d show Dec what it meant to really be a vampire.

He was about to leave when the idea came to him. Danny smiled. If there had been anyone else left alive in the hotel room, they would’ve cowered at the iciness of the smirk. Picking up the dark-haired woman at his feet, he carried her to the bed, stretching her out on top of the blankets before dipping his fingers into the blood that streaked her mauled breasts. He turned to the wall, scrutinizing it with a practiced eye. Then, he began to paint his message, taking his time to make it painstakingly clear.

He licked his fingers clean when he was done. His only regret was that he wouldn’t be able to see Dec’s face when he heard about it. *That* would almost be worth the price of getting caught again.

Almost.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Katie woke up aching, her back in torment. It felt as though she was suspended in mid-air, drawn on some vertical medieval torture rack. Her arms stretched over her head, heavy manacles rooting her to an immovable object, while her legs were spread-eagled and lashed to something else. The memories of the stun gun being pressed into her and Stuart's gaunt face leering at her while he knocked her out came crashing back, and her eyes shot wide open.

She was in a bedroom, an expensively decorated one, with a wall of covered windows off to her side. A quick glance upward confirmed heavy hooks in the ceiling holding the iron cuffs in place. Another look, this time down, explained the slight breeze around her calves. Her pants had been torn off at the knees, leaving her legs bare, and blood slowly dripped from a series of cuts along her skin, running into pans resting below her exposed heels.

Oak floors and furniture finished the décor, giving the room a homey feel, but it was the sight of the smiling man who lounged against the bed that made Katie's heart chill. The gray hair was longer, pulled back into a ponytail at his nape, and the dark eyes still looked dead and opaque. The only thing really different was the long burn scar that adorned his jaw. She spat as best she could in his direction, disappointed when it fell short of hitting him.

Stuart shook his head in mock disdain. "Now that's not very nice," he scolded. "Hasn't Declan taught you *any* manners?"

"He taught me to hate you," she snapped. "Oh, wait, you did that all on your own when you shot Danny full of that poison. Bastard."

He chuckled. "Danny is an aberration that should've been exterminated long before I ever entered the picture. I only did what needed to be done."

"Bullshit. You did it to get back at Dec."

"True. But that doesn't mean it still shouldn't have been done." He glanced down at her legs. "How are you feeling? A little light-headed, perhaps?"

Katie pressed her lips together. Now that she was more awake, the realization that she *was* feeling weak was sinking in, and it had to be because of the slow bleeding he'd set in motion. How long had she been out of it? The curtains were closed, so it was likely daytime already. That meant hours.

Danny would wake up soon. He'd be hungry and confused. She had to find some way to get back to him.

Tugging at her bindings only elicited another chuckle from Stuart. "You're not going to get loose," he said. He pulled a key ring from his pocket and twirled it on his finger. "These are the only keys, and you're far too weak to break the chains. The only way your feet are going to touch the floor again is if you tell me where Dec's hiding himself these days."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Katie had known that was what this was all about. The rivalry between the two vampires ran deep, and if Stuart was shooting up young vampires again, then he wasn't going to want to be worrying about Dec showing up to spoil the fun.

“The only thing I can’t figure out,” Stuart was saying, his voice thoughtful, “is what you two could’ve had a fight about. Did you finally give up on the boy and go for the big brother? Because that new girlfriend of Dec’s seems quite the dish. And human, to boot. I guess you never really stood a chance, did you? We both know what a soft spot Dec’s got for warm blood.”

Her response was instinctive. With fangs bared, Katie threw all her strength into lunging for him, only to be jerked back like a puppy on a leash when the manacles held firm to their anchorage in the ceiling. “I haven’t given up on Danny,” she panted, the exertion sapping her strength to speak. “I’ll *never* give up on Danny.”

“Which just begs the question of why are you suddenly the black sheep?”

“What makes you think I am?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Because I have eyes, my dear. And I saw you hide from Declan not once, but twice. And what was it that your little Goth friend said to you?” He pretended to think. “Dec’s telling everyone that ... ‘you’re public enemy number one’? Doesn’t sound like you’re still bosom buddies to me.”

Though she had no real reason not to divulge everything then and there, something stayed Katie’s tongue, her lips clamping shut as she glared at him across the room. Maya was the root of her issue with Dec. Until the doctor had come along, Dec and Danny had been Katie’s whole world. Katie might be willing to walk away from that right now, but that didn’t mean she would sell him out to his worst enemy. Especially since said enemy was the instigator of Danny’s condition in the first place.

As the seconds elapsed and it became obvious Katie wasn’t going to talk, Stuart’s smile faded, to be replaced with a cold steel in his dark eyes. “There are a multitude of ways we can do this. And believe me, this current method of mine? By far the least painful.”

“Go to hell,” she spat.

“But you’ve forgotten. We’re already there.” Languorously, Stuart rose from the bed and crossed to the windows, looping his fingers through the draw cord that ran along their side. “Rise and shine.”

She screamed without thinking, flinching away from the light when he pulled open the curtains. Stuart’s broad laughter filled the room, and she opened the eyes she’d squeezed shut to see the moon gleaming back at her through the glass.

“I love doing that,” he said, a malicious grin twisting his lean features. With a flick of his wrists, he tossed the key ring to land in front of the window. Once dawn came, it would be trapped in sunlight. “I have work to do, I’m afraid, which means I’ll be leaving you for awhile. If I were you, I’d give some serious thought to cooperating with me, Katie. It’s the only way you’re getting out of this room alive.”

She still trembled from the shock when he strolled out of the room, her eyes glued to the keys beyond her reach. They might as well have been in Outer Mongolia for as much of a chance she had to get them. But there was no way in hell she was going to give Stuart what he wanted. Even if she *was* willing to sell Dec out, she wasn’t so stupid not to realize that as soon as Stuart had the information, he would no longer have a reason to keep her alive. In fact, he’d probably kill her just for the sport of it.

No, the longer she held out, the better the chance Dec would find Stuart. She didn’t particularly relish the idea of being a damsel in distress, but if it was going to save her skin from what looked like an impossible situation, she could damsel with the best of

them. She just had to count on Dec not being willing to let go of an age-old grudge, even with the doctor in the picture. He might not be making the cure a priority any more, but there was no way in hell he would give up on locating Stuart. Not after everything.

Hurry up, Dec.

* * * *

He rose as soon as he was certain she was deep in sleep, though the effort of letting Maya roll out of his arms was almost more than Dec wanted to bear. Silently, he gathered his clothes and slipped them on, listening to the hushed lilt of her breathing, wondering what dream would come to her while he was gone.

He hadn't meant to say the words. If he was lucky, she hadn't heard them. It was too soon for such declarations, even if she'd been a part of his life in one form or another for months now. Though she'd given herself to him more completely than ever before, handing over the reins to her power with such simple trust, Dec knew it was foolish to think all of their problems were behind him. The weight of his feelings would bow the back of what they were building. He couldn't risk that at this point.

Slipping her car keys from her purse, Dec pressed them into his palm to keep them from jingling and waking her up. He still had a few hours before sunrise. As tempting as it was to spend them with Maya, he had a brother to find.

He began with slow sweeps through the neighborhood, going block by block as he scanned the few places he knew Katie could've hidden the van during the day. Nothing turned up. He hadn't really expected her to be so stupid as to stick close to the church, but Dec had to be certain before he broadened his search.

Six blocks away, though, he was stopped at a red light when three police cars came blazing through the intersection, sirens in full screaming glory. His gaze followed them automatically, watching as they pulled up in front of a Holiday Inn down the road. He had almost turned away when he saw the covered parking lot next to the hotel. It was secluded, safe. The advent of police only augmented the possibility.

Dec made the turn against the light, pulling up across the street. It was worth checking out.

The van wasn't in the lot. The scent of blood was.

Following its trail, Dec broke the lock on the secured outer door, chasing the coppery essence as it wound through the interior hallway. Every step made the air more pungent, carrying with it a new aroma. It was the sickly sweet smell of disease that he'd lived with for the past two years. His stomach leadened.

Danny was here.

A policeman as tall as Dec barred the corridor when he turned the corner. "I'm sorry, sir," the officer said, holding up a hand. "I can't let you go any further."

"Is there a problem?" He glanced over the policeman's shoulder, but heard only the low voices of others scattered through the rooms. "I just want to get to my room."

"If you go to the front desk, they can give you a new one, sir. The officer there will take your information in case we need to speak with you."

Nodding, Dec pretended to turn away to comply with the instruction, but then whirled, his fist shooting out and slamming into the cop's jaw. The man crumpled to the floor, and Dec stepped over him, already listening to see which rooms were occupied and which weren't.

When the scent of blood seemed to pool around him at the second door on the left, Dec hesitated, glancing down the hall to see if anyone had come from the other rooms yet. All was clear, and with a quick snap of the lock, he slipped inside, closing the door behind him.

He almost choked from the stench. Newly dead flesh combined with blood—lots of it—thickened the air, and the cloying shocks of too many perfumes underlay it all. It was almost as if someone had deliberately tipped bottle after bottle in search of a specific fragrance. When he took a step into the main part of the room, the carpet squelched around his shoes, and he glanced down to see blood rising to pool along the surface of the nap.

None of it was anything he hadn't seen before. He had even been responsible for his share of scenes exactly like this. But it had been years since Dec had personally witnessed such grotesquerie, such blatant disregard for anything but the kill and the blood, and it shocked him how badly it turned his stomach.

It was the sight that greeted him from the bed that made him halt in his tracks. And the message scrawled above it.

Atop the slightly skewed blankets, a woman rested on her back. Dark hair spilled across the white pillow, and her eyes gaped blindly at the ceiling above. Across her stomach, her hands were folded as if in prayer, but it was her naked body underneath that commanded the most attention. She had been savaged, her full breasts scored as if Danny had simply sunk his fangs into the top of her breast and ripped downward, and chalky bone was visible through the muscle where he'd torn into her thighs. Her left foot was bent at an odd angle, broken most likely when she tried to fight back, and purple bruises dotted her calves from where he'd held on to do the worst of the damage.

Dec took a step closer, tearing his eyes away to more closely read the words that had been painted over the headboard.

"But it's not Maya."

His throat tightened. Danny couldn't really be after Maya ... could he?

His memory filled with forgotten images. Danny pleading with Dec for more of Maya's blood. The ragged bite on Maya's wrist when Danny had attacked her during his exam. The hatred in his brother's voice when Dec had gone to him that last time.

This was Danny's way of letting Dec know Maya would be next.

Voices from the next room filtered through the connecting door, and Dec shrank to the shadows by the patio exit as they neared.

"The media's going to be all over this," a man said. "This many vics and no sign of the guy who did it? We're going to be plastered all over the morning news."

"That might give this Maya chick the heads up, though," a second man said. "Don't know what she did to piss off her boyfriend, but I sure as hell wouldn't want to be in her shoes right now."

There had to be more messages. More dead bodies.

And Dec had left Maya alone in the one place Danny could probably find with his eyes shut.

He was through the patio doors, not even bothering to close them behind him, before the knob on the connecting door between the two hotel rooms could turn.

He didn't have to find Danny. Danny was going to find him.

* * * *

Stuart probably would've been disappointed if Katie had cracked so early. In spite of her obvious weakness for Danny, he'd always rather liked her. She had spunk. And a nice ass. This way, too, he got the chance to have some fun with her to get her to the breaking point. He got the distinct feeling this one was a screamer.

He hadn't been lying about needing to get some work done. With Leroy dead and Dec seemingly on the rampage, Stuart had to find another drug supplier who was beyond his old partner's undead arm of the law. His options within the Bay area were limited, though, and as he looked through directories online, he was beginning to wonder if he needed to extend his search beyond California's borders. Perhaps even look into Texas. He already had an alias set up there, after all.

As he debated the merits of a Sacramento company, Stuart decided to drop them a question about their supply and opened his e-mail. He rarely checked it. Most of his dealings were face to face, and he'd only set the account up in the first place to talk to those who didn't know he was a vampire. So, when he saw the new message in his inbox, he frowned.

Who would be writing him?

He recognized the hospital name right away, though the doctor's identity remained unfamiliar. The note was succinct, referencing a post he'd made about a drug study weeks ago, and though he was glad to have some sort of interest in his question, he would've preferred some answers instead of someone else just as confused as he was.

He paused, frowning as he re-read the message.

Why, exactly, *was* she interested?

There was no indication in the brief note. When he did a search on her profile online, it only puzzled him further. What would a pediatric oncologist be doing questioning the regenerative properties of his drug? He only was because it looked like the drug acted as a countermeasure to his poison when it was administered in concentrated doses. This Dr. Sheldon had no reason to be interested in that.

Going to the hospital's website, Stuart searched everywhere, trying to learn as much about the woman as he could. It wasn't until he saw a publicity still from Sisters of Mercy's annual fundraiser that he found the connection.

Dark hair. Pretty face, even if was a little blurry on his tiny screen.

It was Dec's girl.

Stuart smiled.

This whole situation had just got a *lot* more interesting.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The creak of the bedroom door woke Maya up. Blinking blearily, she stretched with an audible groan of satisfaction, her muscles burning pleasantly from the motion, before rolling over to see Dec closing the door behind him.

"Where have you been?" she asked, her voice still thick with sleep. The smile that had started to form at the sight of him faded as she drank in his appearance. Deep shadows beneath his eyes. His leather coat and jeans. No shoes? That didn't make sense. "Did you go out?"

"Yes." He stood there, unmoving, his eyes uncharacteristically dark. They didn't waver from her face, but the longer he watched, the greater her sense of unease grew.

Sitting up, Maya pulled the blanket over her bare breasts, realizing he must've covered her in his absence. "What is it? Is it Danny?"

"He's loose." Quiet. Emotionless. His features remained inscrutable, chiseled from stone, but the way his gaze fell from hers unmasked the shattering within him. "Either Katie let him go, or he got away from her. It doesn't really matter which. The result was still the same."

Was. Not *is*. He didn't have to say any more because she knew exactly what happened when Danny was free from his chains. Maya had tended to his victims herself.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Rising from the bed, she strode with new purpose to the wardrobe, shoving aside her selfish wishes for personal attention to address the more practical issue of medical care. "Let me get dressed and—"

"I'm fine." He was suddenly behind her, and she jumped at the unexpected touch of his hand on her shoulder. When she glanced back at him, he added, "I want you to pick out a few essentials. I'm moving you to another part of the refuge."

Maya frowned. "What? Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, yes. If it's not safe, then I have a right to know."

His lips thinned. "Fine. It's not safe. Now get dressed."

Deliberately, Maya stepped away from him and the wardrobe, crossing her arms over her chest to avoid feeling exposed. "Tell me what's going on."

"I already did." Reaching into the wardrobe, Dec started blindly grabbing her clothes, the muscles twitching in his jaw. "Danny's out, you're not safe, end of story."

Maya froze at the change in his words. No longer *it's*, but specifically, *you're not safe*. "Danny was out yesterday," she said, carefully. "I would've been just as much at danger then as now. So that means something happened, something that's specific to me, and I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what it is."

She knew when he turned his back to her that he wasn't going to say anything. As per the usual, Dec was shouldering all the weight of the situation, making it his authority alone to resolve it. He'd done it before by holding back the truth about the illness until she'd dragged it out of him. But now was different. Now, they were on different footing, and Maya wasn't going to stand back and let him get away with it again.

Calmly, she stepped to his side, pulling her clothes from his clumsy hands and dressing without saying a word. He edged back to watch her, and from the corner of her

eye, she saw the relief apparent in his face that she was complying. It took all her control not to turn on him in rage.

Maya waited to speak until she was buttoning her blouse. "I guess you didn't mean it, then," she said, keeping the tone of her voice as casual as she could.

Dec frowned. "Mean what?"

"What you said last night. About loving me." She lifted her head to look at him, and though the memory of his voice when he'd uttered those words still made her tremble in delighted surprise, she kept it from registering on her face. "Because if you did, you'd trust me. Like I trusted you. Or did I miss the whole point of the blindfold experience?"

The shock in his eyes stabbed at her, and for a moment, she faltered in her resolve. She knew he hadn't meant for her to hear. She'd been almost asleep when he'd murmured the *Love you, Maya*. The phrase had haunted her dreams, and she'd wandered through her unconsciousness wondering if she dared to say it back to Dec if she was given the chance.

In spite of having to use it this way against him, she still rather hoped it might happen.

"Don't do this," Dec warned. "You think you want it, but you don't. It's better for you not to know."

"Shouldn't *I* be the judge of that?"

He wanted to run. The taut lines of his body as he angled himself toward the door betrayed the desire. But he didn't. He just stood there, searching her face for some chink in her resolution.

He never found it.

"I found him," Dec said. His voice was hushed and flat, the words so faint that if they'd been tangible, Maya imagined a strong breeze could just pick them up and blow them away. "Well, I found where he'd been. Who would've thought all I had to do to find Danny was follow the cops?"

He began slowly, tripping over his tongue as he struggled to tell the tale. As she stood there and listened, Maya absorbed the details of the story with ever-growing apprehension, her stomach beginning to roil when the details became more and more gruesome. He told her about stumbling across the scene, about knocking out the cop to better follow Danny's trail deeper into the hotel, about walking into the victim's room and stepping into carpet so sodden with blood that it had welled up around his boots.

"That's why I took them off," he said, glancing down at his sock-clad feet. "I didn't want you to see the blood on them, because then you'd know something was wrong." He chuckled, a cold, lifeless sound. "I should've known you'd figure it out anyway. Some judge of character I am, huh?"

She held back from touching him, though the fight of it was excruciating. If she yielded to his distress in telling her the truth, it would tell Dec that she really couldn't handle hearing it and he'd likely have the same reaction the next time something like this happened. So she held back, tucking her hands into her pockets to stifle the urge, and listened to the rest of it.

"He's been caged for so long, it's really no surprise he acted out this violently," Dec said, his voice subdued once again. "There was blood everywhere. On the woman, the bed, the floor. He even used it to write on the walls. The cops said there was more than the one, too, and it sounded like he left a message at every single scene."

“What was the message?”

His eyes were bleak. “They all mentioned you. By name. Even the cops were commenting on it. I don’t know about the others, but the woman I saw...” His gaze flickered over her. “...she had dark hair. Young. Probably pretty, but it was dark and he’d...” He couldn’t finish and shook his head. “He wants *you*, and he needed for me to know that.” Dec took a step closer, daring to reach to cup her cheek. “So you see why I have to move you, right? We’ll leave most of your things here to throw off the scent, but this is going to be the first place he comes looking for you. I *can’t* let him hurt you. I can’t lose you, too.”

“I see it.” Her agreement appeased some of the anguish in his body, sagging his shoulders and bowing his head. “But if you think I’m just going to let you lock me away to try and protect me, you’re wrong.”

Dec’s attention snapped back to her. “What? But you heard me. It’s not safe here—”

“Exactly. *Here* being the operative word. I need to get away from the refuge while I can. This is the one place where he can find me without even trying too hard.”

“No.” He moved away from her, pacing angrily across the room. “I won’t let you leave.”

“You can’t make me stay.”

“Yes, I can!”

“Think about this with your head for a second, Dec!” It was no longer time to hold back her anger, and Maya strode forward to grab his arm, forcing him to halt and look at her as her nails dug into his flesh. “You can only be in one place at one time, and those kids are stuck here. They need someone to keep them safe from another of Danny’s rampages. Me? I can stand out in the middle of the road and he can’t touch me while it’s daylight. Don’t put those kids at risk because you can’t separate your feelings from what you know is right. Do that, and you’re not the man I thought you were.”

Until that moment, Dec had remained mostly impassive, exemplary of his disciplined need to hide his feelings from her. Now, though, everything seemed to flit across his face at once.

Anger.

Frustration.

And the big one...

Fear.

“*Did* you mean it?” Maya asked, lowering his voice. “Do you love me?”

“Yes.” His tongue darted out to lick his dry lips. “God help me, but I do.”

She loosened her hold on his arm, placing her palm softly against his chest. “Then, trust me. Vampires need invitations into your home, right? That’s not a myth?”

“No, that part is true.”

“Then, that’s where I’ll go. We’ll get all the samples I need from the other kids, and then I’ll take them back to the hospital. I can work from there while it’s still light out and go home for the night where Danny’s not invited. That’s the best way for both of us to win, Dec. I’m safe, and you don’t have to worry about anything but finding Danny and helping these kids.”

Dec shook his head. “I’ll still worry about you.”

“But you see this is for the best, right?”

He took a long time to respond to her.

“I want you to promise you’ll go to the police,” he finally said. “Don’t say anything about Danny, but tell them you’re worried because of the connection to your name. It won’t be much, but maybe they’ll give you some extra protection.”

“I promise.”

“And you’ll call. Let me know where you are, when you leave.”

“Only if you promise you’ll let me know when you’ve got Danny back. Me being gone, this is just temporary, you know that, don’t you?” When his eyes fell, betraying his true fear, Maya stepped forward to press a gentle kiss to his lips. “I’m coming back. I promise.”

His only reply was to wrap his arms around her and pull her tight against him.

* * * *

Though he was far from sated, Danny slept peacefully. The effects of his late-night party with the hotel guests had served one primary purpose. They gave him potent fuel to feed his dreams.

She ran through the halls of the Holiday Inn, her dark hair streaming behind her, unbound and wild in her flight. Danny didn’t run. Danny didn’t need to. He knew there was nowhere for Maya to go where he wouldn’t get her.

Bloody footprints marked the trail, almost lost in the darkly patterned carpet. At one point, she glanced back to see how far Danny was behind her and brushed against a wall when her path went less than straight, leaving behind a jagged scarlet swipe where her bloodied body touched it. The sight of it rejuvenated the taste of her on his tongue. More. He wanted more. The sample he’d been given hadn’t nearly been enough.

The scent of her fear perfumed the hallway, filling his nostrils with memories long forgotten.

Screams of the girls who realized they’d been dancing with a monster.

Jagged wounds in perfect necks when he tore into their supple flesh.

Taut limbs going limp against him as the life pulsed from their bodies into his.

Maya could give him all of that back again. Somehow, Danny knew that. All he had to do was catch her.

He wasn’t bothered when she disappeared around a corner. It would only take a few steps for him to narrow the gap. But as he took the bend, Danny found himself staring down the yawning maw of one of the corridors at the refuge, Dec standing at the opposite end with his arms folded across his chest.

There was no sign of Maya.

“Where did she go?” Danny demanded. He didn’t stop in his approach, though his brother’s stance was less than friendly. “You can’t hide her from me forever, Dec.”

“You’re never going to learn, are you?” Dec sneered. “You can’t have her. Even if you catch Maya, her blood won’t satisfy your craving. It’ll only make it worse.”

“I’ll take that chance.”

Dec’s powerful grip slammed around his throat, thrusting him into the wall. Dust crumbled around his head.

“That’s a chance I’m not going to let you have,” Dec said, his voice rough with anger.

Though he struggled, there was no way to fight Dec’s greater strength, not even when Dec sank his fangs into Danny’s neck. He screamed from the pain, still flailing

against the assault when Maya appeared from nowhere behind Dec and started laughing. "Can't catch me," she taunted. Her cheeks were rosy from her running, her panting labored. It drove her body to heightened rhythms that tortured Danny's senses, but he could do nothing but watch as Dec sucked the life from him.

"Don't," he heard himself pleading. His voice sounded weak, even to his ears. "I thought you loved me. We're brothers, remember?"

Dec's fangs retracted though his hold didn't slacken. "That's exactly why I am doing this. Someday, you'll see that."

Danny slammed into the floor when Dec threw him aside to gather Maya into his arms, her back to his front, her ass grinding into his pelvis. She was still smiling at Danny when she tilted her head to the side, a blissful groan escaping her when Dec sank his teeth into the exposed sinew.

Unbidden, Danny's cock hardened as he watched. It was impossible not to. Dec had always had exquisite taste in women, even those he claimed to love.

Danny's eyes shot open. The coppery smell of blood still hung in the close air of the back of the van, but all he sensed was the fading rhythm of Maya's body as his dream drifted to nothing. She was wrapped around him, suffocating him with the promise of what she could give, and his body ached from wanting it. Even in his sleep, he couldn't shake her image.

Leaping from the pallet he'd made for himself, Danny ran shaky fingers through his lank hair. Getting any more rest was out of the question. It would just produce more of the same disquiet.

The only way for him to silence them was to kill Maya, once and for all.

* * * *

He got as far as the head nurse before he hit the immovable wall.

"I'm sure you understand my confusion," Stuart said into the telephone. "Nobody seems to be able to tell me how I can get a hold of Dr. Sheldon."

"That's because it's hospital policy not to divulge personal information about anyone on staff," Nurse Ponti replied. Her voice was cold, reminding Stuart of a hated schoolmarm from his youth. This one was going to be by the book. He wasn't going to get anywhere with her.

"I understand that. That's not what I'm asking for. I merely want to find out how I might be able to speak with Dr. Sheldon. I know she's working. She just sent me an e-mail from the hospital yesterday."

There was a pause, like he'd said something that he shouldn't have known, though he really had no idea what it could be. "The best that I can do for you is pass along that you called, Dr. Dogan. But I should warn you, Dr. Sheldon is very busy. It's likely you won't hear from her for quite a while."

It was the best he was going to get, and for some reason, Stuart suspected it was more than she'd been willing to concede when he'd first gotten her on the phone. He gave her the number to his cell phone and then hung up, his brow wrinkled as he contemplated the odd exchange.

Curiouser and curiouser. The hospital was trying to protect the good doctor, who was trying to help Dec, who was on the lookout for his brother's girlfriend.

Stuart's eyes drifted to the closed door that led to the bedroom, a small smile curling

his lips.

And the circle tightens.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Maya stepped out into the alley from the refuge, she froze. Dec hadn't stopped with the warnings while she packed, reminding her over and over again what she had to be aware of. She now had the full description of the van and its license plate, and though she wasn't going to pass the information over to the police right away, Dec made her swear to do so the second she felt she was in danger. She didn't want to. The van was registered in Dec's name, and the last thing he needed was to be watching his back for police interference. So she just filed the information away as nice to have.

He'd gone silent as they went and collected the blood samples from each of the sick vampires. Without any contact from the outside world, they had no idea about Danny's second rampage, and Dec obviously wanted to keep it that way. It was just as well. More than one looked like they'd spent the entire night wide awake, pale and drawn as they just watched her with hungry eyes.

But then, just before she pushed open the doors that led into the alley, Dec took the heavy bag she carried from her hands and set it aside to scoop Maya into his arms. His fingers slid beneath her low ponytail to keep her neck still, while his mouth sought out hers, kissing her with a quiet desperation. She was crushed to his chest, her ribs constricting from the power in his arms. In spite of her sudden fight for air, she didn't contest it. She kissed him back, letting him pour out his fear in the caress.

"Be careful," Dec said when he finally let her go.

"I told you I will." Giving him her best reassuring smile, Maya threw her bag back over her shoulder. "Relax. Uptight's not the best look for you."

Her joking bravado held while she opened the doors and stepped into the alleyway. But in those seconds when she stopped, and then when she hurried from the alley to her car, Maya's nerves rippled her skin in goose bumps. Danny could be anywhere. It was hard not to respond to that.

Her tension eased the further away she got. Traffic was heavy, but it was a gloriously sunny day, forcing her fumble for her spare sunglasses in the glove compartment. Annoyed drivers honked at her as she slowed down to put the glasses on, but surprisingly, it didn't faze her. It made her more aware of the cars around her, bringing a sense of normalcy to what she was doing. There was no way she could get surprised by Danny now. Now, she could just concentrate on her research.

She parked in the visitor's lot, where there was no opportunity for cover between the car and the hospital, and headed for the open entrance at the front of the building. There was something oddly comfortable about walking through the sliding glass doors at Sisters of Mercy, and Maya smiled as she strolled through the hallways to her office. As interesting as the past few days had been, and as hard as it seemed to envision her life without Dec being in it, she did miss the routine of her life before. Maybe she had time to see some of her patients today. Surely it couldn't hurt to stop and check how Jason Hsu was doing.

Though Maya greeted almost everyone she saw, Karen was the first person to stop her. Her welcome, however, was very different than from the day before.

"You shouldn't be here," Karen said abruptly. Setting down the chart she'd been

looking over, she curled her fingers around Maya's elbow and led her away from the nurses' station. "Did you see the morning news today?"

Maya shook her head. Though she had a feeling Karen was referring to Danny's murders, she only had Dec's account of what had happened.

Silently, Karen led her through the hall, opening the door to the doctor's lounge to check to see if it was empty before pulling Maya inside. "There was a massacre at a Holiday Inn in San Francisco," she said, finally releasing her grip. "And the police were here when I showed up for shift because of it."

"Why?"

Karen's lips thinned. She suddenly looked very old. "They're not releasing these details to the press, but they're under the impression that whoever was responsible for the killings did it to get someone's attention. Someone named Maya. The police were here to make sure you were all right. They said you weren't at your apartment." She paused.

"Are you OK?"

She nodded automatically, surprisingly taken aback by Karen's words. It was one thing to hear Dec worry about her, but to know the police were already checking her out had to mean it really was that serious.

"Why me?" she asked. "I can't be the only Maya in the Bay area."

"No, but apparently you're the only one who's a doctor. They didn't say why, but they're convinced you're the person they're looking for."

By Dec's own admission, he'd only seen one of the messages Danny had left before fleeing to make sure Maya was all right. It was more than feasible that Danny had said something more specific in the others, something that would directly lead the police to her. While it was reassuring that the cops were more than on top of their job, she wasn't entirely convinced it was necessarily a good thing in this instance. It drew more attention to her, when she needed some anonymity while she researched the poison.

"There's more," Karen said. "I told the police you were on vacation, which was why they couldn't find you. But after they left, someone else called here asking questions. The police told the switchboard to keep quiet on the fact you weren't around, but this guy wasn't taking no for an answer, so they turned him over to me to deal with."

"Who was it?"

"A pediatrician from Texas. I didn't know the name—Dogan, I think?—but he knew that you'd been in the office yesterday. Something about you sending him an e-mail? I know you were pretty mum about coming in, so I decided to just get his information and pass it along to you. You can do with it whatever you want."

It took Maya a minute to remember why that sounded familiar. "Oh! No, he's right. I *did* e-mail him. He's involved with a drug study I wanted information about." She frowned. "He called, though? Did he say why he didn't just e-mail me back?"

"No. Just that he's in town for some convention at Moscone, and thought he'd be able to speak with you in person since he's so close."

At least one thing was working out for her. As she followed Karen back to the nurse's station to retrieve the message, Maya planned out the rest of her afternoon, allotting the necessary time both to get to the lab and to call the Texan doctor back. If she could get some serious answers regarding the drugs, that would be one less thing for Dec to worry about.

They could both use a bit of good news right about now.

* * * *

She had to call in a lot of favors to get the lab to put a rush on her orders, but in the end, Maya decided it was worth it, even if she would be cutting it close in getting the results before sunset. She was parked right out in front of the hospital. If she didn't feel safe, she'd just call security to escort her. In light of the police intervention, she didn't think they'd balk at the request.

By the time she got back to her office, it was already after two. A message from Karen asked Maya to stop by the nurses' station. She found the head nurse arguing with an aide about a long lunch break and waited patiently for her to get free.

"How many people are you e-mailing?" Karen asked without preamble when it was just the pair of them.

"Why?"

"Because I got another call for you. This one was..." She reached across the counter and grabbed a pink message from a stack of folders. "...Dec Jericho." She looked up. "This one didn't claim to be a doctor, though."

Maya smiled, relaxing from the flash of anxiety that had shot through her at Karen's mention of another caller. "You know who that is. He's the one who came to let you know about my time off."

Karen sighed. "And he couldn't have told me that? Have a talk with your young man, Maya. Now is not the time to be playing mysterious man games."

"I'll do that."

Taking the message, Maya played with the edge of the paper as she turned away. Karen stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm.

"I'll tell the switchboard to put his calls through from now on," she said. "Anybody else you want on that list?"

Maya shook her head. "Just Dec. Thanks."

She was dialing his cell number as soon as she sat behind her desk, tucking the phone into her shoulder as she logged onto her laptop. He answered on the first ring.

"I told you I'd call," she said teasingly.

"What took you so long to get to the hospital?"

His voice was tight with worry, and Maya imagined she could hear the tread of his boots as he paced in his room. "Actually, I've been here since twelve. But I've been stuck in the lab getting the orders sorted out on those blood samples. This is the first chance I've had to get near a phone."

"Is everything all right?"

"Just fine. It's just the usual bureaucratic red tape. I've had to do some serious bribing to make this look legit, you know."

"You didn't have to—"

"I'm teasing. Stop worrying. I'm fine. If there was even a hint that any of this would come back to you, I wouldn't have done it. And..." The blinking e-mail icon on her desktop reminded her of the Texan. "...I might even have some good news by the time I get out of here tonight."

"This afternoon."

"What?"

"You're leaving this afternoon," he elaborated. "Not tonight. Before the sun sets. That's what we agreed on."

“Right, right, that’s what I meant.”

“I’m serious, Maya.” He paused. “You promised.”

She froze in mid-typing. “I know. But you were going to trust me, remember?”

There was silence, and then Dec chuckled. “Touché. I guess I asked for that one, didn’t I?”

“Have I missed anything exciting?” she asked, changing the subject. “Please tell me Danny’s put in a surprise appearance, and I can come back to your place tonight instead of my lonely apartment.”

“Unfortunately, no. It’s been quiet. Too quiet.” Another pause. “I miss you. I’d rather you were here.”

Maya sighed. “Not that I don’t agree with you, but we’ve had this conversation.”

“Doesn’t mean I liked it. Just call me when you get home tonight, all right?”

They said their good-byes with unspoken longing, and Maya hung up her phone wishing she could yield to his wishes and go back to the refuge. The stress of Danny’s disappearance was straining Dec’s temper, and she couldn’t help but believe she was the key in making all of this easier for him.

Maya silently vowed to make it up to him when it was all over. And in the meantime, she’d do what he’d come to her for in the first place.

* * * *

A phone call from the lab stopped her from trying to reach Dr. Dogan for another hour, but once she’d satisfied their questions, Maya dialed the number Karen had given her. She was disappointed when there wasn’t an answer, but she left a message on his voice mail, giving him her direct line so he could call her back without going through the switchboard. Only then did she get the chance to settle down with her research.

It was another call letting her know her bloodwork results were in that jarred Maya from her reading. She glanced at the display on the phone and frowned when she saw the time. Four-fifteen. The color of the sky outside her window was deepening, sunset approaching on silent paws, encroaching on her sense of peace with an alacrity that alarmed her. She’d been so absorbed in her work that she’d completely lost track of her day.

However, she still had time to keep her promise to Dec without having to call on any outside sources. Quickly, Maya turned off her laptop, stacking together the books she was going to take home and finish, before drawing the blinds over the window. The lab was on the way downstairs. If she rushed, she could get her results, get to her car, and be home in plenty of time before night came.

There was a knock at her door as she stuffed the last of her books into her pack. “Come in!” she called out automatically, expecting it to be Karen with some more motherly advice. It would have to be given on the go. She didn’t want to waste a minute she didn’t have to.

At the soft creak of the opening door, she glanced away from her bag, but when she met the glittering blue eyes of her visitor, Maya stilled, unable to move, unable to breathe.

She could still hear, however, even over her hammering pulse.

“Hello, Dr. Sheldon,” Danny said with a smile. “You have no idea how glad I’ve found you.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was the first time she'd ever seen Danny fully functioning and on his feet. Well, fully functioning was probably stretching it, considering the advancement of the poison in his system, but to the casual observer, Maya could see how he would almost appear normal.

He wasn't as tall or broad as Dec, but the signs that he would've grown to be if he'd lived through adolescence were there. There was a slight gangliness to his long limbs, but he'd long ago shed the awkwardness of a youth unaccustomed to his growth. Instead, it was replaced with a feral grace, more lithe than Dec's, unsettling to witness as he silently shut the door behind him.

"Why don't you look happy to see me?" A slight frown drew his dark brows together, and he tilted his head in confusion, much like a young, inquisitive puppy would. "I think I liked your bedside manner better before. Can we go back to that?"

Very slowly, Maya drew her bag closed, never taking her eyes off him. "Do you have any idea how worried Dec is?" It shocked her that her voice was so calm. It felt like her insides were trying to escape through her skin. "He was out all night looking for you."

Danny shook his head. The deliberate motion rustled the collar of his light jacket, exposing the line of his neck to reveal drops of blood spattered across the pale skin. Somehow, Maya knew the blood wasn't his.

"Please don't lie to me, Dr. Sheldon. You didn't shower this morning. I can smell Dec all over you."

"That's because I was out with him."

"And you decided to stop for a quick fuck along the way?" The harshness of the word didn't seem to fit the almost innocent face. "I don't think so."

She lifted her chin. In spite of her fear, her temper was rising, which meant so was her nerve. "I don't know what kinds of lies Katie's been filling your head with, but Dec hasn't given up on helping you. Why do you think I'm here? Because the hospital has better resources than Dec does, that's why. He *wants* me to find the antidote."

Danny took a step closer, driving Maya to counter with a step back and away from both him and the door. "That's not all he wants." His eyes swept over her form, the blue fading to silver as his tongue darted out to lick his lips. The sight of his distending fangs made her shiver. "I have to give him credit for good taste, though. You were absolutely delicious. Of course, he never let me have a taste of Leanne, so I don't *really* have a base for comparison. He's always had this thing about not sharing his toys."

"How did you find me?" She had to keep him talking, keep him distracted. She couldn't reach her phone, but there were other options in the room.

"Followed you. I went back to the church and saw you leaving. And without your boyfriend. How could I resist?"

Another step. Her bottom brushed against the wall by the window.

"You have to go back, Danny," she said firmly. "You're not in control of yourself like this. Let Dec and me help you."

Maya cried out when his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, more from surprise

than actual pain. "You can help me, all right. Why do you think I came to you?"

She shrank away, trying to dissolve into the wall, but Danny closed the gap between them, his lean body pressing into hers. There was no mistaking his erection, or the hungry gleam in his eye, or the calculated slither of his gaze as it slid to the pounding pulse in the hollow of her throat. In spite of her resolve, she started trembling, her free hand snaking along the wall behind her for anything she might be able to use as a weapon.

"You don't want to do this," Maya said, but it came out more of a hoarse whisper than the command she wanted.

"Funny. Kind of feels like I do."

Her fingers curled around the string just as his mouth started to descend, and she tugged at it desperately, hoping beyond hope that it wasn't too late.

It wasn't.

The blind went flying upward, startling both of them with the noise, but it was the dusky sunlight streaming through the glass that made Danny cry out and jump away from her.

"Bitch!" His hands swatted furiously at his face, extinguishing the flames that had erupted along his skin. When he looked at her again, there was an angry scarlet burn slicing down his cheek.

Maya hugged the wall, safe within the orange light that filtered from behind her. "All I have to do is scream," she warned. "Security's already on the watch for me because of what you did last night. It'll only take them a minute to get here."

"You don't want to turn me in." He paced along the shadowed line the sun cast on the floor, his liquid silver eyes never leaving her face. "You would've done that already. Face it, *Maya*..." And her name was a lascivious sneer, crawling down her spine. "...you *want* me here."

"I want you *well*," she countered. "There's a difference."

"Do you?" The pain from the burn must've already been fading. Danny's demeanor was returning all too easily to the hungry smirks of his first entrance. "Fix me, and what reason does Dec have to keep you around? Except, you know, for the hot blood on tap. He's always been a little bit lazy about his food."

"Dec loves me." She couldn't help asserting that. Danny's argument was just a little too cogent for her comfort level.

"And you love the thrill. The danger." He caught his bottom lip between his teeth, his fangs pricking the soft flesh. Twin beads of blood welled to the surface, and Danny deliberately licked them away. "You don't need Dec for that."

She was saved from answering by the shrill ring of her telephone, making her muscles jump in alarmed protest. Both of them looked at it as it rang once, twice. On the third ring, Danny swiveled his gaze back to her.

"Not going to come and get it?" he asked, with a cocky curl of his lips.

She stayed silent. Now was not the time for word games.

After the fourth ring, Danny crossed to the desk and punched the button for the speakerphone. "Hello?" he said loudly, his eyes still on Maya.

There was a pause, and then a slightly familiar Texan drawl, the one she'd heard on his voicemail earlier, came over the tiny speaker. "I'm looking for Dr. Sheldon," Dr. Dogan said. There was a faint rustle of paper. "She gave me her direct number—"

"This is her office," Danny interrupted.

“Oh.” He sounded confused. “May I speak with her, then, please? This is Dr. Dogan. She was interested in some of my drug research.”

“I’m right here, Dr. Dogan,” Maya interrupted before Danny could speak again. “I’m sorry, I was in the middle of a consult, and my hands were full. Danny was kind enough to grab the phone for me.”

“I see.” The puzzlement was now gone, oddly replaced by an amused tone. “I didn’t mean to call at an inconvenient time, Dr. Sheldon. Maybe we can do this later. Over dinner, perhaps? I’m done at the convention for the day. All you have to do is name the place.”

“I have a few minutes now,” she said. “As long as you don’t mind speaking in front of my patient.” It was a long shot, she knew, but Maya couldn’t help think that if Danny could see that she was genuinely attempting to find a cure for him, just maybe he’d back off from whatever sick fantasy he had playing out inside his head.

“That’s rather unorthodox, don’t you think?”

“So is questioning the regenerative powers of a drug that’s known to be lethal,” she replied.

He chuckled, but while it set Maya at ease, Danny’s humor about the situation seemed to be fading. As her eyes jumped from Danny to the desk, she saw his hands curl into fists at his sides, his knuckles white from the barely controlled force. His gaze was no longer on her, but fixed on the phone, as if he expected something to come through the line itself. It was almost scarier than when he’d been pinning her to the wall.

“I’m curious about why you’re interested,” Dogan was saying. “You’re in oncology, right?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s not exactly traditional treatment for cancer.”

“No, it’s—”

“Stuart.”

It was barely a breath, uttered as if in a daze, but when Maya’s eyes flew to Danny’s face, the young vampire was still staring at the phone.

“What did you say?” she asked him.

“Are you talking to me?” Dogan said through the phone.

“Stuart,” Danny repeated, this time louder. It was clear he was addressing the doctor on the phone. “But ... you’re *dead*.”

Silence. Only the electrical hum of the telephone line filled the room.

Maya’s head whirled. Stuart was the name of Dec’s old partner, the one who’d created the poison in the first place. Had Danny’s psychosis spread so far he was now imagining voices from his past?

“You know,” Dogan said. “When Dr. Sheldon called you Danny, I wondered if it really was you. Aren’t you dead yet, boy? I never expected you to live out the year, let alone two.”

Her blood chilled. Dogan *was* Stuart. She’d just about exposed Dec’s entire hand by contacting him.

“You son of a bitch,” Danny muttered.

“Still as erudite as ever,” Stuart said. “Wait, this is just too delicious not to share.” The sound of footsteps echoed over the line, followed by a door opening. “While you’re figuring out cures with the good doctor, would you like to guess who’s keeping me

company?”

Maya heard Katie’s vicious swearing in the background before he must’ve put the phone up to her mouth. Her gaze flew to Danny, who clutched the edge of the desk, ready to throw it against the wall at the slightest provocation.

“...the fuck for?” Katie snarled.

“Now, now,” Stuart said, his voice muffled since he was no longer speaking directly into his phone. “I’m just asking you to say hello. He’s *your* boyfriend, after all.”

There was a pause, and then...

“Danny?”

Though Maya had seen him turn violent on his girlfriend, hearing that she was now in the hands of the man responsible for his illness seemed to draw out all of Danny’s protective instincts.

“Katie?” His fangs receded; his eyes returned to their dark blue. All of a sudden, he looked like a callow teenager, hearing devastating news for the first time. “What did you...? Are you all right?”

“He’s going to kill me, Danny,” she babbled, her voice rising in hysteria. “He’s crazy—”

“Irony, don’t you think?” It was Stuart again, and Katie’s frustrated cries faded back into the background. “You have Dec’s girl, and I have yours. We should have ourselves a little party, don’t you think?”

“Don’t you lay a finger on her,” Danny threatened.

“Too late for that. She bleeds very prettily, but then, I’m sure you already knew that.”

Pieces of her desk broke away in Danny’s grip, splintering between his fingers to crumble to the floor. “What do you want, Stuart?”

Stuart laughed. “What does any vampire want? Fame, fortune, immortality. Wait, I’ve already got those. Even though Dec tried to take them all away from me. He didn’t tell you I was alive, did he? Not surprising. Declan always liked to keep his cards close to his chest. Frankly, I’m astonished he’s let you out of his sight. That doesn’t have anything to do with his little spat with Katie, does it?”

For the first time since recognizing the voice, Danny looked to Maya in questioning. She shook her head.

“We don’t know why she’s upset with him,” she said softly, hoping that Stuart wouldn’t be able to hear her. “All we know is that she released you and then took you away from the refuge. We’ve been trying to find you ever since.”

His fingers drifted absently to his left wrist, rubbing at the chain marks she could see still chafed against his skin. “She wasn’t there when I woke up,” he said, lost in whatever memory was consuming him. “I didn’t know ... I wasn’t sure...”

He looked so lost that Maya took a step toward him without even thinking. “Dec only found out about Stuart the other night, Danny. He hasn’t been holding out on you. He was just as surprised as you were to find out Stuart was still alive.”

Danny’s nod was distracted, automatic even, and he seemed completely unaware that she was edging away from the sunlight sanctuary at the window. Out of the corner of her eye, she gauged the distance between her and the door, but decided it was still too far to make a break for it.

“Interesting.” Stuart’s voice had returned to its earlier contemplation. “I have to say,

this is fascinating to listen to. Better than Katie's screams, even. Whatever it was that happened between her and Dec, she's still dreadfully loyal to him. I haven't been able to get anything but the most colorful language out of her since this morning."

"You're wasting your time," Danny said, his attention back on the call. "Even if she's pissed at Dec, she hates you even more. She's never going to talk to you."

"Yes, that was exactly the conclusion I was reaching," Stuart sighed. "Pity you had to confirm it, though. It means I have to kill her now."

"No!" His panicked shout boomed between her office walls, and Maya glanced at the door, convinced it was going to open at any minute with security storming inside, Karen at their heels. As much as she wanted to get out of there, she didn't want to see anyone else getting involved. Danny's behavior was too unpredictable at the moment. She couldn't risk any more people getting hurt.

Swallowing her fear, Maya closed the gap between them and laid a gentle hand on Danny's arm. He flinched at the touch, but didn't lash out, choosing instead to turn his pained gaze toward her.

"Let me handle this," she mouthed silently.

She didn't realize she was holding her breath until he nodded. Exhaling quietly, she took a moment to calm her racing nerves before addressing Stuart again.

"I'm curious about why you called me." Her voice was even and professional, betraying none of her jittery feelings. "You knew what my interest was in the drug. What purpose does it serve to keep up this pretense that you're interested in its regenerative qualities?"

His hesitation lasted just a moment too long. "I needed to know how close Dec was to finding his antidote, of course."

The reply was a little too glib, bolstering Maya's confidence as her suspicions continued to grow. "And what if I told you I already had it?"

"I'd say you were lying."

"She's not."

Maya winced when Danny took her wrist again, trying to break free from the iron vise of his fingers. He wouldn't let go.

"That's why I'm here," Danny continued. "I was supposed to be their guinea pig, to see if it worked or not. That's why Katie got so angry at Dec. Dr. Sheldon didn't know if there'd be any side effects, and Katie wasn't willing to risk it."

Even if she didn't understand what he was doing with this line of conversation, at least Danny was back to calling her Dr. Sheldon again. Maya had a feeling that she was safer from him when he made that distinction.

"And you went to get inoculated voluntarily?" Stuart scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. I know that's not how the progression of the poison works. I created it, after all."

"No, I came for something else," Danny's tongue darted out nervously to lick his dry lips. "Maya—Dr. Sheldon—surprised me with the injection. I'm already feeling a thousand percent better."

She didn't know why he was lying. All she knew was that Danny walked some tightrope in his mind, precariously balanced on the edge of his sanity.

"I'll make you a trade," Danny said. "I'll give you Dr. Sheldon and all her notes, and you give me Katie, alive and kicking. I've got what I need, so I don't need Maya any more. But if she gets back to Dec..."

He left the rest unspoken. It took only seconds for Stuart to respond.

"There's a catch," he said. "I know there's a catch in there somewhere."

"No catch. Tit for tat. I'll even do it on neutral territory, just to prove it to you. A church I know. I remember how you love churches."

Maya's eyes widened as Danny rattled off the address of the refuge. What the hell did he think he was doing?

Stuart didn't seem to be buying it, either. "Do you really think I'm that stupid, boy?" All jocularity was gone. All that remained was white-hot fury that reminded her just how dangerous he was. "You're setting a trap of some sort. I don't care what kind of bait you're using."

"But she's wonderfully delicious bait," Danny said. Maya squeaked in surprise when he tugged her against him, but he was far too strong for her to break free. "I've had a taste. Two, actually, though the second was more like an appetizer than anything else."

"So just drain her and be done with it."

"No. I want Katie back. You have until midnight, Stuart. If you're not there with Katie alive, I'm taking Maya to Dec, and the game will be over."

Furiously, Danny grabbed the phone cord and ripped it from the wall, pulling loose some of the plaster to shower along the dark carpet. When he released his hold on Maya, she stumbled away, putting the desk between them as she watched him guardedly.

"What're you planning?" she asked.

Danny pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, as if forcing away a sudden headache. "I won't let him kill Katie. And I know Stuart. He won't be able to stay away."

"But why? After what you did this morning ... I know this isn't what you were after when you came here."

The eyes he turned to her were venomous. "Because Dec and Katie are still my family. This way, we all win."

"I don't see how you think *you* win, though."

He smiled, cold and deadly. "I just said you were bait, Maya. I never said he'd actually get you."

Her skin was ice when he grabbed her again, dragging her toward the door and leaving her bag behind. She couldn't even begin to start thinking about the possibilities of what might happen, what Danny might instigate once they got to the church. At this point, she could only hope for the best.

Chapter Thirty

Even buried beneath the church, without the passing sun overhead, Dec was fully aware of time and how it slipped through even the most dexterous of fingers. The gift from living nearly a century. He could busy himself as much as he wanted with soothing restless children or barring defenseless entrances from unwanted guests, but none of it could mask the minutes that ran away from him. Each crept by, whispering in his ear as it vanished into nothing, taunting him with the reminder that Maya had yet to call and let him know that she'd safely left the hospital. He hadn't been this on edge since the early days of Danny's infection.

He waited until he knew the sun had set before creeping up to the street to maximize his reception. Part of Dec wanted to believe that she hadn't been able to get through, but the display on his phone told the unwanted truth. No messages. No missed calls. No Maya.

He had no choice but to call.

Unlike earlier, the hospital switchboard put him straight through when they heard his name. That was a good sign, he thought while he listened to her phone ring. That meant Maya had made them aware of who it was safe for her to speak with.

When the electronic click came indicating he was being transferred, though, Dec frowned. Why would his call have been forwarded? If Maya wasn't answering, wouldn't he have gone straight into her voice mail?

"Nurses' station. Nurse Ponti speaking."

He recognized the voice as the woman he'd spoken to earlier. "I'm trying to find Dr. Sheldon. This is Dec Jericho again."

"Oh!" Some of the stiffness disappeared from her voice, replaced by an air of friendly familiarity. "She's already left."

"How long ago did she leave?"

"About ... half an hour ago. They're probably caught in traffic, Mr. Jericho. It tends to get congested around here during rush hour."

His worry started to ebb when she mentioned the time. Thirty minutes put Maya's departure just before sunset like she had promised. It was what the nurse said after that made it come roaring back.

"*They?*" he asked carefully.

"Maya and your brother. He said he was here to pick Maya up because you were worried about her getting home safely, which, really, I can't blame you. I don't think she ever did call the police back. She's far too headstrong about some things, but then, you probably know that already."

"Yes." But he wasn't listening to the rest, images of the woman he'd found in the hotel blurring over Maya's sleeping form on his bed. He could still smell the stranger's blood, taste Maya's in the back of his throat. Most likely, Danny would've led her to the van and killed her there. There were places to park around the hospital that sheltered vehicles from the setting sun. Except he would've wanted to hear her scream, probably wanted to hear her beg for her life. Maybe Maya was still alive, trussed up in the back of the van, wondering if Dec was ever going to figure out the truth. Where would Danny

take her to do it, though?

“...on time.”

Dec shook his head. He’d missed what she’d been saying. “What was that?”

“Your brother said to tell you not to worry,” she repeated. “He’d get her to the church on time.” He could practically hear the smile in her voice. “Is there something Maya isn’t telling us?”

Church. On time.

Did Danny mean the refuge?

“Just ... some special arrangements I’ve made for Maya,” Dec said. “*Danny* told you this? What was Maya doing?”

“Well, to be honest, she seemed a little out of it, but considering the kind of day she’s had, it’s more than understandable. She *did* tell him that you were going to worry, though. I think that’s why he gave me the message to relay.”

“OK. Thank you.”

He hung up. He didn’t know what else to say. Hell, he wasn’t even sure what to think.

Danny *had* to mean the refuge. It was the only thing that made sense. He was probably interested in some sort of grand fight, with Maya as the prize. Dec knew it would make the kill all that much sweeter for Danny.

Whatever Danny’s intention was, Dec was going to be prepared. Resolutely, he marched back into the church. He wasn’t going to be taken by surprise. This was a fight he planned on winning, one way or another. The stakes were just too great.

* * * *

In the moment after Danny pushed her into the back of the van, Maya was convinced that was it. Blood was everywhere—spattered across the walls, dried into the sheets he’d been using as a pallet, outlined in footprints on the metal floor. The interior looked like a crime scene itself, and when she saw the silver flash in Danny’s eyes at the smell of it assaulting his senses, she would’ve staked her life that he was going to forget all about whatever plan he’d concocted and kill her straight away.

It didn’t happen, though. For a second, Danny’s hands trembled where they held her arms, and then he shoved with more force than he’d previously used on her, smashing Maya into the opposite wall before slamming the doors shut. She crumpled into unconsciousness at the harsh contact, never feeling the engine come to life beneath her or the van pull away from the hospital lot.

She came back around to darkness and jostling, rolling against the hard wall as Danny navigated a tight turn. Her head ached, and when Maya lifted a hand to touch it, her fingers came away sticky. Blood. Great. Just what she needed around a thirsty vampire with a shaky sense of right and wrong.

Carefully, she sat up, leaning forward to peer between the front seats of the van. The lights of San Francisco dotted the horizon in red and gold, the sun long gone from the day. In the distance, the spire of the church was a silhouette through the townhouses that surrounded it, and wondered again if Dec would call and receive Danny’s cryptic message.

“Sit back,” Danny growled. “You’re distracting me.”

Maya jumped, but obeyed hastily. “What are you going to do when we get there?”

She glanced at the rearview mirror, hoping to gauge his reaction. When she was met with only her reflection, she chastised herself for forgetting, even momentarily.

“We’re going to wait. It’s pointless to go in until Stuart shows up.”

“What do you want *me* to do?”

“Did I not just say *wait*?” She saw him run a trembling hand through his hair, heard him exhale a long, unneeded breath. “God, clean yourself up before I drive us off the road. You smell like—”

He swallowed the rest of it, though it made Maya’s skin crawl knowing he was about to equate her to food. She fumbled around in the dark until she found the corner of the sheet, and then crept along the hem until she felt a portion that wasn’t already stiff with dried blood. Silently, she daubed the scratch, grateful that it seemed to be superficial. Hopefully, it would be the last of her injuries for a long while.

They came to a stop more than a block away from the church. Danny parked along the curb, but instead of climbing out, he tucked the keys into his pocket and leaned against the steering wheel, peering through the windshield as he searched the street. When he didn’t find what he was looking for, he slumped back into the seat.

Maya didn’t say a word. Danny was already on edge, and it was clear that her presence just agitated him further. She didn’t want to do or say anything that might set him off.

“Why did you lie to him?” he asked out of the blue.

“Lie to who?”

“Stuart. You told him you had the antidote, but you don’t.”

She paused, debating how much to tell him. “I think maybe I do.”

He turned around at that, eyes like black pools gleaming amongst pale sand. “Don’t lie to me, too,” he warned, and though he never raised his voice, there was no mistaking the menace in it. “Don’t do that.”

“I’m not.” She took a deep breath. “I think that’s why Stuart contacted me. Part of it probably was what he said, about testing the waters to see how close we were, but I think there’s more. I think he figured out a way to counter the poison, whether he wanted to or not, and he wanted to see what I knew about it.”

“Why do you think that?”

“A lot of reasons. The fact that he took so long to answer me when I pressed him on it. The nature of his original post—”

“What?”

“I found Stuart online. I didn’t know it was him, of course. He was calling himself Dogan. Anyway, he was asking if anyone had encountered regenerative effects with one of the drugs he uses in that poison cocktail of his. But why would he ask that if he hadn’t already seen it? As far as he should’ve been aware, it was lethal.” Maya shook her head. “It doesn’t add up. I’d lay money that that drug is the key. Maybe a concentrated dosage, like an anti-venom, or a vaccination.”

That seemed to satisfy Danny, and he shifted back to resume staring out the front window. Silence filled the van again, the minutes ticking away while they waited, and Maya distracted herself by mulling over the conclusions she’d drawn from Stuart’s probing questions.

She believed what she’d told Danny. It *had* to be the cure. Of course, she wouldn’t know until she tested it, and getting the drug might prove difficult since it still wasn’t

FDA approved, but she was sure Dec would find a way.
Provided all of them survived the night, of course.

* * * *

The street was nearly deserted as he approached the church. Stuart's eyes flickered over the plain façade, ferreting through every chasm and chink that might house a waiting enemy. It was lifeless. Empty. Just as he'd seen so many similar buildings when he'd been alive.

He drove around the block, taking his time to look into the parked cars, to scan the dark drives. Though the area was populated, this was obviously a neighborhood that feared the night, took to its beds and locked its doors when the aegis of the sun took away its protection. Stuart smiled. So appropriate for young Danny to pick a location such as this to conduct his little transaction. Dec had always been about life, about the power of giving it and taking it away. This would never be a place that would gather his attention long enough for him to notice.

Not that he still didn't think this was a trap of some sort. Stuart wasn't foolish. Next to Dec, Danny was the person who hated him most, and that had gone on long before Stuart had used him as revenge against his ex-partner. No, Stuart was fairly certain that Danny had some trick up his sleeve in making this suggestion. It was just Stuart's responsibility to make sure Danny never got to play it.

He glanced over his shoulder to check on Katie's unconscious body. He'd given her a double shot of the stun gun before he'd left his apartment. She would be out for hours yet. It would be impossible for her to go to anyone's aid in the case of a fight, but just in case, he gave her another boost, dropping the stun gun to the passenger seat while he nodded in satisfaction. That was enough.

Parking right in front of the church, Stuart spent several more minutes preparing before getting out of the car. Flight was his first priority. By keeping the car within easy reach, he could run if it became clear he was in danger of losing. Second priority was weapons. Long-range was preferable, but just in case, he had a stake and some holy water in a plastic bottle tucked away for closer combat. He'd learned the hard way not to tote holy water around in anything breakable. That hurt like a bitch.

OK, ready. Time to go.

*

Nothing moved within the church. Empty pews stood before the empty altar, with ghosts saying silent prayers to a god nobody could see. The air was thick with unsaid promises, dusty and dry as only churches could be in those six long days between requisite masses. So, when the front door opened, its creak was more than an echo between the stone walls. It was a gong, booming the entrance of its new arrival. It was undeniable.

With a slither, the door swung shut again, taking with it the illumination that had escaped from the streetlights just along the curb. Long shadows crept across the floor, but no sound disturbed the silence that soaked from within. In the rafters, the soft scuttling of a mouse's feet betrayed the only indication of life.

He paused at the mouth of the atrium, gazing up the center aisle at the towering cross behind the pulpit. Sanctified ground didn't weaken vampires, but the proliferation of holy symbols usually succeeded in keeping them away from churches anyway. Stuart had

never been one of those vamps too scared to face the danger. In fact, he usually embraced it.

One step.

Two steps.

He paused, listening to the space breathe.

Another foot forward.

This time, he caught a dull glint out of the corner of his eye, but before he could swing his weapon around, it was knocked out of his hands, sent flying against the back of a pew where the trigger cracked from the impact. A heavy fist slammed into his jaw, and he reeled backward, though he did not fall.

“This time, I won’t fail.”

Rubbing his sore jaw, Stuart turned his gaze back to Dec, meeting him eye to eye with a virulent sneer. “Burning down churches?” he taunted. “Not really your style, now is it?”

He ducked the next blow and leapt backward over the last few rows of pews. Landing with a quiet thud, Stuart pivoted to make a break for the exit, only to be greeted by a second pair of silver eyes. These shone with hatred, following his every move as he debated which direction to attempt next.

“There’s nowhere left to go,” Danny said. “Time to roll over.”

“Not quite,” Stuart replied, and propelled himself toward the wall and the closest of the stained glass windows.

*

Danny ducked the first time Stuart drove around the block, ordering Maya to do the same, even though she was in the rear of the van. When the car went by the second time, he waited, listening, before poking his head up to see it come to a stop in front of the church. As soon as Stuart was inside, Danny was moving, scrambling from behind the wheel to follow him.

“Stay here,” he directed, though he didn’t even look at her when he spoke.

It was fair enough advice, but the moment Danny disappeared inside, Maya was out of the van, away from the stench of blood she never thought she was going to escape, gulping at the fresh air as if she hadn’t taken a breath in days. This wasn’t her fight, but damned if she was going to stay cooped up like a sitting duck, waiting to see which victor would claim her as its spoils. She had to find Dec and tell him what was going on.

When she passed by Stuart’s car on her way to the alley, Maya saw the bundled body in the back seat and paused. Apparently, he had meant to keep his end of the bargain. Stretched across the seat, Katie slept, bound in heavy chains. She didn’t make a noise when Maya opened the back door, nor did she react when Maya tried to wake her. Still, Maya couldn’t just leave her there. Even if she couldn’t undo the chains, she could drag her away to safety.

Maya was hot and sweaty by the time she dropped Katie’s shoulders to the ground in the alley. It was as far as she could take her. With the added weight of the chains, Katie was just too heavy to move any further.

As she bent over, trying to catch her breath, Maya heard the sounds of crashing wood emanate from inside the church, followed by a man’s shout.

It was Dec. Danny’s message had worked.

Instead of relief, though, dread began to replace the adrenaline that had fuelled all of

Maya's efforts thus far. She'd seen Stuart go in with the crossbow. Perhaps Dec hadn't been armed at all. Or if he had been, maybe he'd only been expecting Danny and so just had the sedatives in preparation.

Danny hadn't taken any weapons either. All he wielded were his anger and fangs.

Against a vampire who'd managed to survive two deaths already, including a fiery one, Maya wasn't sure that was enough.

*

Danny was being sloppy, but Dec didn't have time to tell him what he was doing wrong. He was just glad his brother was there, especially since Stuart had somehow managed to retrieve his crossbow. Though the trigger was cracked, it was only malfunctioning part of the time. One out of every three arrows still managed to spring effectively from its bow, with the latest embedding itself in Dec's thigh.

"I suppose this is my own fault," Stuart said from his perch near the altar. "I knew Danny Boy was up to something, but I never would've dreamed that you'd set foot inside a church again, Declan. Not after what happened to poor, poor Leanne."

Dec prowled along the outer aisle, his eyes locked on his prey. "Things change," he growled.

"But we don't," Stuart countered. "Wasn't that always the problem?"

"That was always *your* problem. Not mine."

He lunged, hoping to catch Stuart off-guard with the conversation, but the other vampire was expecting it. With the crossbow aimed sloppily behind him, Stuart vaulted to the narrow window ledge as he shot, hoping yet again to reach one of the possible means of exit. He was thwarted a second time, when Danny rushed forward and grabbed his foot, yanking him back to earth in a tussle of fangs and fists. Before Dec could intervene, Stuart smashed the crossbow against Danny's temple and fled to safety along the far wall of the church.

Danny dropped like a rock, blood pouring from the head wound.

"And then there were two," Stuart said with a bloody smile.

The pews separated the two vampires, the altar to one side and the front atrium to the other. Stuart was slightly closer to the exit, but seemed unsure that he could make it if he chose to try another run, his eyes darting back and forth between Dec and the doors.

"Speaking of Leanne," Stuart said casually, "you seem to have developed a type in my absence. Lovely girl, your doctor. I'm hoping to get the opportunity to get better acquainted with her in the near future."

In the concentration of the fight, it had slipped Dec's mind that Maya was still involved in this. Of course she was. Danny had left the hospital with her in tow.

But Danny had entered the church alone.

What had he done with Maya?

Stuart saw the flash of fear in Dec's eyes and danced closer to the doorway with a widening grin. "Oh, dear," he said. "It looks like I'm not the only one who's been double-crossed tonight. Do you think the police will find her bloodied body in the hospital parking lot? Or, maybe the morgue. That would be more appropriate, I think."

"It won't work," Dec said.

"What won't work?"

"You won't distract me. I'm not letting you get out of this building alive, Stuart. Not this time."

“But what’s the point? Without your doctor and her antidote, you can’t save them.” His lips curled into a sneer. “You can’t save *anyone*, Declan.”

Dec caught the scent just seconds before Stuart did.

The salty tang of sweat.

The warm gush of blood.

The faint antiseptic that came from her time at the hospital.

And lilac. From her shampoo.

Maya was *here*.

But Stuart was closer.

Both moved with the unnatural speed of their kind, but the few feet Stuart had gained might as well have been miles.

Dec skidded to a halt when he saw Maya trapped within Stuart’s arms, her back pressed to his front, her hands curled into fists at her sides. She wasn’t moving. The tip of one of the crossbow’s arrows was pressed hard against her jugular, indenting the skin though it didn’t appear to be breaking it. Behind her, Stuart was smiling.

“Should we test your feelings?” Stuart taunted. “Which do you think is greater? Your hate for me, or your love for the good doctor?”

His stomach was lead. He couldn’t tear his gaze from Maya’s face, and though the smell of fear radiated from her pores, he couldn’t see it in her eyes.

Stuart took a step backward toward the door, dragging Maya along with him. “I’m going to bet it’s love. Because it’s not just her you’re seeing, is it? You’re seeing Leanne, and every thing you did that failed her.”

“Dec—” Maya started, and then cried out when the point of the arrow dug into her flesh, drawing a small drop of blood.

“You’ve done enough talking for the day, I think,” Stuart warned her.

“What do you want?” Dec asked. He was still watching Maya as he asked it. Something in her face was commanding it.

“Just the freedom to do as I wish,” Stuart replied. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, but you were too narrow-minded to let it happen.”

“You won’t hurt her. I won’t let you.”

“Not really a whole lot you can say about the matter.” Another step, and the distance between them grew.

Maya still watched him, but beyond the fresh smell of blood, Dec would’ve sworn she wasn’t nearly as terrified of the situation as she should’ve been. Then, he saw the small flicker of her fingers.

And he understood.

“You’re a fool, Stuart,” he said. “You’ve underestimated all of us.”

“Then why is it I’ll be the one who walks out of here with exactly what I intended?”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

She moved while Dec was still talking, though really, the motion was tiny. Her hand was already in place. All it took was a quick jab backward and the stun gun that had been hidden in Maya’s hand jammed against Stuart’s thigh.

His gurgled cry of surprise was cut off when he collapsed to the floor, seizing from the electrical shocks coursing through his system. Dec jumped forward, Maya clearing his path, and with a sweep too swift for her to see, plunged the stake he’d had tucked inside his waistband deep into Stuart’s chest.

Maya stood there, staring blankly at the body. “Is that it? He doesn’t go poof, or burst into flame, or dissolve into a puddle of sticky goo?”

“You’ve been watching too many movies,” Dec said. Two long strides and he held her by the shoulders, looking her over for any signs of injury he’d missed. Other than the prick on her neck, she seemed fine, albeit more than a little shaken.

“Where’s Danny?” she asked. Her eyes were huge, her mouth quivering. Her adrenaline was starting to run out on her. “He’s not—?”

“Just knocked cold.” Gently, he pushed back a strand of hair that had escaped her ponytail. “You’re crazy, you know that? It was suicide to trust Danny’s plan.”

“That part was kind of out of my control.” With a tired sigh, she sagged against him, her arms curling his waist. “God, you feel good. I don’t suppose we can skip the part where we have to take care of all the unconscious bodies and go straight to the cuddling in your bed part, can we? I think I need to sleep for the next two weeks just to catch up with today.”

“Why don’t you sit down? The worst of it is over. I’ll take care of this.”

But when he tried to disengage from her arms, Maya refused to let go.

“I heard you from outside,” she said softly. “I thought ... when I thought you might be hurt, it felt like ... I’ve never been so terrified about anything before. Not even when I thought Danny was there to kill me. I just ... don’t do that to me again, OK? It’s hard enough dealing with being in love with a vampire. I don’t want to have to be worrying about you doing anything stupid and dying on me, too.”

It was the last of what she said that rang in his ears.

“What was that?” Dec asked carefully. When she looked up at him, he added, “About your feelings. For me. What did you say?”

A relieved smile was curling her lips. “You mean the loving you bit?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s just that I had a lot of time to do some thinking tonight. In between the being scared for my life and trying to save your ass parts, that is. And I realized that I do. Love you.” She stiffened slightly. “You’re not thinking this is because of the rush of the moment, are you? Because it’s not. I really do love you. I probably have for longer than I knew it. But I—”

He cut her babbling off with a swift kiss. He didn’t need to hear the explanations. He’d heard enough already.

Suddenly, holding her in his arms seemed like the preferred option to him, too.

Chapter Thirty-One

It only took backtracking to Stuart's apartment to find the answers Maya had been looking for. With Dec standing guard on the off-chance Stuart hadn't been working alone again, she inventoried Stuart's notes, both written and digital, silently pleased that she'd figured out his purposes all on her own. The solution wasn't quite as simple as she'd envisioned, but the ingredients were few. It was just a matter of process to create a test antidote.

One by one, they treated the young vampires at the refuge. Katie hovered in the background, silent and sullen ever since waking up under Maya's care, but she obeyed orders without question, nodding when Dec would make a request. Maya knew the two had had a long talk when Katie had regained consciousness, and though she never pressed on the details, Maya knew it had been a draining one for both of them. Katie had immediately retreated to Danny's room, where she now spent all of her free time, while Dec had withdrawn to the sanctuary of the church, cleaning up the wreckage from the fight before the minister came in and discovered it for himself.

The antidote worked. Mostly. The evidence of the rash faded with the first dosages, and the various elevated levels she'd detected in their blood with the last tests evened out over the first few days. Before her eyes, Maya saw the children change, moods elevating as energy levels increased, faces filling out as they started to regain nutrition from the blood they consumed. Dec kept all of them on a strictly animal diet, warning them with tales of relapse should they return to a human diet, and though she never thought she'd be completely sure, she didn't think the younger vampires really minded all that much. The new freedoms they were allowed more than made up for it.

The exception to the antidote was Danny. Dec had refused to allow Maya to see him, spiriting him away to an unknown part of the refuge while he and Katie tended to him. "It's for your own safety," he'd said in explanation.

For once, Maya didn't argue. She had enough on her hands worrying about the rest of the sick vampires.

But the progress she saw so rapidly in the others didn't happen to Danny. Dec drew blood daily, and while analysis showed that his levels were dropping, it happened so slowly that Maya wasn't convinced it was because of their efforts. She had no explanation for it.

Dec did.

"Human blood always exacerbates the poison's progression," he said. "Danny's the only one who ever glutted himself while he was so sick. And he did it just recently, too. It's just going to take time."

It was as good a reason as any, and when Dec reported on her last night at the refuge that the rash was starting to recede, Maya was relieved. It was easier to leave them all behind, knowing her work was primarily complete.

* * * *

Danny rubbed at his wrists, eyes wary while he watched Dec toss the chains aside.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"Don't make me regret it," Dec warned, and stepped back, taking his usual sentry position near the door.

Danny sat silently, his head bowed, as Katie injected the serum into his upper arm. The effect was immediate, the writhing tension that twisted his veins easing with the curative balm, and his lashes fluttered closed as he waited for the unwinding to complete its path throughout his body.

"Can I talk to Dec alone, please?" he said quietly. He didn't look up to see Katie agree, but he did hear the door open and close with her exit. Katie hadn't talked much since the big fight. He had a vague idea about what had happened with her and Stuart, and he still wasn't clear about why she'd snatched Danny from the refuge in the first place, but that didn't matter. There was an easy peace between them that hadn't been there since before he'd been sick. They were each just grateful the other was still around.

"I want to leave." He said it without preamble, still staring at the floor. He saw Dec's booted feet move forward and knew he was under close scrutiny, but Danny didn't care. The need to do this had been eating him ever since his head had started clearing.

"You're still sick," Dec countered. "You're not going anywhere."

"I didn't mean now. After. When you're convinced I'm better."

He risked glancing up. Dec's brows were drawn, his eyes dark. It was a familiar look on him, but without seeing it through the cloud of the poison that had been coloring all Danny's perceptions of the past two years, it seemed more protective than menacing. There was a part of Danny that took comfort in that.

"Why?" came the brusque reply.

His fingers curled around the cot's mattress. This was the part he was dreading.

"Did Dr. Sheldon tell you what happened?" His voice was subdued. With most of the confusion gone from his head, he seemed to prefer lower tones these days.

Dec folded his arms over his chest. Fuck. That was never good.

"Some of it. She's been busy."

Danny lowered his eyes again. "I was going to kill her, you know. When I went to the hospital. I thought that that would make it all stop."

"Stop what?"

"The urges. Ever since that night, when I first bit her, and then when I bit her again, all I could think about was how good she tasted. How long it had been since I'd had human blood and not that bagged shit you were feeding me. And knowing you were feeding from her—"

"I wasn't—I don't *feed* from Maya. What's between us, it's not like that."

Danny waved his hand in dismissal. "Whatever. It's all so fucked up anyway. And it was *that*, too. When I realized what she really meant to you. I thought getting rid of her would turn things back to the way they'd been in the beginning. When it was just you and me, and how good everything was then. How *easy*."

There was a soft intake of breath, and then, "That was the drugs messing with your head, Danny. You know we can't go back to that."

"I know that. *Now*. I didn't then."

"What does any of this have to do with wanting to leave?"

His throat was dry. He really didn't want to talk about this, but Dec wasn't giving him a choice. "Because I'm still having the dreams. The rest of it is getting better, but

every time I close my eyes, I'm back at the hotel, and all I want to do is find Maya and sink my teeth into her."

As he spoke, the memory of her taste came flooding back, rich and thick and coppery, his mouth watering involuntarily so that he was forced to swallow it down. "I can smell her on you, you know," Danny continued. "I've smelled her blood on your breath. Every time you come to see me. It makes my palms itch." He didn't mention that it got him hard, too. That might be pushing it too far.

"That's just the drugs," Dec repeated. "It'll get—"

"Don't say better. Don't you think that's what I thought, too?" His voice was rising, his skin crawling as the writhing seemed to return to his gut. "It's *not*. They're getting worse, Dec, and if you love her like I think you do, you'll not only let me go, but you'll give me plane money to send me all the way to Timbuktu. She's not *safe*, don't you get it?" He pointed to the door. "Every time that opens, part of me is hoping that it's her. And when it's not..."

He trailed off, unable to finish the thought. It wasn't necessary, though. Understanding of the implications was clear in Dec's face.

"You control it," Dec finally said. The muscle in his jaw twitched. "You didn't kill her at the hospital, now did you? And you managed to get her all the way back here without hurting her. You just ... do more of that."

"I can't. The only reason Maya's alive is because of Stuart. I hated him more than I wanted to kill her, but now he's gone. I don't have that to hold on to any more." Rising to his feet, Danny lifted his chin and faced his brother, eye to eye for the first time in what felt like forever. "This is all I can do, Dec. If you want Maya safe, you've got to let me go."

Dec had never been an easy read. He liked to keep things to himself, not let others see how things affected him. But Danny prided himself on knowing him better than anyone else in the world, and at that moment, he could see the indecision in the dark blue depths of his eyes.

"Have you told Katie any of this?" Dec asked.

Danny shook his head. "I might be sick, but I'm not suicidal. She'd rip my intestines out through my throat."

More silence.

"Katie goes with you. She stuck by you through everything. She deserves that."

"OK."

"And you leave the continent. Go to Europe. Or Asia. You always liked Japan."

"Yeah. I figured that was a given. OK."

Dec rested a hand on Danny's shoulder. It was the first time since Danny had gotten sick that one of Dec's touches was spurred by something other than the need to fight him down.

"And when the dreams stop," Dec said quietly, "you come home. Yes, I love Maya, but we'll always be family, Danny."

For a second, he wasn't sure he'd heard him correctly. "Are you serious?"

"Well, since you're of the opinion that I lost my sense of humor somewhere around the time Reagan got shot, I'd say yeah, I'm serious."

This time, there was a small smile accompanying Dec's words, and Danny felt a smile of his own creep up to join it. "Tell Maya thank you. For the antidote."

Dec nodded, but said, “You’re not going anywhere yet. Full recovery first. Then ... I’ll tell her.”

It was a relief to have it done with, even if he knew it colored Dec’s opinion of him. There was more, so much more, about the dreams of Maya than Danny could tell, and while those still woke him up hard and dripping with desire, memories of her scent lingering long after the dreams were gone, it was a small comfort to know he could do this for Dec. After everything, Dec deserved a little peace of mind.

Even if Danny wasn’t going to find his own.

* * * *

She was nervous. She didn’t know why. They’d spent every night together since Stuart’s death, but for some reason, Maya’s stomach was a bundle of knots while she waited for Dec to return.

She fidgeted with her hair one more time. It was always annoying wearing it down. Ponytails were so much more efficient. But she’d caught Dec playing with it once when he thought she was asleep, and when she’d asked him about it, a small smile had softened the hard lines of his face.

“I don’t know,” he’d said. “But when it’s down like this, you just seem to look more relaxed. Happier. I like that.”

Afterward, she kept finding reasons to keep it down. Even though it still made her neck itch.

The soft whisper of the opening door startled her, and Maya stood abruptly from where she’d been perched on the edge of the bed. “How’s Danny?” she blurted.

“Fine.” His gaze swept down over the brown silk nightshirt she wore, caressing her curves without lifting a single finger. “It’s a little early for sleep, isn’t it?”

“I’m back at the hospital tomorrow. I have to get my body back onto its old schedule sooner or later.”

Mentioning of her work shuttered his features, but Dec nodded anyway, turning away as he closed the door. This was a conversation they’d been avoiding. Things like making sure Stuart was really dead this time, and finding the antidote, and then getting the ingredients before they could start using it, had taken precedence. But now, there was no more opportunity for dodging. Her time at the refuge was up.

Tomorrow, Maya got her real life back.

She still wasn’t convinced she wanted it.

When he walked to the refrigerator without saying a word, she said, “We have to talk about this, you know. You promised no more running away from things, remember?”

“I’m not.” He paused before pulling out his sports bottle of blood. “But part of me keeps thinking that if we don’t talk about it, it won’t happen.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a sad smile. “Can you really blame me for not wanting to see you walk out of my life?”

She was at his side before he could lift the bottle to his lips, tugging at his arm and forcing him to look at her. “Who said anything about walking out? Have I *ever* given you the impression that this was just some fling?”

His knuckle brushed over her cheek. “Be realistic about this, Maya. You have a whole life out there, a career—”

“And I see no reason why you can’t be a part of that,” she finished. “We’ll work

something out. We have to. I'm not losing you." Her chin jutted out defiantly. "I can be selfish, too."

He smiled at her determined show and dropped a soft kiss across her lips. When he began to pull away, however, Maya looped her arms around his neck, drawing him back to force him into deepening the caress. Her mouth attacked his, hot, hungry, tangling with his tongue as she poured out all the fear and frustration she'd bottled over the past few hours.

Her breath choked in her throat. "I love you," she repeated every time their mouths parted, even if it was only for a second. Though she'd said the words again after her first declaration, she wasn't convinced he actually believed her. In her mind, if he had, he wouldn't have been so unsure about her intentions when she left. So, she wanted to tattoo it on his brain, make him see that no matter what, her feelings for him weren't going anywhere. Even if she was.

When they finally parted, Dec's arm was firmly around her waist, keeping their hips locked, his arousal pressed against her heat. "I want what other couples have," he said. His eyes were black with desire, drinking in her flushed cheeks, the wet parting of her lips. "I want to take you out. I want the nights, I want the days. I want showing up at the hospital to pick you up and having that head nurse yell at me for letting you work so hard. I want listening to you make those little snoring noises in your sleep—"

She slapped playfully at his chest. "I don't snore!"

He smiled, grabbing her wrist before she could pull away and bringing her palm to his mouth, nibbling at the fleshy pad below her thumb. "I want," he continued, ignoring her interruption, "that smell when you first get out of the shower, when you're all lilac and dewy before you've even bothered getting dressed."

Her feet left the floor as he pulled her weight against him and crossed the two yards back to the bed.

"I want to be the one who gets to hold you when you're upset about losing a patient, the one who doesn't see the stoic mask you wear for the parents or the rest of the staff but the face you hide from them because you don't want anyone to know just how deeply it affects you."

The back of her legs hit the edge of the mattress, and Maya sank into the comforters, guided by Dec's powerful hands as he stretched her out beneath him. His mouth lowered to seek hers out, his tongue sweeping across her lower lip before taking it between his teeth. She groaned, clawing into his back.

"I want you screaming," he murmured. His hands slipped beneath the hem of her nightshirt, skating over her stomach, up and up to cup her full breasts. She arched into him when his thumbs flicked over her nipples, but he'd trapped her legs between his, keeping her pinned while he continued to map out her curves. "I want you wet, and gasping, and begging me for more. I want to be the one you see when you come, and I want my name to be the only coherent thought you have when you're lying there afterward."

"Dec—"

But he wasn't done, and told her so by smothering her with another hungry kiss.

"I haven't talked about you leaving because I knew I didn't want to let you go at all, Maya. Don't take what I said about being selfish lightly. If you let me into your life for real, I'm going to want it all."

He nibbled a trail across her jaw, to the soft throbbing of her pulse just below her ear. When he sucked at the tender flesh, Maya whimpered, curling a hand into the hair at his nape to hold him closer, squirming against his hardness as she tried desperately to get some friction against her clit.

Dec chuckled, a deep rumble that made her skin vibrate. "So, do you want me to keep talking about this? Or have I scared you into letting it go?"

She pushed him away at that, forcing him to look at her. "I'm not scared of you. I'm scared of going back to a life without you. Be selfish all you want. Just ... be *there*."

His nod was all it took for them to come together again, hands, lips, arms, legs, anything that allowed them to touch the other. The moment Dec's hips lifted, Maya's fingers were flying across the button of his jeans, pushing down the denim until the rough hair along his thighs scraped across her skin. When he pushed the silky nightshirt up to expose her chest, she gasped at the sudden chill, but it was gone almost immediately as Dec covered her again, sinking his blunt teeth into the soft flesh of the left breast.

"Now," she whispered, her breath taking flight and leaving her quivering. "Please."

He didn't have to be asked twice. Taking her wrist in his hand, Dec surprised Maya by coiling it around his neck, encouraging her to cling to him while he positioned his cock at her wet opening. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied, and then cried out in delight when he sheathed himself in a single stroke.

His thrusts were long, hard, unyielding to anything but the need that swelled and burned between them. Every stroke ground his pelvis into her clit, and Dec only added to the fire inside her by sucking and nibbling at her neck. As their pace quickened, Maya tilted her head further to the side, allowing him access to the healed marks where he'd first bitten her.

"Go on," she said. He'd been extra careful in not biting her ever since Stuart's death, but she knew he desperately wanted to. "It's all right."

She didn't see him change. Without breaking the rhythm of his pumping, Dec ran his tongue over the slightly raised scars, sending shivers straight to her pussy. And then, there was slight pricking, the few seconds of sharp burn as his fangs pierced her skin followed quickly by the longer euphoria when his mouth latched firmly to her neck to prevent any loss of her blood.

She came. Blindly. Explosively. The world was a scarlet haze pounding inside her skull, roaring with life as she clung to his back. Amidst a blur of sensations, his thrusts accelerated, then froze in an endless moment when his orgasm shuddered throughout his body, muscles rippling beneath her fingers, his fangs retracting as his mouth sought hers out one more time.

Neither was willing to let the other go, and they stayed like that for minutes upon minutes, Dec still buried deep inside her, Maya showering him with kisses that left her dizzy. Eventually, he rolled onto his back, taking her with him, and nestled her head onto his chest.

"I don't expect it, you know," he said, smoothing her hair away from her face.

"I know." Her fingers traced lazy patterns across the fabric of his shirt. They were silent for a moment before she spoke up again. "Do you have a suit?"

Dec chuckled. "I'm not even going to try and figure out how your brain got from biting to clothes in that short amount of time."

She turned her head, resting her chin against him in order to meet his eyes. "I was just thinking that now I don't have to be alone at all those awful hospital functions. But I don't think the jeans and your leather will sit so well with the board." She grinned. "Although Karen might like it. She's already warned me that I have competition for you."

His thumb brushed across her kiss-swollen lower lip. "I don't think you have to worry. I'm going to be too busy with you to even notice anybody else. As for the other, I clean up pretty good, if I do say so myself. I might even have a suit that was made in this decade hiding away somewhere."

Stretching, Maya kissed Dec gently before returning to her warm place against his chest. As his arms tightened around her, she felt the last of her doubts float away, warded off by the cocoon being with him created.

There were certain facts within her life that were inescapable. Work. Her drive to help and heal others. Her desire for someone to understand what it was like to be surrounded by people and still feel lonely. She'd spent too much of her life trying to deny they were there, but now, probably for the first moment in a very long time, she didn't have to.

Because Dec understood. Even better, Dec loved her for those same unavoidable fetters. And though the chains that now bound her to him were just as unbreakable, she knew she didn't have to carry the burden of them alone.

He would be there, to help shoulder the delicate weight.

She smiled, sleep already starting to win its battle over her body.

Life was good.

Tomorrow would be even better.

The End

About the Author:

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, RT Reviewers Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children.

Visit her website at <http://www.viviendean.com/>

**Meet Lsb Authors At The House Of Sin
Lsbooks.Net**

We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books

LSbooks.com
for other exciting erotic romances.

2007: Terran Realm

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

Featured Series:

The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors
Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan
Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron
Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

The Max Series by JB Skully
Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!