



*Order of Terminus*

*BLOOD DESIRES*

*By*

*Olivia Starke*

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**Blood Desires**

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## **Dedication**

To my four four-legged workout buddies Ace, Max, Sugar, and Silas. Thanks for getting me away from the computer and into the sunshine each day.

## Chapter One

*Monday the 27<sup>th</sup>*

*Dear Diary,*

*...P.S. to my last entry*

*I just got the call that I'm in! I have a meeting tonight with Remann and I'll be offering myself to him. He is very picky about his Feeders, but it turns out I'm perfectly his type...type AB negative that is...*

Kate Andrews pitched the diary next to where she sat on the bed. A painful lump had lodged in her throat. Hot tears stung her eyes and threatened to spill down her cheeks. She'd read this last entry of her half-sister, Melanie's diary perhaps a dozen times. Each time she tried to find some hidden clue to her nineteen-year-old sister's whereabouts.

"Oh, Melly, where are you?" she asked the empty room. She rose from the bed and walked into the living room and found a can of goldfish food. Sprinkling a pinch in the aquarium, she watched the hungry goldfish gobble up the multi-colored flakes. Their scales caught the aquarium light and reflected it back in a metallic glimmer that danced over their little bodies. Their reflections twinkled on the surface of the water as they darted from flake to flake of food. After she watered a couple of ferns in the tiny apartment, Kate took another walk through the apartment Melanie rented.

Melanie James had gone missing three days before, the night of the last entry in her sister's journal. Kate brushed away the tears staining her cheeks, licking the salty taste from her lips. Melanie had been an aspiring fashion model in Chicago with the looks and attitude to carry her into the business. Yet within six months after she'd started her career, she'd fallen into a gothic underworld, according to the journal. At thirty years of age, Kate was level-headed and didn't hold much stock in the paranormal or supernatural. Vampires were just silly teenage crap as far as she was

concerned. Her sister had fallen for it full heartedly and somewhere out there was living some crazy fantasy...Kate hoped anyway. The alternative was unthinkable.

The police hadn't taken much of an interest in Melanie's disappearance. They had assured Kate that her sister had fallen in with the 'wrong crowd' and probably drugs. They'd promised to keep an eye out for her on street corners much to Kate's disgust and frustration. Melanie wasn't the type to do drugs and certainly wouldn't sell her body, though Kate worried what offering herself to this Remann meant. Her sister had always been adamant about saving herself for marriage, a reflection of their Baptist upbringing.

Later that evening in her own apartment, Kate studied Melanie's diary. Most of its contents were the names and details on various vampires and people who called themselves *Feeders*. It revolted Kate as she read that these so called Feeders offered their blood to people who thought themselves vampires. The idea of all the communicable diseases these crazy people were exposing themselves to made her stomach roll, and she feared for Melanie's safety.

Kate shuddered. She hated the sight of blood.

The phone rang and Kate answered.

"Any news?"

"No, Mom, I'm sorry. The cops haven't found anything new, but they tell me they're investigating anything that comes their way." Kate hated lying, but with her mother's heart problems she wanted to lessen whatever stress she could.

"Well, Danny and I are having a prayer circle at church tomorrow night. We really wish you'd come," her mother said. Her mom and stepdad lived in St. Louis, Missouri, a few hours away.

"No, Mom, it's best if I stay here in case something should come up," Kate said. She didn't want to face a church full of pitying and judgmental faces. "I want to nose around on my own, too."

"Kathryn, now be careful. We don't know what we'd do if something happened to you." Her mom's tight voice broke into a sob.

"It's okay, just got a couple of Melanie's friends I'm going to question. I'm a newspaper reporter remember? I know what to do," Kate said.

Her mother let out a sigh. "Okay, honey, be careful. We love you."

"I love you, too. Give Danny my love." Kate hung up the phone and paced her apartment. She felt trapped within its confines. She grabbed her running shoes from the bedroom floor and went out for a brisk run.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aiden sat on the sidelines and watched his brother, Remann, bask in the

attention of several human women. Aiden's drink, blood from a donor agency mixed with an expensive scotch, twirled untouched in his hands. His leg bounced up and down as Remann lifted a wrist from a tall waifish girl to his lips. He bit into the pale delicate flesh, and the young woman went limp.

*Feeders*, Aiden thought in disgust, shaking his head. *Humans are so naïve.*

His twin brother's habits had always been questionable to Aiden. They'd both succumbed to the ravages of the Black Death in the Middle Ages. A vampiress, taking advantage of the abundant prey plague victims offered, found the identical twin brothers a novelty. After changing them, she'd taken them under her wing for several centuries. Unfortunately, she'd found herself tied to a burning stake in the sixteen hundreds.

Remann lifted his mouth from the waif's offered arm, his eyes deepening to a darkened red. He smiled at Aiden, his white teeth smeared with blood.

"You should try her, my brother," Remann said. "She is still a virgin. A nineteen-year-old and a virgin in this century." He shook his head in amusement as the young woman sank deeper into the cushions of the overstuffed couch. Her face was deathly pale, and Aiden wondered if Remann had feasted too much on the girl.

"Humans aren't cattle, Remann." Aiden rose from the recliner of soft black lambskin. He downed his drink in a single swallow and left his brother to his Feeders. Remann's deep chuckle followed him out of the room of the old mansion outside of Chicago.

Standing in his private quarters, Aiden stared out across Lake Michigan and absorbed the tranquility the water offered. Moonlight danced over its rippling surface mirroring the full moon perfectly. He stroked his hand down the smooth planes of his freshly shaven jaw and listened as several rooms away a woman gasped then laughed at something his brother had said.

Aiden and his brother had taken to vampirism differently. While Remann enjoyed the power, and used it to his advantage when it came to women, Aiden viewed it as something to control and respect. He had joined the *Order of Terminus*, an organization that protected both vampires and humans. From time to time feral vampires, known as *Dissenters*, would take residence in Chicago and the surrounding areas. As a *Hunter* it was Aiden's job to destroy Dissenters to prevent them from exposing the existence of vampires. Dissenters had a nasty reputation of leaving bloody carnage in their wake.

The darkness beckoned him as it did all vampires, an instinct inherent with the virus that coursed within his blood. It was easier for their kind to take prey that was tucked safely in their beds. A victim's deep slumber saved them energy and kept their attacks concealed. His cell phone rang and his irritation flared over the rude sound.

"Hey, gorgeous, you want to come out tonight?" a sultry female voice asked.

“Depends, what do you have in mind?” Aiden asked. His annoyance evaporated as his voice matched her provocative tone. Deidre was a tempting vampiress he’d met many decades before. She provided him with detached female companionship that suited him perfectly.

“Well I just received several pints of AB negative from my supplier. Why don’t you come over and indulge with me.” Deidre’s voice ended in a near purr and several illicit thoughts passed through Aiden’s mind. His cock hardened. He grinned wickedly as he checked his image in the huge gilded antique mirror that dominated his quarters.

“I’ll be right out, don’t start without me.”

Deidre chuckled in a positively obscene manner.



## Chapter Two

The jog path along Lake Michigan was popular even at 7 a.m. Kate had catnapped through the night and had gotten up early, and decided to take a favorite trail. Running had replaced her nicotine addiction years before, and she relied on the physical exertion to clear her head. The rhythmic pounding of her feet on the hard packed dirt path helped center her thoughts as she worked out her plan.

She'd decided to go undercover and find this Remann who Melanie had mentioned in her diary. As a journalist she'd done some minor covert stories in the past for the Associated Press, and she was confident she could pull it off.

Later that afternoon Kate found herself standing before the full length mirror on her bedroom door with her confidence wavering. At five foot five and blessed with an hour glass figure, she wasn't the six-foot tall waif her half-sister was, but she received her fair share of male attention. Would she be this vampire guy's type? She was AB negative, but how Remann would know was beyond her.

After she chose a silk smoky grey dress that perfectly matched the shade of her eyes she laid the dress on her bed. She dragged a comb through her heavy wet auburn locks. Kate picked out a little black lace g-string, the cowl neck of the dress dipping too low to allow for a bra. She'd worn the dress once for an old boyfriend to an anniversary dinner. She'd shoved it to the back of the closet when he'd broken up with her the same night.

"Maybe if I look available enough he'll buy it," she said to her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Kate's plan was to go to the night club her sister had mentioned in her diary, the club frequented by Remann. Hopefully she could pull out all her feminine wiles and get a meeting with the man who thought himself a vampire.

She slipped the silk dress over her head and strapped on a pair of matching stilettos. She styled her hair into thick waves and after applying more make-up than she'd worn in years she was out the door. The club, *Sang Rouge*, had a line half-way down the block when she stepped from the taxi. It was just before nine and she had

hoped to arrive before the crowd had collected.

"Crap," Kate muttered under her breath as she took her place in line. Two men barely old enough to legally drink turned and immediately their eyes focused on the low cut of her dress. The chill of the early May evening had her crossing her arms over her breasts to prevent them from getting more of a peep show.

"Yes, I'm a fully developed thirty year old woman, boys," she said to the still gawking young men. Their eyes darted to her face and the blond boy flushed bright red. The dark-haired one only smiled.

"I'm Jason, it's very nice to meet you," he said with a smile Kate would have appreciated if she'd been eight years younger. She offered him a tight grin and let her gaze travel down the length of the line as more people filed in behind her.

"Do you come here often?" Jason asked, apparently having decided persistence would pay off.

"I usually have too many grown-up responsibilities," Kate said as she focused her gaze on the doors of the club. Two large bouncers dressed in tuxedos had stepped out to size up the crowd.

"So, like, what's up with the attitude? I just wanted to get to know you better," Jason said, his boyish features creased into a pout. His blond friend turned away and snagged Jason's arm trying to get him to follow. The line began to move forward, to Kate's relief. Jason became distracted by a group of scantily clad giggling girls that had just arrived in a taxi.

Once inside the club she scanned the trendy décor and wondered if Remann was anywhere to be found. Walking up to a bar she ordered a long island iced tea from a bartender who wore a dark grey tailored shirt with a matching tie. He juggled several drink bottles expertly, flipping them high in the air, as he prepared her drink. He gave her a wink and a sly smile as he slid the tall glass across the bar. It stopped perfectly an inch from the edge of the polished wood. Kate couldn't help but be impressed. After paying for the drink she conspicuously pulled a twenty dollar bill from her clutch and slipped it into the tip jar.

"So, can you tell me if Remann is here tonight?" She gave him her most come hither smile. The bartender lost some of the twinkle in his eyes and gave her a brief shrug.

"If he's here he's upstairs," he said glancing up. She followed his quick look and saw an upper level lined with windows. The bartender turned his attention to another customer as Kate hopped off the barstool, sipping her drink as she searched for a staircase. Against the back wall she spotted an elevator with another tuxedo-dressed man standing guard next to it. She took a deep swig of her liquid courage and sauntered up to the bouncer.

The bouncer towered over her a good six-foot-six. He was all solid-packed

muscle that couldn't be hidden beneath his finely tailored suit. His skin was a smooth deep mahogany color, and as he peered down at her, a bored expression crossed his features. Kate batted her eyelashes and cocked her head, doing her best to hide her intimidation.

"I'd like to meet Remann," Kate said. She winced as her voice cracked.

The bouncer's eyes traveled down her body in assessment, not appreciation, and his nostrils flared. He placed a finger to his ear and spoke smooth French in a deep baritone voice.

It was so contrary to his quarterback physique that Kate's mouth fell open. Having never taken a French class, she had no clue what the bouncer said. She absently twirled a lock of hair between her fingers.

He turned his head slightly, listening to the reply through the earpiece he wore. He nodded and turned his attention back to Kate.

"Remann is willing to accept a visitor at this time," the bouncer said in thickly accented English. He punched the button for the elevator. "He is to the left of the elevator, down the hall in a room."

Kate followed his instructions and soon found the room in question. The heavy oak door was closed, and she could hear voices talking and laughing from within. For the first time that evening real nervousness washed through her. Her knees grew weak.

*Would Melanie be inside? Would she come home if she were?*

She squared her shoulders just as the door opened and found her gaze fixed on a broad chest clothed beneath a crisp white tailored shirt. She let her gaze travel up and noted several buttons had been left undone, revealing a trace of black hair hidden beneath. Kate's breath caught in her throat as her startled eyes found a strong neck and a square jaw line shadowed with slight dark beard growth. A broad smile with perfect white teeth welcomed her and when her gaze finally met his, she gasped and stepped back.

His left eye was a pale, almost unearthly blue while the right was a deep rich brown.

"I'm Remann," the man said sweeping his arm toward the room. "Please come in and introduce yourself."

### Chapter Three

Aiden spent the day sailing on Lake Michigan. The weather was beautiful with crisp blue skies and fifty degree weather on the open water. Vampires preferred colder weather than humans. It wasn't the sun they feared as in legend; it was the heat. Hours of heat drained their energy and left them more helpless than their human prey.

Deidre had kept him busy the night before, pulling him into several games of Texas Hold 'Em. It was a new hobby for her and though she couldn't disguise her emotions beneath a poker face, Aiden had let her win hand after hand. She had been delighted with her perceived wins and had rewarded her losing partner with her feminine talents.

As dusk approached, a heavy grey fog bank rolled in from the north and Aiden headed the boat toward shore. His brother would be at the club that evening, and he toyed with the idea of making an appearance. Remann always searched for new Feeders to whet his palette. Once he tired of the girls he'd turn them away with a healthy monetary compensation for their time and their silence. Sometimes the women pleaded to be changed, but luckily Remann always refused. Through the centuries Remann's system had run smoothly, though worry always tugged at the corners of Aiden's mind.

Later that evening, dressed in a tailored white shirt and black slacks he drove his Mercedes across town to the club. He greeted Arnaud, the bouncer positioned at the elevator. Arnaud gave a simple nod in return. In the century Aiden had known him he'd rarely shown emotion, though he was a good vampire to have on one's side.

Aiden let himself into the lounge and nodded a hello to his brother before he took a seat at the far end of the room. He and his brother jointly owned the establishment along with several other commercial properties that brought in a healthy sum of money. Over their lifetimes they'd collected enough money to suit their needs ten times over, so they used the extra money from their investments to help fund a local research hospital.

A woman he didn't recognize sat amongst the group of Feeders, and Aiden studied her for a moment as her eyes roamed in his direction. A look of shock crossed her features as she looked from him, to his brother, and back again. Remann laughed heartily as Aiden hid his grin. They were used to the reaction and Remann found particular amusement in it. The woman looked a few years older than his brother's usual group. She was rather attractive with thick auburn hair and striking grey eyes outlined darkly in kohl.

"Come, brother, and introduce yourself," Remann called out, waving him over. The woman still had a stunned expression on her lovely features. The other young women giggled and whispered as Aiden walked to the group.

Kate was speechless as the living mirror image of Remann walked toward her. She had just joined the throng of his adoring women and hadn't quite settled in. She knew she was slack-jawed but didn't care. She could see the attraction her sister had held for Remann. He was tall, broad shouldered, and muscular, with a masculine virility that couldn't be ignored. And here he was times two. The twin stared down at her giving her a small smile. His thick eyebrows knit together before he glanced in Remann's direction. Remann met the look and an almost imperceptible exchange took place between the brothers, before the twin turned his attention back to her.

"I'm Aiden," he said as he extended a hand to Kate. She accepted it and was taken aback when, instead of shaking her hand, he placed a very genteel kiss upon the top of it. His full lips lingered hotly for just a moment, and she watched his nostrils flare slightly. Still holding her hand Aiden stared hard into her eyes with the same dark brown eye and pale blue eye of Remann. In the back of Kate's mind she thought she should consider the eyes too theatrical for the two vampire want-to-bes. The idea died where it started.

Caught in an almost spell-like state, she couldn't take her eyes off the sharp angles of Aiden's face. The brothers shared a long straight nose with a strong square jaw, sensual lips, and thick dark brows over those peculiar odd-colored eyes.

Kate sucked in a breath and Aiden's scent filled her head, a strong male musk with something beneath it...something sharp and indefinable that made her thoughts swim and her body tingle. Though he shared this subtle odor with Remann, Aiden's seemed to grow stronger with each of her shallow breaths. It was clouding her thoughts and Kate struggled to find a reason why this twin affected her so strangely.

"This is Kate," she heard Remann say somewhere in the distance. Her flesh vibrated, a minute distracting sensation that started from the hand enclosed within Aiden's. It spread throughout her body.

"Perhaps you would do me the honor of joining me for a drink," Aiden said. He seemed to say the words without moving his lips, but his deep voice was loud, drowning out the errant thoughts that tried to interrupt the spell she was caught within.

He stepped back and Kate rose from the chair feeling feathery light, and she drifted with Aiden to his shadowed table in the corner of the room. He didn't release her hand as he guided her down next to him on a leather bound loveseat. She sank heavily within the soft black cushions.

A waitress walked over and took an order from Aiden. Kate couldn't remember what it was for as she continued to gaze at his strong features. Her heart was fluttery, almost palpating. She breathed in his scent as a drowning man would gasp for air.

"What brings you here, Kate, my darling?" Aiden asked in that intoxicating voice.

Kate searched her mind not quite sure she knew the answer.

*Melanie.*

The image of her half-sister filled her head, partly breaking the odd spell.

"I've heard of Remann, and wanted to see for myself," she said breathlessly.

Aiden considered the answer for a moment. "Yes, my brother has somewhat of a reputation. What exactly have you heard?" he asked. His deep voice was slightly accented in a European way.

"He has some mystery around him," Kate answered truthfully. Her eyes searched his unusual mismatched eyes.

"The blue is real, an inherited trait," Aiden said answering her unasked question. "What type of mystery are you looking for, my darling Kate?" He leaned in closer his thumb stroking the palm of her hand he held. His hard thigh pressed into her bare flesh where her dress had slid to an almost indecent height. A part of her wanted to back away, yet she swayed closer to him, closing her eyes. White hot desire flooded her veins. Closing her eyes intensified the affects of his scent, a potent drug that caused her muscles to relax even as her nerves strummed with awakening lust.

Aiden drew closer still, as he brushed her hair back with his free hand. The rough pad of his thumb still traced never ending circles on her palm. His lips touched the silky outer curve of her earlobe, and his breath was rich with that sharp overpowering spicy aroma. Just as she was robbed of all conscience thought, she heard his whispered words.

"Perhaps, my darling Kate, we should continue this at my place."

## Chapter Four

Aiden hadn't used his vampiric attraction on a human woman in a very long time, yet it flowed from him as easily and naturally as breathing. Vampires used a human's sex drive against their prey, drawing them in and rendering them helpless. Their odor acted as a powerful narcotic, and they had the ability to intensify their scent. Kate lay upon the chaise lounge in his quarters, her curvy toned physique outlined by the cut of the dress and the thin clingy grey silk draping her form.

Aiden's predatory instincts thrilled at the sight of his victim so close and available. He paced back and forth across the room as he tried to force his feeding drive into control. The hunt had aroused his senses and stimulated him in a way he hadn't expected. Donor blood kept him alive, but fresh living blood straight from the source had no comparison. It's what the virus within him craved; why it had evolved so perfectly and efficiently to get the blood that was needed to survive.

Kate's beating heart rang in his ears, and her human odor filled his nostrils, until he thought his heart would explode beneath his restraint. Aiden ran his tongue over his sharp canines which had extended with his desire.

Slowly he reigned himself into control. Walking amongst humans on a daily basis was an easy experience, but once vampires *stalked* a human instinct took over. Aiden walked to where Kate was laying, and his eyes traveled the length of her still body. Something within him began to replace the feeding drive, something he hadn't felt for a human woman in centuries. She had the tight muscular legs of a runner. He let his eyes travel up to the curve of her hips, the thin clingy fabric outlining her hip bones and the subtle convex curve of her lower stomach. Farther up the low dip of the dress had fallen open to expose the inside of one full breast; the beige shadow of a nipple was just showing.

Aiden sucked in a breath. Fire flared within his loins and his cock hardened to a painful level. Shocked at the intensity of the desire, he stepped back from the woman. Deidre amused him, attracted and distracted him. She nor any woman or vampiress

had affected him so strongly.

Kate muttered, shifting her legs up and over. Her dress pooled around her hips and exposed the tiny lace undergarment she wore. His eyes froze upon the scrap of sheer black fabric, and he could just make out a tiny thatch of dark hair beneath.

Her scent changed from the potent human odor to something subtle yet unbelievably more tantalizing. It was a soft feminine fragrance that he could taste on the back of his tongue, causing his whole body to spasm. His body quivered uncontrollably, and Aiden did the only thing he could as carnal male lust consumed his senses.

He fled from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate's head swam and her thoughts grappled for solid ground.

*Where was she?* She lay on a soft cushion and as she opened her eyes her hazy vision focused on a room illuminated by natural light from a large window. She propped herself up on her elbows and let her eyes travel around the dusky room. Antique looking furniture artfully filled the space, and one wall was dominated by a huge gilded mirror. Kate closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to clear her muddled thoughts.

She had gone to *Sang Rouge* in the evening, but judging by the soft orange glow of light that streamed through the window the sun was rising.

*Or was it setting?* She had no way of knowing for sure as she pushed up to a sitting position and rubbed her hands over her eyes. Kate felt a little motion sick with the movement, but she forced her legs to support her as she stood. She swayed and grabbed the back of the upholstered chaise lounge, blinking rapidly as its purple and green floral pattern blurred.

She'd met Remann's twin brother, Aiden, and had joined him for a drink, though she couldn't remember beyond sitting next to him on a small sofa.

"God, what did they slip into my drink?" she asked the empty room. She held the side of her head, and walked to the window. What had happened to her last night? Obviously she wasn't in the club anymore. She pushed away the worry; she would follow any direction her search took her to find Melanie.

Outside, she realized the sun was rising over the waters of Lake Michigan after recognizing some landmarks far to the east. Reds and oranges filled the eastern sky smearing the surface of the dark grey water with their vibrancy. She lost herself in the serenity of the moment before a knock on the door brought her abruptly around. She teetered as the gentle knock sounded again.

"Yes," she said, then licked her dry lips.



The door opened and a tall figure entered through the shadows of the room. As he drew closer her gaze fixed on his odd-colored eyes. Even from a distance somehow she knew who the man was.

"Remann," she said.

"Was that a guess or can you tell us apart so easily?" he asked a broad smile crossing his face.

Kate hugged her arms against the chill of the room and wariness of the man in front of her. She shrugged.

"I have a fully stocked kitchen and a pot of tea is brewing. I've never taken to coffee," he said as he extended a hand to her. She shrank back from it, and he dropped his arm to his side.

"I'm afraid my brother keeps his quarters a little too chilly for a young woman," Remann said his deep voice slightly accented exactly as Aiden's. She didn't feel that same drunkenness as she had with Remann's twin, and her confidence began returning. Kate squared her shoulders as Remann walked to a tall dark bureau against a far wall. He pulled out a delicately knit shawl and returned to drape it over her shoulders.

"I apologize for Aiden's rudeness at leaving you like this," Remann said as she hugged the soft silvery grey yarn against her cool flesh. His gaze lingered on her face.

"The color matches your eyes beautifully."

"Is he here?" she asked, frowning at the unexpected hopeful tone in her voice.

Remann chuckled, breaking his eyes away from her own. "Isn't it enough that we look alike and have the exact genetics? We're basically clones of one another."

Kate didn't answer. Raising his hands in defeat, he led her through the house.

She tried to look casual as she searched every nook and cranny for signs of Melanie. Remann's scent filled her nostrils, a potent musk mixed with a curious spicy fragrance that tickled her senses. Not exactly the same as Aiden's, yet heady in its own way. She remained focused as she glanced into each room they passed. The home was positively huge with tall arched doorways framed with dark polished wood. Rooms stood with doors opened, each filled with priceless-looking pieces of furniture and paintings. Kate didn't know much about old things, but she recognized real quality.

They emerged from the long hallway into a huge open area with an impossibly high ceiling. Her jaw dropped as she craned her head back to study the gleaming golden tiles covering the ceiling. She twirled a lock of hair around her fingers as she studied the etchings decorating each golden tile. Kate could just make out cherubs and strange little carved creatures.

"It's incredible," she whispered. A massive crystal chandelier, at least fifteen feet across, hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. Its sparkle caught the golden glow of the tiles mixing it with the reds and oranges of the sunlight streaming through the large windows that made up one wall. Millions of tiny mystical lights filled the

room, dancing across the walls, ceiling, and floors of rich polished dark cherry.

“Yes,” Remann said as his eyes studied her awestruck face. “Sometimes I forget what true beauty is...” His voice trailed off. Kate spun in place as her eyes devoured all the magical details of the foyer.

## Chapter Five

After leaving Kate, Aiden had received a phone call from Deidre. He drove to her home. As always, she was happy to see him and made her usual advances. He pushed the vampiress away much to her confusion.

"What's the matter, gorgeous?" she asked her pale brows knitting together. She placed long slim fingers on her hips, waiting for an explanation.

"It's nothing. What was the message you wanted to give me?" he answered after he waved a hand dismissively.

"Hmm, okay. Well I've heard through the grapevine that we may have a Dissenter in our midst," she said as she took a seat on the long white sectional sofa in her living room. She watched curiously as Aiden paced the floor, his hands laced together behind his back. He paused as her words finally penetrated his thoughts.

As Aiden's *Contact*, Deidre's job in Terminus was to keep up with Dissenter activity and pass it on to her Hunters. Aiden, of course, was her favorite. She smoothed her pale blonde bob before she continued.

"A body was found mauled pretty badly. A fellow vampire found the man, and told the authorities he'd seen a large dog do the damage."

Aiden stood in the middle of the living room stroking the rough stubble of beard growth on his face. The home had the familiar smell of vanilla and sandalwood and outside in the city a horn blared loudly.

"What did he see?" Aiden asked.

Deirdre pulled a white ottoman over to her and placed her bare feet and long legs upon it. Dressed only in a short pale pink silk caftan she was the image of lounging sexuality. Behind the sectional was a blown up image of the Playboy shot of Marilyn Monroe lying naked in bed.

She straightened the hem of the sheer robe as she answered, "A tall thin young woman with dark hair, he thought in her late teens or early twenties. He didn't get to the scene in time."

"Okay, can I get to the body?"

"Sure, John just left. He's the coroner on duty today." She gave him a sweet smile and Aiden nodded. Deirdre had a collection of lovers, both vampires and vampiresses, which didn't create any ill feelings within Aiden. Having been trained in the seductive arts as a teenager she'd spent several years as a favored courtesan before being changed. Puritan ideas and restraints of sex were abstract concepts to her, which Aiden appreciated.

Aiden left Deirdre's home and drove his Mercedes to the morgue where the body was located. A short, portly, balding man greeted him warmly when he walked through the door.

"I hear you have a body for me," Aiden said as he shook the vampire's hand.

"Yes, yes, Aiden come in, come in," John said in his usual cheerful open manner as he led him into the next room. John's sunny disposition was a harsh juxtaposition to the stark white walls and gleaming silver slab tables that filled the autopsy room. They walked to a row of coolers, and he opened a small low door. The rollers of the table squeaked then made a loud hiss as he pulled the body out.

"Quite a shame, yes, quite a shame," John said shaking his head. "He was a vagrant, but certainly didn't deserve to go like this. We're searching for family now."

Aiden stared at the body dispassionately, having viewed this scene many times before. He searched for clues beyond the jagged tears in the man's throat where greedy unpracticed canines had torn into the flesh.

Closing his eyes he focused on the odor coming off the body. Disinfectant hung heavily in the air, with the smell of death and bodily fluids nearly as strong. The victim hadn't bathed in some time, and Aiden searched through the thick soured fragrance of bad personal hygiene. It was there, the slight piquant scent he was looking for and he committed it to memory.

"Thank you, John," Aiden said.

John gave him a hard pat on the back. "No problem, no problem. I'll let you know if anything turns up in autopsy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate sat on a tall stool in the gourmet kitchen nursing a tepid cup of Earl Grey tea. The bitter flavor of the tea mixed with the sweet taste of the honey she'd used to sweeten the drink.

*Where are you, Melanie?* she thought miserably as she looked around the well-equipped kitchen. Not a soul had stirred since Remann had served her tea on a sterling silver serving set before leaving. He'd told Kate to make herself at home, and to stay or leave at her choosing. An attractive perfect gentleman and host, he was too good

to be true. *And there were two of him.*

Kate placed her forehead in the hand propped against the granite island top in the middle of the kitchen. She clutched the soft shawl around her shoulders. Shining stainless steel appliances filled the state-of-the-art kitchen, reflecting the dark grey marble counter tops and natural oak cabinets. The scent of fresh baked bread filled the air, though she didn't see any around.

Kate had yet to see any blood drinking much to her relief. She could only imagine the orgy Remann had had with his entourage.

"What did you get yourself into, Melly," she said to her now cold cup of tea. She studied the sediments that had settled at the bottom of the china cup as she formed her next plan of action. She decided to do a little exploring through the old mansion, perhaps her sister had left something behind Kate would recognize. Her stomach growled loudly, echoing in the empty kitchen. Despite her lack of appetite she eyed a platter of pastries sitting at the end of the island.

"Well you need to eat something, Kate," she said as she chose a light pastry with a gooey red center. She sank her teeth into the rich sweet treat, marveling at the way it melted over her tongue.

"Wow," she said over the mouthful. It could've been baked by a skilled French chef that very morning.

"I see you enjoy my brother's cooking," a deep male voice said from behind her. Startled she turned around as the morsel in her mouth went down the wrong pipe. Kate choked as she tried to suck a breath around the lodged pastry.

In a blur of movement, he was at her side and slapped her hard on the back. Kate gagged and gripped at her throat as muscular arms encircled her waist to apply the Heimlich maneuver. She coughed and sucked down grateful gulps of air as the food dislodged. Ragged hoarse coughs wracked her body and tears filled her eyes.

"Here, drink this."

Kate accepted the offered glass of water, and she sipped it to sooth her raw throat.

"Thank you, Aiden," she said as she peered into his concerned gaze through her watering eyes. A thick dark eyebrow rose in surprise as she relaxed back into the counter clutching the shawl around her once more.

"You can tell us apart rather easily," he said. A slight smile tugged the corners of his lips.

"You're two different people," Kate said with a shrug.

Aiden regarded her for several seconds. "Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

"No, I'm fine," she said hoarsely before she sipped the water again.

"I'll have to let Remann know his cooking nearly killed someone," Aiden said still grinning. She met his odd eyes, which crinkled slightly at the corners. Aiden's

heady scent filled her head and the same sensations she'd experienced the night before began. Her flesh tingled and her thoughts began to swirl.

Kate stepped away, trying to focus on the scent of baked bread. Aiden handed her a dampened dish towel and she swiped it over her face, suddenly self-conscious about her appearance.

"I know I'm a mess," she said as she looked at her reflection in the stainless steel doors on the refrigerator. She could see mascara and eyeliner smeared down her cheeks. Her hair was a ratty tangled mess.

"I've seen worse in the mornings," Aiden said, his eyes losing some of their humor. Kate scrubbed harder at the makeup darkening her cheeks.

A trendy rock song filled the kitchen and Kate's eyes darted around as she recognized the ring tone on her cell phone.

"Here," Aiden said holding out her clutch. "You left it behind last night."

She took the purse and snatched out her cell phone.

"Hello."

Kate's hand covered her mouth. Her heart constricted and she was caught between horror and disbelief as she listened to the caller. Nausea welled up within her.

"Oh my god, was anyone hurt?" she asked her gaze flying up to Aiden's. His brows knit together.

"Okay, I'm glad everyone is okay." She flipped her phone closed and her shoulders slumped. *How is this possible?* she thought. *How much back luck can one woman take?*

"There was a fire in my apartment building. I lost everything," she said numbly, pinching the bridge of her nose. She felt woozy and wondered how she was going to handle this on top of everything else.

"I am so sorry, Kate. Really, I am truly sorry. Your insurance should cover your losses," Aiden said as he took a step in her direction.

"I was stupid and didn't take any out. I'm homeless." The stress of the last few days came crashing down over her. Melanie's disappearance followed by this apparent dead end lead. Add the strange way Aiden made her feel just being in the same room with her, and it was all too much. Her legs began to shake, and she sank to the cold floor as sobs tore from her already raw throat.

"They're just replaceable possessions, my darling," Aiden said coming to her side. He sat on the stone-tiled floor next to her. After hesitating for a moment, he pulled her into his lap. She cried harder, her whole body convulsed with the effort. Aiden hugged her tightly and rocked her gently from side to side.

"My darling, lovely Kate, it'll be alright." He stroked the tangled hair from her face, then used the end of the shawl to dry her tear-stained face. She sniffed loudly, and he picked the damp dishcloth from the floor and stroked it down her cheeks.

"Thank you," she said weakly taking the cloth from his hand. "I've just had a bad week and this is the final straw." She rubbed her gritty eyes wishing the cloth was cold. She blew her nose, then in embarrassment, balled up the terry cloth towel.

"I'm sorry, that was rude. I'll replace it," she said. Still cradled against Aiden's chest she felt the vibrations of his low chuckle.

"I don't think we'll miss it," he said, a gentle hand still stroking her hair. Against her better judgment, Kate released a pent up breath and leaned into Aiden's chest to absorb some of his solid strength.

"You're more than welcome to stay here. Remann loves having beautiful women in our home," Aiden said. He stroked a long finger down her cheek and a hot shiver spread from his light touch. Kate swallowed hard and licked her tear-moistened lips.

Aiden's gaze followed the movement, and his odd-colored eyes darkened. His nostrils flared while the muscle in his jaw worked.

"Kate," he said his voice deepening. "There is too much..."

His voice trailed off as Kate was pulled into his intense searching eyes. An aura enveloped the two of them as they fell under one another's spell.

"Aiden."

## Chapter Six

Kate wasn't sure if she'd spoken out loud as her eyes drifted to the hard set of his sensual mouth. Her head spun with his overwhelming male scent that mixed with the peculiar spicy aroma.

His mouth descended and hovered just above her own parted lips. His hot spicy breath fanned across her skin.

Electricity built within Kate's nerve endings and she tingled all over. Her muscles began to relax, as though she'd been slipped a muscle relaxer. Aiden lowered his head past her waiting lips, the coarse stubble of his cheek caressing the curve of her own, sending a hot shiver down her spine. The tip of his nose just brushed the tender flesh of her neck as he lowered her to the floor. She felt herself growing wet. Kate wanted to respond to the hot hard body covering hers, yet she could only lie motionless against the cold grey stones of the floor.

A voice cried inside her mind that something was wrong, before her thoughts swirled into a meaningless collection. She considered her helpless state for a brief moment, but the stroke of Aiden's tongue on the side of her throat quieted the buzzing voice. His frame shuddered as he balanced on muscular arms just above her. Waves of heat from him washed over her.

Kate wasn't sure she'd ever been so turned on by a man in her life. She wanted to lift her arms and pull him close, but her limbs were simply too heavy for her to move.

Aiden straightened his arms, and lifted his large body to peer deep into her eyes. After she realized he was hesitating she wanted to encourage him to continue, but found she couldn't form the words. The lights in the room dimmed. The voice of warning in her mind returned and the desperation in the words caught her attention.

*Something's wrong...*

She fought against the darkness that tugged at the corners of her vision. Aiden's body shook, his nostrils flared. A vein pulsed in his temple and the muscles worked in his jaw as he ground his teeth together. The grating sound filled her ears.



Her desire was being replaced by an emotion even more primal.

*Fear.*

“My god, brother, what’s going on here?”

Remann’s voice pierced through the thick grey fog of her thoughts. Still frozen, she watched in fascinated horror as Aiden’s lips peeled back from his white teeth exposing long sharp canines.

A terrible growl tore from his throat as he spun around to meet his brother’s shocked eyes. Aiden moved into a crouched position over her with blinding speed as a menacing growl answered from somewhere in the kitchen. A rush of wind blew over her, and as she grappled for consciousness, a loud crash shook the kitchen floor.

Darkness swallowed her.

## Chapter Seven

"I was in control," Aiden said, pacing back and forth before the huge gilded mirror in his quarters. His teeth ground together as his living reflection lounged across the room with reproach in his odd-colored eyes.

"Right, brother, another minute and she would've been drained," Remann said as he stretched an arm along the back of the antique Victorian sofa. He adjusted his position on the uncomfortable piece of furniture and frowned.

"She would've been drained long before you entered the kitchen. I was *in control*," he said, pounding a fist into his hand as he turned to Remann.

"You are so disapproving of my Feeders, yet I've learned control and no longer desire taking prey." Remann sat up straighter as Aiden leveled a heated stare upon his brother. After the tussle which had nearly destroyed the kitchen, Remann had moved Kate to a bedroom to sleep off the vampire induced coma she was in.

"That is just an excuse to use women as you see fit, Remann," Aiden said as his anger flared to life. His canines lengthened, and he pulled his lips back to expose their sharp points.

Obviously unimpressed, Remann cocked his head to the side. "Can I help it if women find me irresistible?"

"Well your enjoyment of women has back fired on you," Aiden said as he reigned himself in.

Remann's brows knit together.

"I've found Kate's sister. She's gone feral. Thanks to you, and your apparent weakness, I have to kill that poor woman's flesh and blood."

Remann's jaw dropped, and he stood in a flash of movement. The brothers had recognized Kate's scent as familiar, soon placing it to a Feeder Remann had recently released. Guessing the girl, Melanie, was Kate's sister, as they both shared the same shade of eye color and a familial scent, they'd decided to keep Kate close to see what her motives were.

"What are you accusing me of *brother*?" Remann asked spitting out the last word. "I've never changed a human and would never do so."

"Then how did I find the girl's scent mixed with vampire on a body this morning?" Aiden asked as he crossed the room to stand before his brother. The two stood squared off, neither flinching a muscle. "A girl matching Melanie's description was noticed leaving the scene."

"You're mad, Aiden," Remann said through clenched teeth, his own canines lengthened. The tension in the room was palpable as the two vampires fought to control their mounting anger.

"Did you take too much of the poor waif's blood and decide to try to cover your murder?" Aiden asked as Remann moved to within a breath of his brother. Aiden held his ground.

"I don't think so, *brother*," Remann said his hot breath fanned Aiden's face. "If the girl, Melanie, was changed it wasn't with my blood."

Seconds passed. Aiden took a step back.

"For your sake I hope that is true." Aiden stormed from the quarters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate's mind worked on her surroundings. She was lying upon the softest cloud she could imagine and beneath her heavy limbs she felt silkiness caressing her skin. She opened her eyes, blinking against the hazy light flooding her eyes. A heavy off-white lace canopy hung above her, and she took several moments, focusing on the delicate details of the fabric.

"Ah yes, yes, she's awake," a man's voice said from next to Kate. She looked in the direction of the voice to find a round ruddy face smiling down at her. "How are you, Kate?"

Kate licked her lips and swallowed. Her throat was raw and dry.

"Who are you?" she asked. She frowned at the raspy whisper.

"I'm Dr. Taber. It seems you've had a couple of fainting spells," the man said, lifting her wrist between his chubby fingers. He looked at his watch briefly then released her. "I'm a friend of Remann and Aiden. Yes, I have known them quite some time." He nodded as he adjusted a bag of fluids that led to an IV Kate realized she had in her arm.

She searched her memory and remembered being in the kitchen, and Aiden helping her when she choked. She'd sat on the floor crying, and afterwards things became fuzzy.

"I don't remember what happened," Kate said.

"Yes, I hear you've had quite a week." The doctor placed a stethoscope to her

chest and then her abdomen, asking her to take several deep breaths. He smiled and nodded, and replaced the instruments in an old fashioned black bag. "Yes, stress can do funny things to one's mind. I heard of your apartment fire. I am quite sorry, quite sorry."

With trembling fingers she rubbed her forehead and let her eyes roam over the richly patterned silk comforter of greens, golds, and greys. She lay upon golden silk sheets and after a moment realized she'd been redressed in a soft blue cotton chemise. She shook her head puzzled.

"A couple of Remann's lady friends redressed you, so no need to worry," Dr. Taber said noting her sudden concern. "No, not at all."

"So how's our patient?"

Kate peered around the doctor's stocky frame to see Remann striding into the room, smiling broadly. He came to stand next to the bed and Kate noticed a deep cut down his cheek.

"Glad to see you awake," Remann said. He shook Dr. Taber's hand. "Thanks for coming over, John."

"I'm happy to do it, happy to do it," he said as he smiled up into Remann's face. "Leave her on the IV until the fluid is gone. I trust you can remove it without causing this pretty young lady too much distress."

"Of course," Remann said studying Kate's face.

"Well I'll be off then. Good bye, miss, goodbye," Dr. Taber said, bowing his head.

Kate gave him a weak smile.

Remann brought a chair to the bedside.

"Hope you don't mind if I take advantage of your weakened state and enjoy your company," Remann said before he gave her his most dashing smile.

Kate studied his mismatched eyes as his scent flooded her nostrils. "I guess not," she said as she tried desperately to remember the events that led up to her passing out. Aiden had held her as she cried and that was all her memory could offer her.

"Well, lovely Kate, all will be well. You are more than welcome to take advantage of our hospitality in any way you desire," he said as a wicked gleam entered his eyes.

Kate felt her face flush. "Thank you." Her gaze roamed the room filled with antique furniture and paintings of a Renaissance-looking era. Even the bed, with its height from the floor, spoke of antiquity.

"Your home is so beautiful. I think I'd love to know the history of all these items," Kate said in earnest as she tried to sit up on the feather mattress. Remann was quick to help her.

"I'd absolutely love to give you a tour sometime," he said. "What would you like

for dinner? I'm sure you're starving and I'd be happy to serve you here in bed."

His words ended in a near purr and Kate didn't miss the double meaning. His mismatched eyes studied her for a reaction and she gave him a small smile.

"Whatever you're having would be fine."

Remann laughed loudly, and the sound echoed through the large chamber of the room. Kate frowned.

"Perhaps a three course gourmet meal will suit your palette," Remann said as he still chuckled with amusement. Kate made to get out of bed, but Remann placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Not until your IV is empty," he said firmly. "You are a bit dehydrated."

Kate leaned back against the high ornately carved headboard. She reminded herself that this charming man was a suspect in her sister's disappearance and probably drank human blood. She shivered screwing up her features.

"Well, my lovely Kate, it won't be too much longer," Remann said apparently misreading her look. He walked over to another chair in the room and lifted a garment bag from it.

"Here is something new for you to wear if you've tired of the other dress." He paused. "Though, I quite appreciated the cut of the other." He laid it across the foot of the bed before he bowed and left her alone to her thoughts.

Kate drummed her fingers on the silky comforter. She hadn't done much in the way of investigative work. Remann definitely wasn't the Goth weirdo she'd imagined him to be. Instead he seemed a cultured, educated man.

*And Aiden.* The image of the man filled her mind and her body tingled in response as a hot chill raced over her flesh. It was strange to her how he and Remann looked exactly the same, yet Remann's presence didn't cause her heart to flutter as the sight of his twin did. She wondered where Aiden was, maybe he'd gotten scared off by her sudden show of emotion. Kate frowned, the idea of not seeing him again tugged at her chest, leaving her feeling anxious.

There was a knock at the door. Kate's heart quickened.

"Come in," she called out.

## Chapter Eight

Aiden strode into the bedchamber and focused on the tiny form nearly swallowed by the large bed and lavish bed clothes.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as he approached.

"A little shaky," she said. Her hand stroked her thigh hidden beneath the silky comforter that bunched around her lower body.

"The IV is empty." He smiled as he sat at the edge of the bed. "If you'll allow me, I'll remove it."

Kate nodded, her eyes fixed on his and lingered in the moment, before he blinked and took her hand into his large palm. His long strong fingers closed around hers and a thrill raced up her arm.

"I'll be gentle and try not to hurt you," he said as he gently pulled the surgical tape from where the IV entered the top of her wrist.

Kate's breath caught in her throat as she imagined a double meaning to his softly spoken words. She didn't feel the needle as he pulled it from her vein, being distracted by the heat of his palm. She absorbed the warmth from his touch and felt it follow her veins back to her heart.

Aiden sucked in a harsh breath and released her hand.

Kate brought her gaze to his face. His features were drawn tight as he stared at her released hand. A tiny bead of blood had formed from the wound of the needle. She felt her stomach grow woozy. She covered the blood with the piece of gauze that had covered the entry spot for the IV.

"I hate blood, too," she said, trying to ease the strain she saw in Aiden's features. He sucked down several deep breaths, his eyes shut tight. Kate tentatively reached her good hand to his jaw, letting her fingers stroke the smooth planes of his freshly shaven cheek. Her touch made Aiden's body stiffen, but he didn't pull away. He reached for her hand and returned her feather light touch.

"My darling Kate." His eyes were still closed. Kate's hand fell to his chest clothed

beneath a tailored navy blue shirt, his heart beating a rapid staccato beneath her palm. He placed a hand over hers.

"You don't know the person I am," he said.

"You're Aiden," Kate said breathlessly.

The statement was so simple and yet held so much meaning for Aiden. He knew he should leave Kate for good, but her beauty and her unexpected affect on his senses left him helpless. His skin burned beneath her touch as her hand lay over his heart. Even as his predatory instincts had kicked in at the smell of the blood beading on her hand, a carnal desire had pulsed through his veins. Aiden ran his tongue over his extended canines hidden beneath his lips.

*Just one taste.*

His desire to feed mixed with the raw lust filling his body. It created a dizzying sensation. Even with closed eyes, his lips instinctively found Kate's. Her body swayed and he took hold of her shoulders as she surrendered to the light touch of his lips. Her sweet breath filled his mouth as he traced his tongue over the full curve of her parted lips. Her pulse beat loudly in his ears, the blood in her veins singing an intoxicating song to him, even as his cock hardened to a painful level. He paused tasting her sweet breath on his tongue.

Aiden wanted her. He wanted to taste her, share a physical experience with Kate that would surely rock them both to the core. At the same time his head swam at the draw her long delicate throat presented, and he placed his hand gently upon her neck, feeling the pulse of her jugular vein beneath his palm. Kate's body grew limp, her reaction to his predatory state. Disappointment filled his heart and he pulled away as he realized his true affect on Kate. He couldn't take advantage of a drugged woman.

He sat back and allowed her body to slump against the carved headboard of the bed.

"Aiden?"

Kate's soft voice was but a whisper as she said his name, but Aiden couldn't have been more shocked if she'd screamed the word. She lifted a trembling hand to his fingers that still curved around her narrow shoulder.

"Unbelievable," Aiden said as he closed his hand around Kate's. "This isn't possible."

Kate should've been nearly catatonic at this point as she'd succumbed to his pheromones. There was such a fine line when keeping his hunting instinct and sex drive separate. One went hand-in-hand with the other when it came to a human, and it took a good deal of practice to keep them apart. He'd heard stories of vampire and humans who'd formed emotional bonds that overcame the prey drive, but that certainly didn't apply to them.

He shook his head in confusion.

"What's..." Kate swallowed. "Is something wrong?"

Kate had felt herself falling under Aiden's spell and, as white hot desire pooled low in her body, she struggled to keep her mind from drifting away. Something within Aiden tugged at her in a way she couldn't describe, something that was beyond the physical. She clung to it like a life raft for her drowning senses. Her body was alive with him even as her strange reaction to him made her feel sluggish. She'd never known such feelings with another man.

"My darling, you have no idea," Aiden said, his voice deep and thick, as he clasped her hand between his own. He brought her hand to his lips, kissing the top of it gently before he rose from the bed.

Kate's eyes drifted down and widened at the way his cock strained against his black cotton slacks. Her eyes darted back to his still closed eyes and his clenched jaw.

"There are too many things that stand between the two of us. Things that would be too difficult for you to understand." Aiden turned and strode from the room leaving Kate to her mounting frustration.

It took her several minutes to regain her senses, and at last she rose to get dressed. The dress was a silvery grey sheath that probably had a big designer price tag and fit Kate's curves as if it had been made for her. The dress reminded her of the one she'd worn to Sang Rouge, and sadness brought the threat of tears to her eyes. All of her things were ash that had most likely been scooped up and dumped into a trash bin.

She padded through the huge mansion in soft slippers of a matching color studded with what she hoped were clear rhinestones. Nervously, she searched room after room and listened for any sound that might lead to discovery. Not one trace of her sister could be found and she thought sadly of Melanie, feeling as if she'd never see her beautiful and innocent sister again. She set her jaw, perhaps she'd just come out and confront Remann; he didn't seem dangerous. At this point she doubted that he really drank blood as Melanie had written in her diary, maybe he just liked Bloody Marys.

Her stomach growled loudly, and Kate decided to see if dinner was available. She walked into the foyer and was again distracted by the room's opulence. The crystal chandelier was lit and its crystal reflections dazzled her eyes as she studied the golden tiled ceilings. The home was really more of a medieval castle in style. She studied some rich old tapestries behind protective glass that decorated the walls. Their colors were still vibrant detailing scenes of women and mounted knights, running stags and dark forests. Each told a story and Kate could imagine the fairy tale behind each piece of art.

She felt a presence in the room and turned.

"I see you appreciate fine art," Remann said as always beaming a broad white smile. Kate's face flushed and she felt as if she'd been caught doing something suspicious. He crossed the distance that separated them.

"These are Renaissance tapestries from the early sixteen hundreds, an era when



they were at their richest and most expressive.” Remann waved a hand toward the tapestry she had been studying. There was a note of pride in his voice over the collection.

“They must have cost a fortune,” Kate said as she let her eyes scan the other five hanging in the foyer.

Remann laughed loudly, the sound bounced off the walls of the room.

“You just have to catch things in the right markets.”

He offered his elbow and Kate took it hesitantly. He led her to a small study that had a dining table set up in the center of the room. A white lace tablecloth adorned a dark wood table with matching chairs sitting at opposite ends. It was just large enough for two people with several candles lit within crystal votives. A cart with silver-covered dishes sat next to the table, the aroma of food making Kate’s mouth water. The low lighting of the study mixed with the candlelight had her cocking a brow.

“I sincerely hope you’ll allow me to join you for dinner, my lovely Kate,” Remann said.

Kate crossed her arms, feeling uncomfortable with the intimacy of the room.

“I promise to be a perfect gentleman in every way,” he said. He walked to the table pulling a chair out and Kate walked to it.

She’d never had a chair pulled out for her and awkwardly took a seat. She took an embroidered napkin folded on a fine china plate and laid it across her lap, then looked warily over the forks lined up to the left of the plate.

“The trick is to start from the outside and work your way in,” he said in a hushed voice as he served her a crisp green salad with cranberries and walnuts. Remann drizzled a light vinaigrette dressing over the greens before serving himself. He filled their wine glasses with a deep red wine and took a seat. He unfolded his napkin and laid it across his lap.

Kate sipped the wine in an effort to calm her nervousness. She wasn’t particularly fond of red wine but found the flavor was quite good. She took a deeper drink as Remann lifted his own glass in a toast.

“To my lovely dinner mate, Kate,” he said before placing the glass to his own lips.

Kate watched him, wondering what it’d be like to share a romantic dinner with Aiden.

## Chapter Nine

*Where was he tonight?* She picked up the fork farthest from her plate as Remann had instructed and speared a piece of arugula. The sweet dressing took away some of the bitterness of the green and was tasty. Her stomach growled loudly, and she shifted in embarrassment.

"So what brought you to me?" Remann asked before he took a bite of salad.

Kate studied her food, trying to think of a believable response.

"I heard some girls talking about you at a day spa. I was curious," she said, shrugging. Kate speared a big bite of walnuts and arugula and shoved it into her mouth.

"Well I sincerely hope they spoke of only good things," Remann said. Kate chewed her food slowly. "I hope you'll satisfy my curiosity when I ask what they said exactly."

There was something beneath his words that made Kate squirm uncomfortably in her chair.

"Um, just that you were a popular lady's man. So where are your lady friends this evening?" she asked, deciding to ask the questions for a while.

Remann sat back and savored his glass of wine. "Most likely in their homes living their usual lives," he answered, his odd-colored eyes glued to hers. She found herself again shifting in her chair. "So tell me about yourself, Kate."

"Not much to tell, I'm just your average woman," she said before she took a big drink of the wine. She felt its affects at last.

"I don't even know your last name," Remann said.

"It's Smith," Kate lied.

Remann seemed to mull over her answer.

"So, Miss Smith," he said pausing. "I can assume it is *Miss*, correct?"

Kate nodded and shoved the last of the salad into her mouth. Remann rose from his seat and cleared the table. After he refilled both their wine glasses he lifted the silver

cover of the main course. The aroma had her mouth watering.

"Pork loin roast with pomegranate sauce," he said as he sliced a good portion onto a plate and set it before her.

"Thank you," Kate said wanting to dive into the juicy looking meat. She hadn't had a good meal in two days. It was interesting having a man wait on her like Remann was doing. She couldn't imagine any of her former boyfriends doing so.

"How long have you lived in this mansion?" she asked before she placed a piece of roast into her mouth. It nearly melted over her tongue and she groaned in pleasure.

Remann smiled brightly. "I'm glad you're enjoying my cooking," he said happily. "We've lived here for many years. Are you a native of Chicago?"

Kate took a very unladylike mouthful of her dinner. She shook her head.

"Missouri actually," she said over the bite.

Remann sat back in his chair his meal untouched. His eyes glittered. He took a deep breath before he brought his wine glass to his lips. "Interesting. So tell me how it is you tell my brother and me apart so easily."

Kate paused before she brought another bite to her mouth.

"Like I told Aiden, you're just different people." She lay the fork down onto her plate and took her wine glass. "So where is he this evening?" she asked as she brought the wine to her lips.

Remann's face fell perceptibly, but was quick to recover his ever present smile.

"I'd say he's out on the town." He paused. "Or with Deidre for the night, I suspect."

Kate's hand trembled, the wine sloshed a bit in her glass. She quickly set it down as her appetite fled. She desperately wished for her running shoes which were most likely a pile of melted rubber and ashes.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay here until I find something of my own. I won't impose on you too long, just a couple of days." Kate looked around the room searching absently for the exit as her fingers wound in her hair.

Remann cocked his head to the side watching her intently.

"Please relax, Kate," he said. "I don't bite, not unless provoked anyway." His tone was teasing, but Kate wanted an escape. She placed her napkin next to her plate and rose from her seat. Remann immediately stood.

"I apologize if I've upset you, Kate" he said. A look of concern crossed his features; his mismatched eyes mirrored his anxiety.

"No, you're okay, I just remembered I have calls to make," Kate said as he came around the small table. "About my apartment fire and all."

Remann's look said he wasn't buying her excuse but he didn't push the issue.

"Well I hope you'll take the room that you were in earlier. Please, accept our hospitality and stay as long as you need. An army could fit in this massive home and

we'd never know their whereabouts."

Kate thanked him and nearly ran back to the hallway of rooms. After several tries she finally found the right bedroom and burst through the doorway. A painful lump lodged in her throat as she searched for her cell phone. After she collected herself she placed a call just as a soft knock sounded at her door.

"Hi, Mom and Danny, nothing new to report but I'm still looking into it. I'm fine but I had an apartment fire and am staying at a friend's for now. I'm okay and was out at the time. Call me on my cell. Love you guys."

She realized her mother and stepfather were most likely at church as she left the message on their voicemail. She opened the door and found the cart of food with the bottle of wine sitting outside the door. Kate searched the hallway, but it stood empty.

She pushed the cart into the bedroom and poured wine into a glass filling it to the top. After tilting her head back and downing the entire glass of tart liquid, she refilled the glass and examined the items on the cart. The roast remained along with a chocolate mousse that was too tempting to pass up. Taking the chilled bowl, a spoon, and her glass of wine back to her bed, she set the glass on the nightstand and scooped a spoonful of the light fluffy chocolate into her mouth. The dark chocolate had a hint of orange liquor and it melted over her tongue in an explosion of taste.

"Oh god, this is amazing," Kate said. She shoveled the mousse into her mouth. Setting the empty bowl on the nightstand she sank back into her silk-covered cloud quickly falling fast asleep.

Darkness filled the bedroom in which Kate slept soundly. A figure emerged from the shadows and approached the side of the bed and mismatched eyes roamed over the figure beneath the thick silk comforter. The figure shifted ever so slightly and inhaled deeply the soft feminine fragrance that mixed with her enticing human odor. Sharp canines lengthened and the dark figure stood trembling with a mix of hunger and raw lust.

Yet something else mixed in his blood, something that tugged at his heart. An emotion that was both intriguing and terrifying swirled around within him, leaving him confused and vulnerable. He was helpless to the feeling and as he quietly slipped from the room a name whispered from her peaceful ruby lips.

"Aiden."

The name tore into him like a jagged knife to his heart.

## Chapter Ten

Kate awoke feeling rested despite a dull headache the red wine had left behind. She stretched her limbs and wondered at what point in the night she'd removed her dress. As she yawned, the smell of the food on the dinner cart filled her nostrils and her stomach growled. Kate needed a shower desperately and she remembered the bathroom she'd been shown just a few rooms down. Her dress lay neatly at the foot of the bed and she slipped it over her head before she padded down the hall. Finding towels and toiletries she walked into the oversized shower and adjusted the spray. Hot water washed over her, easing the dull throb of her headache.

Feeling human again Kate wrapped a big fluffy pale blue towel around her body and went back to her room. The dinner cart had been removed and in its place was a tray with orange juice, fresh fruit, and pastries. There was also a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with a pair of white lacy panties and matching bra lying on the bed. She dressed, happy to have more reasonable clothes to wear, and enjoyed the breakfast she'd been provided.

"Remann, no doubt," she said to herself.

She had to find Melanie. Kate felt guilty over the days she'd already lost and decided to search the other wing of the mansion.

After she put on the slippers from the day before, she padded silently down the hallway, through the opulent foyer, and down a long dark hallway she had yet to explore. Paintings of men and women dressed in medieval clothing hung upon the walls and Kate felt herself drawn to them. One in particular brought her to a halt. A tall brooding man towered within the painting, seeming ready to step from within its aged colors. He had dark hair and a broad stout physique. What had her attention were the eyes of the man, one a blue shade and the other dark. She tangled her hair between her fingers as she studied the painting closely.

"Uncanny resemblance don't you think?"

Kate let out a little squeal as she spun around. A blonde stood in the hallway.

Kate felt her face flush crimson in guilt. She fell speechless at being caught snooping. The woman walked toward her, the gentle swell of her hips swaying side to side. A smile curved her lips. She wore a short mini skirt and a top that hugged her full breasts. She made walking in four-inch stilettos look effortless.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she said. She came to stand next to Kate. The blonde's eyes moved over the painting before they settled on Kate's face. She studied her features and Kate squirmed inwardly. After a moment she cocked her head to the side.

"You must be Kate Smith," she said at last. She extended a hand. Her handshake was firm and her grip lingered on Kate's hand. The woman's scent was a soft floral mixed with vanilla and something that was piquant and familiar. *And appealing.* Kate became more uncomfortable as her body stirred at the woman's nearness. She'd never felt an attraction for a woman.

The woman's hand loosened on Kate's and she let her fingertips trace a tantalizing trail down Kate's palm until just the tips of their fingers touched. Kate moistened her lips. The woman watched the movement of Kate's tongue before her eyes focused on her throat. Her delicate nostrils flared slightly as Kate swallowed.

"I'm Deidra by the way." The name struck a familiar cord, but Kate found herself pulled into an odd spell the woman was casting over her. Her fingers tingled as their fingertips touched. Deidra lifted a hand to stroke Kate's hair back from her shoulder. Her hand moved to Kate's throat, her fingers leaving a fiery trail down her flesh.

"Kate, you are positively gorgeous," Deidre said bringing her gaze back to Kate's. Her eyes were a swirling blend of blues and greens and slanted slightly giving her a catlike look. "I can certainly see their fascination with you."

Kate's thoughts tumbled as Deidre stepped closer.

"It's been so long since I've been with one of your kind," she said as she lowered her head and inhaled. Her mouth came to rest a mere breath away from the side of Kate's throat, and she felt the woman's hot breath on her equally heated flesh.

"Gorgeous Kate, tell me..." Deidre paused and brought the fingers that rested on Kate's throat down to lightly graze Kate's breast. Her body instantly responded and she felt herself growing wet. Kate's breathing became shallow gasps as her lids drifted close.

"Tell me, have you ever been pleased by a woman? Have you ever had a woman's name on your lips as she brought you to orgasm?" The words were a hot breath on Kate's neck, and her whole body shuddered as Deidre's soft and pungent scent filled her head. The world began swimming as Deidre traced light fingertips around Kate's hardened nipple.

"Deidre." The voice was stern and authoritative, somewhat piercing the fog in Kate's mind. She swayed on her feet, and leaned against the wall, sucking in breaths of

cool air.

"What is this?" the male voice demanded. Kate realized it was Aiden and her heart tripped up. Her eyes tried to focus on the tall dark form that towered over Deidre. A soft feminine chuckle echoed down the hallway.

"I happen to know from experience that you like to watch, Aiden," she said.

Aiden growled and his fists clenched at his sides.

"Get out, Deirdre," he said.

She shook her head not in the least cowed by his demeanor.

"It's more than..." Deirdre paused and tilted her head to the side. "Her body that you want I'm afraid."

She turned to Kate.

"Good bye, my gorgeous Kate. Don't let this man give you the run around." She winked and then was gone. Aiden came to her side and examined her closely. His hands steadied her trembling shoulders. She felt both woozy and embarrassed.

"I don't know what came over me," she said her voice sounding small in the expansive hallway.

"Deirdre has that affect on people," Aiden said as his thumbs stroked along her collarbones.

"Deirdre, now I remember," Kate said. She tilted her chin and forced her legs to hold her better. "She's your lover, right?"

The question caught Aiden off guard.

"Yes, from time to time."

"She's very...well I'm straight and I was ready to do her I think," Kate said. Aiden's hands tightened ever so slightly and a muscle ticked in his strong jaw.

"She won't be back. Let's go have some lunch." He put an arm around her shoulders and guided her back the way she'd come. Kate cursed inwardly, frustrated by the interruption to her investigation.

*Melanie, please be all right. I don't know what I'll do otherwise.* Her head began to ache and her shoulders slumped in defeat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melanie curled beneath the rug she'd found on the grimy floor of the room she was trapped in. She couldn't recall how she'd gotten there or where her clothes had gone, but she'd been there for quite some time. It was so cold, especially when nighttime fell. Old yellow discolored windows high overhead were the only way she had of judging the time. Her last memory was of hanging out with her friend, Sarah, at the other girl's apartment. Now, she was here.

A couple of bottles of water and a box of granola bars kept her alive day after

day, but the supplies were running low. Melanie said a silent prayer as she huddled beneath her filthy makeshift blanket that smelled of mouse pee. It had been the home of too many creepy crawlies.

"I finally have the money for that trip to Hawaii we've planned since I was thirteen," Melanie said to fill the empty space of the room. It was the same conversation she'd held with herself each day, trying in vain to keep the loneliness and fear away.

Remann had given her a tidy sum upon her release, enough for her to pay for college and go on vacation with her sister. Tears stung her eyes and Melanie sniffed loudly before she rubbed her nose with her dirty arm. Her long thin limbs were barely covered by the rug regardless of how small she tried to make her body. She was beginning to forget what being warm felt like. Dressed only in her bra and underwear she curled tighter into her ball.

"Katie, please find me," Melanie said as hot tears flooded down her cheeks. Night would fall soon.



## Chapter Eleven

Kate finished her sandwich as Aiden sat next to her at the island. A heavy silence hung in the air that neither was willing to break. She still felt awkward at the position Aiden had caught her in earlier, and she certainly hoped the man hadn't lost respect for her. She sipped her sweet tea and let her gaze roam over Aiden's chiseled features. He was so overtly masculine, and Kate felt a surge of jealousy at the idea of Deidre's hands all over him.

"I guess I'll go out this afternoon and look for a new apartment," she said. She picked at a string on the soft grey linen napkin that lay in her lap.

Aiden let out a breath. "Would you like a ride into the city?"

The rumble of his deep voice sent a hot shiver down her spine.

"I don't want to trouble you. I'll call a taxi."

Aiden's leg bounced up and down on its perch on the stool rung. "I insist. Cabs can be dangerous in the city."

Not wanting to argue, Kate decided to retrieve her cell phone where she could pull up the internet. She hadn't seen a computer in sight in the mansion and felt it would've been an obscenity in such a home.

"Whatever you want to do." She put her plate in the dishwasher and headed toward her room. Walking inside she shut the door softly somewhat disappointed that Aiden had remained seated at the island. Kate sat on the huge bed, sinking into the silk coverlet. She folded her legs and started searching for rent ads online.

A soft tap at the door had her heart lurching before it began a rapid staccato.

"Yes?" she said. "Come in."

Aiden stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. He walked to her and gently took the phone from her hand.

"We shouldn't do this, my darling Kate." Aiden's voice was raw as he stared into the smoky depths of Kate's wide eyes. She was impossibly irresistible and he felt jealousy shoot through him at the intimate way Deidre had touched her earlier.

Kate's breathing became shallow as Aiden willed away his vampiric attraction. He wanted her to be responding only to him.

She swallowed. "Do what?"

He couldn't help but grin at her feigned innocence and he allowed his hand to rest loosely on her throat.

"It can be a bit dangerous with a man in my condition," he said. A puzzled expression crossed her lovely face as he brought his lips to hers. She hesitated, but only a moment before she crushed her lips to his, rising on her knees to wrap her arms around his neck. Aiden groaned as his cock grew rock hard and Kate's body grew soft.

His hand slid down to her breast and he massaged it, his thumb stroking her pebbled nipple. Kate groaned, and her head fell back to expose the pale delicate flesh of her throat. Aiden's heart quickened. The sound of her rapid heartbeat was loud in his ears. He fought his hunting instinct, and forced it into submission.

"Aiden, please," Kate said in a ragged whisper.

His hands cupped her backside then one slid between her thighs to stroke her pussy. He could feel her growing damp through the denim fabric. He wanted to taste her. Aiden pulled her T-shirt over her head before he discarded his own shirt. He brought his mouth to her breast, sucking hard on her nipple as the pad of his thumb teased the other.

Kate pushed him away, getting off the bed. She got down on her knees before him, undoing the catch on his slacks. Aiden weaved his fingers within Kate's thick locks as she slid his cock out. He groaned as she licked the pre-cum from the tip before she ran her tongue all along its length.

"Oh, Kate, my darling Kate."

She pushed his slacks down and he kicked his shoes off. Kate stroked his shaft as her tongue did wicked things to him.

"If you don't stop, I'm going to come," he said pulling her up.

Kate discarded her jeans and stood before him dressed only in a white lace bra and matching panties. She was the most desirable woman he'd ever beheld.

"I have to taste you," Aiden said. He pushed her back against the bed. Reaching around, he unhooked her bra allowing her luscious breasts to tumble free. He kissed the top of each as his hands slid the lacy fabric of the panties over her hips. His hot tongue licked each nipple, drawing a whimper from Kate. He dropped to his knees and guided her thighs apart. As she leaned against the bed Aiden's tongue stroked the thin strip of hair leading to her slit. He slid his tongue within her.

Kate was sure she was dying. Aiden held her firm even as his tongue shot out to stroke her wet slit. Her head fell back and she gasped as her legs grew weak. His tongue then slipped between her folds and Kate wound her fingers within his dark thick hair. The tip of his tongue teased her swollen clit and her legs shook beneath his supporting

grip. Her ragged breaths filled the room as did her moans.

"Oh god, Aiden, I can't take this," she said. She felt dizzy as pleasure mounted within her.

Aiden stood and grasped her around the waist as her legs gave out.

"I want your beautiful pussy riding my face." He lay down on the soft coverlet pulling Kate with him.

"Let's sixty-nine instead." Kate turned her body bringing her thighs around to straddle his face. Grabbing his thick cock she stroked him as he pulled her body down to his waiting mouth. Her mouth covered his cock and sucked hard as his tongue played within her wet folds. It was a race to see who could push who over the edge.

It was Kate. Her hungry mouth moved up and down over his cock as the waves built within her. She moved faster and harder, needing to share with him the waves of pleasure overcoming her. He gripped her hips hard, his fingers biting into her tender flesh as his mouth devoured her. Aiden's tongue thrust deeper and harder within her and she crested the waves. Throwing her head back she screamed his name as the orgasm overtook her.

Aiden rolled her over to her back and quickly covered her, parting her thighs. As Kate wrapped her legs around his waist he thrust hard into her tight hole. She bucked beneath him. He drove her on as his own need mounted higher and higher. Aiden wanted to hear her scream again and feel her pussy tighten and spasm around his cock. He ground his teeth together fighting back his own orgasm. Kate sucked in a deep breath and her nails dug into his back.

Then she cried his name, and her entire body shuddered with her orgasm. Unable to restrain himself further his own climax overcame him. He cried out as his body convulsed with the power of his release.

## Chapter Twelve

For several long minutes they lay entwined as their breaths slowed. Finally Kate stirred.

"Crap," she said. She sighed deeply and brought a hand to rub her forehead.

"What is it, my darling?" Aiden asked as he drifted in bliss.

"I'm not on the pill or anything."

Aiden came to attention. As he'd lain within her arms he'd found himself forgetting his true nature, forgetting that she was merely prey to his kind and he a real danger to her. He'd even imagined a future with Kate. Her worried words brought him crashing to reality.

"Kate." He sighed. What if she wanted children someday? Why was this even a concern with him?

"Kate, I'm sterile."

Silence hung thickly in the air for several long seconds.

"Oh."

It was a simple word said without inflection, yet Aiden analyzed it over and over. Kate's breathing soon slowed as she drifted to sleep. He watched fascinated by the way her lips were slightly parted with her breath, her eyelids fluttering as a dream danced before her mind's eye. He didn't sleep, as vampires had no need to do so. A feeling washed over him, something as gentle and pleasing as it was strong and terrifying.

He'd fallen in love with Kate, something that was an impossibility for the both of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate awoke with a start. It took several long moments for her to realize what had brought her from sleep. Another jarring vibration echoed through the bedchamber, and

she realized it was thunder. Lightning flashed through the dim room as she rubbed her dry, gritty eyes. She yawned and searched the room.

No Aiden.

She sat up as disappointment filled her. Kate suddenly felt very alone. She knew, beyond a doubt, that she'd fallen in love with Aiden.

She was going to be hurt badly by this.

And she still had to find her sister.

Kate crawled out of bed and walked to the window, and the cool air of the room brought goose pimples to her naked skin. A heavy grey mist obscured the lake beyond and several more rumbles of thunder reflected her mood perfectly. She felt raw and sore in both her body and her heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Perhaps, my brother, you should tell Kate the truth." Remann lounged on a black leather couch in his quarters. He sipped a scotch as he eyed his brother. "As we both know, love between human and vampire is destined to fail. In a bloody fashion, most likely."

Aiden snorted.

"I never said a word about love, Remann."

Remann laughed loudly.

"Come now, it's written all over your face. Judging by the sounds coming from Kate's bedchamber earlier..." Remann paused as Aiden tensed. "I'd say it's been consummated."

Aiden paced back and forth his hands clutched behind his back. His gaze remained fixed to the hardwood floor.

"How was it with our lovely Kate? I've forgotten what a human woman is like."

Aiden ignored Remann's question.

"Perhaps you should pay a visit to Deirdre. She will be a healthy distraction for you."

Aiden stopped and faced his twin.

"Why is it your concern, Remann?"

His brother gave a casual shrug followed by a big sigh.

"Are you such a monster that you can lay with a woman and kill her sister all in one day?"

Aiden whirled on his brother, canines bared.

"You brought this down on Kate. Remember that, Remann."

Remann was on his feet in an instant. He curled his lips back as his canines lengthened.

*"I did no such thing, my brother."* Remann's words were carefully measured.

The tension was palpable in the room. Aiden's body trembled as he held his temper in check. He sized up his twin. Remann squared his body, not giving an inch.

"As expected I am here to clean up your mess. You've always been too irresponsible, Remann. Your lifestyle disgusts me."

Remann's fist clenched at his sides.

"Again..." He sucked in a deep breath. "I am not fucking a woman and killing her sister all in the same day, my brother. You judge me? Kate has no idea what is happening, what it is we are, or what has happened with her sister. A woman like Kate deserves the truth."

Aiden's eyes narrowed. "Could it be that you have feelings for her as well?"

Remann's fists relaxed a hair.

"If Kate were mine, I'd certainly tell her all she needs to know," Remann said. *"Before I made love to her."*

Aiden rolled his eyes.

"You're so cavalier? No, you're much too selfish."

"Perhaps I will tell her then, after I seduce her myself, of course. I'd certainly pleasure her in ways you wouldn't know how."

Aiden's body impacting Remann's was thunderous as the room vibrated from the storm outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melanie shivered beneath the old dirty rug as the storm raged outside. She'd always been nervous when it came to storms, and here she was all alone in the dark. Coughs racked her body and echoed through the small empty room. Her teeth chattered and Melanie was sure she had a fever.

"Please, God, I know you're listening. Tell my sister where I am."

Thunder jarred the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate stepped from the shower feeling more energized and determined to find her sister. Her gut told her that somehow she'd find her by the end of the night, though she wasn't sure how. Feeling more positive than she had in days, she wrapped a big towel around her body and headed to her room. A shadow appeared from her doorway and Kate stopped, her heart skipping several beats.

"Kate, we must talk."

It was Remann. Disappointment flooded through her.

"Okay, let me dress first."

"There isn't much time, hurry."

The urgency in Remann's tone made a thrill of fear spread through her.

"What's happened? Is it Aiden?"

As she approached Remann she saw several open wounds on his face and neck.

"Oh my god, Remann, what happened?"

"It's nothing to worry yourself over, my lovely Kate. It will heal within the hour."

She shook her head, confused.

"Just give me a minute."

She shut the door to the bedroom and threw on her clothes as quickly as she could. Kate opened the door.

"There is something you need to know." Remann said, turning to her. "Several things, actually."

Fear welled up stronger within her.

"First, we are not who we seem to be. Please be open minded with what I am about to tell you. Can you promise me that?"

Kate nodded and swallowed hard. She tangled her wet hair around her fingers. Water ran down her arm.

"Aiden and I, we are vampires. I know that may sound like madness to you, but unfortunately it is true. We were born to a noble family in the Middle Ages. We were changed by a vampiress and spared the death of the plague."

Kate's mouth fell open.

"Aiden is a Hunter in the Order of Terminus. It is a society that protects both humans and vampires. It is how we keep our secret."

Kate was speechless. Disbelief and abject curiosity warred within her mind.

"Please understand I meant no harm when it came to your sister."

She sucked in a hard breath and her fist clenched around her damp hair.

"What has happened to Melanie, Remann?" Her kept her tone was low, even, and *deadly*.

Remann took a step back, bringing up a hand as Kate squared her body to his. She took a step toward him.

"I released her with a healthy monetary compensation for her time. No harm had come to the girl. Somehow, after her release, she was..." Remann brought a hand to his forehead, shaking his head.

"I don't know what happened only that she was changed. Melanie is now a feral vampire, a Dissenter as we call them. She is indiscriminately attacking humans. This is a threat to both your kind and mine. Please, understand. Aiden is only doing his job."

Kate's stomach fell to the floor.

"What job?"

"He has to destroy her, Kate, before she can reveal our kind's existence."

The world swam before her and shudders wracked her body. She feared another fainting spell as her legs grew weak. Remann's hands came to her shoulders, catching her before she collapsed.

It was too horrible to be true. Yet, it was so horrible it *had* to be true.

Even as her heart cried out for Aiden, she hated him. She hated Remann, even as he pulled her close, stroking a hand down her damp hair and back.

"We've known almost from the beginning why it is you came to me. I am so very sorry, my lovely darling Kate. Words cannot express my regret."

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she gathered her strength.

"None of this is making sense, but if you can get me to my sister and Aiden please take me."

There was a softening in Remann's odd-colored eyes. Something she'd seen in Aiden's as he'd made love to her. Remann brushed her tears away as his gaze roamed her face.

"We need to hurry," he said.



## Chapter Thirteen

Aiden's quarry hadn't put up much of a fight. Other than a few deep gashes, which would heal perfectly within the hour, it was a quick kill. A large bonfire burned next to the old warehouse his informant had directed him to. He tried to push away the thoughts of Kate as he prepared to toss the body into the flames. The girl, Melanie, hadn't been quite as he remembered, but Remann had so many young women coming and going.

Anger flashed through him and he balled his fists at his sides.

"Damn you, Remann."

"No!" A high pitched wail caught Aiden off guard. Too lost in thought he hadn't even heard the SUV arrive. He whirled and fell into an aggressive crouch, instinctively flashing his sharp canines in a threat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Melanie was sure she'd heard voices outside. Her fevered mind had her dreaming all sorts of scary things, but she felt this was real. She pushed herself up to listen, her teeth chattered loudly. A woman screamed just outside.

"Katie?" Melanie felt renewed strength.

A large old rusty wrench lay near her. She grabbed it and stumbled to her feet, swaying. Placing a steadying hand on a wall, it was all she could do but lift the heavy piece of iron. She sucked in a deep breath and said a silent prayer.

Melanie's gaze moved up and focused on the discolored glass above her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aiden was dumbstruck as he watched Kate run toward him. Remann came around the SUV and his gaze locked heatedly on his twin. Remann ignored him, his

eyes on Kate.

"What have you done?" Kate said her eyes wide in anguish. Her gaze fell to his bared canines for just a moment. She dropped to her knees beside the bloodied girl. A hysterical laugh tore from her throat, more terrible than the awful sobs from before, and Aiden held his breath.

"It's not her. It's not Melanie. It's her clothes, but it's not her."

The sound of shattering glass brought them both upright. An old rusty tool dropped to the ground several yards away.

"It's Melanie, I know it is!"

Kate took off at a run for the nearest door, with Aiden and Remann close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate was sure she'd never been so exhausted in her life. An absolute bone tiredness left her trembling and aching. A dull headache pounded in her temples, and her eyes were swollen and gritty. Nausea welled up inside her as Aiden helped her into the passenger seat of his Mercedes.

Melanie suffered from exposure, dehydration, malnutrition, and pneumonia. She was a fighter, though, and the doctors said she was stable. They believed she would make a full recovery thanks to her rescuers. When questioned by authorities, Kate hadn't hesitated in telling them she'd received an anonymous tip from a caller about Melanie's whereabouts. They seemed skeptical, but Kate guessed they didn't want to waste man hours pursuing the matter further. Until Melanie was strong enough to give a statement they were willing to let things rest. Kate was sure she could convince her sister to keep the secret.

Reluctantly, she'd left her sister's side at the insistence of her mother and stepfather who felt she needed a night in the hospital as well.

"Honey, you look as if you'll drop at any moment." Her mother had worried over her. Her stepfather had questioned Aiden and Remann for nearly an hour before he was satisfied his stepdaughter was in safe hands with them.

Aiden came to the conclusion that Melanie's feral friend hadn't had the heart to kill Melanie, and perhaps had hoped to change her. He could only assume she'd worn Melanie's clothes to throw investigators off her own trail. Unfortunately, that truth would remain a mystery along with who had changed the girl.

It was noon and the sun had at last pierced through the heavy grey mist that boiled off Lake Michigan. The sunlight stung Kate's eyes as they pulled up to the mansion. Too tired to move, she waited as Aiden came around to open the car door. Remann pulled up in his SUV. Aiden scooped Kate into his arms and carried her into the home, Remann holding the door for them.

Aiden carried her to her bedchamber and laid her upon the soft bed. Kate's limbs felt like lead as he removed her shoes. He turned to Remann.

"Remann." Aiden's gaze was on the floor and he placed his hands on his hips. Remann lifted a hand.

"It's understood, my brother."

There was another nearly imperceptible exchange between the twins. Remann looked to Kate. There was sadness in his mismatched eyes as he studied her for several moments.

"My lovely Kate, I shall leave you to the care of my brother. I'll be going away for a while and I will say my goodbyes now."

He bowed low, then turned and left her and Aiden alone.

Aiden's heart went out to his brother. He could see in the way Remann looked at Kate, that she had captured him almost as completely as she had Aiden. He took a seat next to her, studying the patterned comforter.

"Kate, I did what I had to do. Please understand that." He didn't expect forgiveness from her, or for her to understand. He only waited for her to confirm her horror and revulsion at his true nature.

"She is my sister. I'd have died to protect her."

"As I would die to protect my own. Kate, it is my duty."

Kate yawned and rubbed her puffy eyes, fighting her exhaustion.

"I don't really understand your world, or how I could ever fit into it, Aiden," she said.

His shoulders slumped and he looked away. Despite everything that had happened he looked as if he'd just risen fresh from bed. Even the gashes over his face had vanished, as had the mysterious ones on Remann's face and neck.

"I don't know how things will work between us, but I sincerely want to try."

Aiden's intriguing mismatched eyes searched hers, pleading with her in unspoken emotions. His hands found her hand and he clasped it between his warm grasp.

"Can you give me a chance, my darling Kate?"

Kate's heart both melted and raced. She blinked as tears filled her dry, sore eyes.

"I love you, Aiden." It was spoken on a breath as her body flooded with the emotions she'd worked hard to suppress before. Her sister was safe, and now she had her life to get back into order. And her life would now include this incredible and sexy man, no this *vampire*. Her mind reeled for a moment as it was all unbelievable, but she was happy. A wonderful feeling of peace and joy filled her.

"Beautiful Kate, I love you as well. From this moment on, as vampire and human, we are yet one."

Their lips met in a gentle, but emotion-filled kiss. Aiden pulled back and gently

traced his fingertips over the dark shadow beneath her eyes. His heart swelled. This was true joy, something he'd never really experienced in his centuries long life. He wasn't sure how it could work, but that didn't matter to him. They would take it moment by moment and enjoy themselves thoroughly.

He stretched his length beside her, and cradled her to his body. Kate's head lay upon his chest as she at last gave in to exhaustion. Her breathing slowed, and a peaceful smile crossed her sleeping face. A sense of serenity filled his own body, and Aiden sighed deeply. Nothing in the world had ever meant as much to him as the sleeping woman in his arms.

His gaze focused on the sunlight that streamed through the silvery curtains. Beyond was Lake Michigan, and Aiden watched as Remann's SUV disappeared down the private drive.

The End

### **Author Bio**

Olivia grew up doodling, daydreaming, and drafting prose. When not hard at work at her keyboard, she's spending time outdoors with her dogs and horses. Always a sucker for a furry face, she now plays mom to four dogs, four horses, and two cats all of whom are rescues. You can see what's new in Olivia's world, or her writing, by checking out her website! [www.OliviaStarke.webs.com](http://www.OliviaStarke.webs.com)