

Ladies of St George

BLOOD and DESTINY

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SANDHAIN publishing Ltd.

When the past bites, bite back.

Ladies of St. George, Book 1

For Destiny St. George, shapeshifting lioness and private investigator, her best friend's looming wedding is little more than a reminder of her failed relationship with vampire king Marcus Smythe. Tired of being only one of many mistresses—and dinner entrees—she's stayed away from the vampire scene altogether. Until a missing-person case forces her to seek his help.

Knowing that pressing Destiny is not the way to convince her to give their relationship another try, Marcus has been waiting her out—and his patience is rewarded when she steps into his nightclub. Now is his chance to lure her back into his arms. This time, he plans to keep her there.

Destiny's not sure which is worse: working with Marcus, or trying to remember all the reasons she called it off with him. And when it becomes clear the case is an elaborate trap to avenge a millennia-old grudge, she finds herself caught between love and instinct—while the clock ticks down on an innocent victim's life...

Warning: Vampires determined to take more than a bite out of the heroine. A lioness sure that she's going to have the last word.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Blood and Destiny
Copyright © 2010 by Kaye Chambers
ISBN: 978-1-60504-938-0
Edited by Anne Scott
Cover by Natalie Winters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

Blood and Destiny

Kaye Chambers

Dedication

For my husband, as always,
Thank you for being my personal hero.

For Colleen,
Thank you for loaning me your vampire for inspiration.

For Vivi Andrews,
Thank you for helping me smooth out the kinks in this story.

For the Cookie Monsters,
Thank you all for your positive attitudes and support.

For Anne and Samhain,
Thank you for all the work you've done to bring out
Destiny's potential.

Chapter One

I yawned. I couldn't help it. It was terribly unprofessional and the man in the thousand-dollar suit in front of my desk didn't appreciate it. Oh well. That's what I got for staying for that last round of conga-line shooters. My best friend was getting married and I was the maid of honor. Just wouldn't do for the maid of honor to bolt out of the bachelorette party before the bride. It didn't help that I had been the only non-werewolf there, and that included the strippers.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Vincent. I had a terribly late night last night. I'm listening."

"Do you know what they say about you, Ms. St. George?"

Okay, so we were going to do a topic swap. I guess I deserved it considering I was half-asleep on his time.

"I know what my peers whisper about me. Yet, here you are, despite it all. I can't help but wonder why."

"I'm here because it is my understanding that you are the best candidate for finding Betsy."

I smelled the air and tried to determine if Matthew Vincent was lying to me or not. Yasmine was better at it than I was. The canine nose was far more acute than the feline.

"I see. Can you give me a bit of background, please?"

The frown on his face told me he'd probably been doing that already, but he was going to have to repeat himself. This time, I made the mental promise to pay attention.

"Six months ago, Betsy and I received the news that she wasn't able to have children. She was distraught, naturally, and turned to her friends for distraction. Patty, Patricia Vanderlane, encouraged her to join a club."

His tone of voice carried disdain and something else that prickled across my senses. I couldn't put my finger on it, exactly, so I interrupted.

"A club? What kind? Something like a book club?"

"Only it seemed to specialize in *Dracula*."

I blinked at him, trying to gauge how serious he was. Yep, he meant what I thought he meant. There weren't that many vampires in town and I knew them all, some better than others. I was afraid of where this was going. There was no way it could be good.

"I don't think I understand."

Yes, I was going to make him say it. Part of it was my contrary nature. This man was so conservative I bet he wore his underwear starched. The other part was that I might be able to gauge his response enough to give me a clue. There's no way a man could say he thought his wife was having an affair with a vampire without giving something away.

"I'm saying that Patty began to take Betsy to the Mystic Vantage where they were meeting with men who fancied themselves vampires."

Uh-oh. Considering I owned an exclusive membership to the Mystic Vantage's private elite club, this couldn't go well.

"The Vantage is a popular haunt for a lot of different sets. Your wife was going for...?" I let my voice trail off so he would fill in the blank. He didn't disappoint.

"Sex, Ms. St. George. They were meeting for sex and God knows what else."

I expected fury, but what I got was well-rehearsed nothing. His words were bland, no true emotion at all. It made the affair sound so terribly ordinary. I fished for more.

"So, you're saying...?"

"You know what I mean, Ms. St. George."

"Enlighten me, just to make sure I'm not jumping to conclusions here."

"I'm saying that Betsy fell into an inappropriate situation with a man who thought himself a vampire."

"And you know it was an inappropriate relationship, how? I mean a lot of married women go to the Vantage to dance, flirt, and generally cut loose for a little while. How do you know she was really having an affair?"

Instead of answering, he reached down to pick up the briefcase he'd walked in with. Setting it on the seat beside him, he deftly twirled the combination locks to open it. I didn't get a chance to examine what was in it because he pulled out a large envelope and snapped the case shut. He very politely held it over the second-hand desk without a single tremor in his hand. Biting back a groan at the all-too-familiar embossed seal, I took the file.

"If you already had her investigated, Mr. Vincent, why not let Frank LeCroy finish the job?"

"Because he sent me to you. He seemed to think he'd pursued the investigation as far as he could take it. He also said to tell you that the file is complete, though I don't understand exactly what that means."

I did. Frank LeCroy was a Cajun who'd moved to town after Katrina devastated New Orleans. I could say a lot of disparaging things about him, but the bottom line? He was very good at what he did. Unfortunately, he fancied himself supernaturally friendly. Since that was my forte, he had been known to sabotage cases we were forced to share. He liked it when I had to call him to find the missing pieces. It drove me nuts. Trust him to be a man about it and not call to give me a heads-up on this one. I guess that was my penalty since he hadn't withheld information, or so he said. I wouldn't really believe it until I'd gone through the file myself.

“It’s a bit of professional rivalry. If he sent you to me with a complete file, he must think I can help you.”

“He said that you were the best at finding things that don’t want to be found in the underworld.”

Wow. Sending me cases and compliments too. He wanted something. “Don’t believe everything you hear, Mr. Vincent. He’s still looking for an introduction to my more informative sources.”

“So why don’t you introduce them?” His tone told me it was a question of honest curiosity, so I replied as honestly as I could.

“Because I’m afraid he’ll put on a cocky attitude and they’ll eat him.” I glanced up to see shock on his face and bit back a grin. He looked like he was trying to decide if I was serious or had a seriously twisted sense of humor. The fact he seemed to be considering the logistics of my comment reinforced the reality of the situation. He really did believe in things bumping in the night.

“I see.”

I doubted he truly did, but didn’t correct him as I opened the folder to pull out the file. The edge of a full-color glossy slipped out and I opened the file. I blinked at the sight of a woman, presumably the missing Mrs. Vincent, and a man I didn’t know in what could only be called a compromising position. She had excellent taste in lingerie.

“Is this the only man she dallied with?”

“As far as we could tell, yes. He was the only one she met with while Mr. LeCroy had the case.”

Well, if he was a vampire, I didn’t recognize him. I’d been out of the scene for a while so he could be a recent arrival. Even admitting that to myself, I doubted it because of the suspicious circumstances. Flipping through the file, I didn’t find anything else that might have warranted referral to me. It looked pretty cut-and-dry. Twice a week, she slipped out to meet her wanna-be-vampire lover, always after dark and always on the seedy side of town. None of the notes or reports said anything about suspicious or paranormal activity. On the surface, it appeared he was exactly what Mr. Vincent had said—a man who fancied himself to be a vampire. I gave in to my gut and asked my question.

“Why did Frank really send you to me? What’s not in this file?”

Closing the file, I looked my client in the eyes and waited. Somewhere in the last five minutes, I’d decided to take the case. Maybe it was the compliments. It didn’t look like my cup of tea, but even I needed the occasional “normal” case.

“The night she vanished, her routine changed. She met her lover, but they disappeared. Mr. LeCroy didn’t see them leave. When she didn’t come home, he recommended I come to you.”

“According to the missing-person report, your wife has been gone for over a week.”

Silence stretched as he looked back at me. Maybe he was trying to determine what to say, but I didn’t think so. There was absolutely no expression on his face. If he were looking to hide details or lie to me, I

would have been able to see it. Finally, he gave an almost imperceptible shrug and answered the question I hadn't outright asked with a true questioning tone.

"Maybe I was holding out hope she'd come home on her own?"

"Or maybe you were hoping the trail would be so cold that I couldn't follow it."

He broke eye contact. I was closer to the truth than he liked. "I'll admit to being put off by the entire situation. It's tawdry and messy. An affair is one thing. With proper handling, no one would know and we could avoid scandal. But this? Going missing in the arms of her lover? When the press gets wind of this, it's going to be a nightmare."

He was worried about the *press*?

"What do you do, Mr. Vincent? Professionally, I mean?"

"You don't know me?" He sounded genuinely surprised, but I couldn't imagine why. He was hardly a Hollywood superstar. Mr. Vincent was too old, too conservative, and lacked that leading-man quality. Not that he was geriatric, but I put him near forty at a glance. While some men aged into a timeless sex appeal, he wasn't one of them.

"I'm a neurosurgeon. I was recently featured in *USA Today* for a procedure I developed to remove previously inoperable tumors."

Putting the file onto my desk, I leaned back and surveyed him. He had a lot to lose no matter how this panned out. I found myself wondering how he'd handled his life-changing news, especially since we knew how Betsy Vincent had reacted. Like most men, he'd probably wrapped himself in his work.

"Did you want children?" The question popped out before I could think about how offensive it might sound. Doing my best not to cringe at the rudeness of it, I carefully watched my client for whatever clues his reaction could give me.

He blinked and I had a revelation. The news had been that she couldn't have children, not him. Dr. Matthew Vincent didn't intend to stay married to his barren wife. Just like a man. Had she known it? A clue was a clue, so I waved my hand and let him off the hook and asked the next question on my mental list.

"Never mind, Dr. Vincent. That's really none of my business. I'm sorry for asking such an indelicate question. Do you want me to find her? Honestly?"

He dropped his gaze to his hands clenched in his lap. True emotions flashed across his face. Guilt was prominent, but there was concern and anxiety too.

"Yes." Emotion made his voice unsteady. It was the first sign of humanity I'd seen in relation to his wife. Nodding, I moved on.

"Okay, then this is where we go from here. I have to ask some pretty hard questions."

"And those weren't considered difficult?"

He had a point. All I could do was shrug and acknowledge it. Picking up the pen kept beside the phone, I pulled a pad of paper from the desk drawer and prepared to take notes.

“Let’s say the difficulty level just went up. Did your wife work?”

“No, she was a chemist but stopped working once my practice established itself.”

Making the note about her profession, I marveled at his word choice. Established itself, he said. In short, she had been the breadwinner while he was struggling through medical school, residency and those first painful years of private practice.

“Did she know you were planning to divorce her?”

His gaze slid away from mine. When he finally answered, it was a pained whisper. “No, I don’t think so.”

I added it to the list of facts even though I doubted it would be something I’d readily forget. “Is there anything else you can think of to volunteer that may give me a starting point? Likes, dislikes? Allergies? Something she was passionate about?”

Dr. Vincent seemed to ponder for a moment before shaking his head. “The only hobby Betsy indulged after she gave up her job was Rodeo Drive.”

I added *trophy wife shopaholic* to my list and did my best not to judge. The Vincents obviously enjoyed a lifestyle far different from my own.

“Okay, Dr. Vincent. Considering it’s been a week since your wife went missing, I’m going to ask for a five-thousand-dollar retainer to grease the wheels of the system. I don’t usually ask for so much, but I may need some serious bribe money.”

“So you’ll take the case?”

I’d surprised him again. Good for me. From his expression, he’d expected me to send him packing. I probably should have, but something about this pulled at me. I didn’t know if I could find her, but I had to try. Besides, no one else was going to be able to help him if Frank LeCroy couldn’t. Next to me, he had the best eyes and ears in the underworld.

“Yeah, I’ll take your case, but I’m not making any promises. I’ll do my best to find out what happened to her.”

“You don’t think she’s still alive, do you?” The anguished tone made me think better of him.

“Honestly? I can’t say. There are too many variables in play and she wasn’t in the best mental state when she disappeared. All I can promise is that if there’s a trail to find, I’ll find it.”

“Thank you, Ms. St. George.”

He unfurled his lanky frame from the chair and smoothed his slacks. I stood with him, not out of politeness, but because I hated feeling small. The doctor was too damned tall. He reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and handed me the long white sheet of paper he’d removed. Glancing down, I blinked. The certified check in my hand was made out to cash and was six figures. I dropped it like it was made of lava.

“Dr. Vincent, that’s wayyy too much. I only need enough to offer up some bribes. I can’t promise I’ll find anything at all.”

“Take it, Ms. St. George. It’s only money and if you find Betsy, you’ll be worth every penny.” He turned to go, leaving me gaping like a fish.

“I can’t guarantee I can find her. We should set this up so you can get what I don’t use back.”

“I don’t want it back.” He strode for the door with his briefcase in hand. “Take it, use what you need and keep the rest for trying.”

With that cryptic comment, he disappeared through my empty lobby. I heard the bell above the door ring as he let himself out onto the street. Sitting down heavily, I looked at the check and tried to decide what to do.

In the end, I walked down to the bank and deposited it. Since it was certified funds, I was amazed at how fast my bank account grew. The cashier assured me the funds would be available after the evening posting. Returning home in a daze, I let myself in the office door instead of going up the back steps like I usually did. While I waited for dusk, when the most likely suspects would be out to play, I pulled out my checkbook with some trepidation. For the first time in my life, I paid every bill I had as well as the payoff amount on my second-hand Chevy. Slapping the last stamp on the envelopes, I left them in a stack on the desk and went upstairs to get ready for my night on the town.

Since I was already part of the “in” crowd at the Vantage, no special attire was necessary. Just the little gold pin clipped to my collar in case there was a new set of bouncers on duty. It had been a long time since my last visit, so I wasn’t banking on being recognized at first look.

Now, if I were going to play, I’d have found something that screamed come and get me. Since I wasn’t, I passed over the leather pants and settled on slacks. Pulling on a shirt that was slightly snugger than it should be, I surveyed my reflection. Beauty wasn’t my claim to fame, but I cleaned up nicely when I had to. Makeup was a brush of eyeliner, shadow and lipstick. With a final check on my upstairs locks, I headed downstairs.

Locking up my office in time to see the glorious sunset over the ocean, I took a moment to appreciate the twilight. My office/apartment sat on a hill with a fabulous view of the ocean. The mortgage was outrageous. But every time I saw that view, I knew it was worth every penny. There was even parking, hard to find in San Francisco. Those of us living in the surrounding buildings shared the tiny lot gladly. The herbalist next door poked her head out of her apartment window above her shop.

“Out to play, Destiny?”

“Always, Susan. You should try it. It’ll keep you young.”

I didn’t know much about Susan’s story. She was of indeterminate age, her black hair going gray at the edges. She was kind and trustworthy, and that’s all that mattered in my world.

“You’re only as old as you feel, Destiny, and I’ll be young forever. Go, have a good time. And make sure you leave the back-porch light on if you bring home a friend so I don’t call the cops if I see someone skulking out before dawn. Hate to have some poor fool locked up for being a prowler. He’ll never call you back!”

We shared a laugh. She wasn’t going to let me live that one down. The guy really hadn’t called back, which was a shame since he had been a lot of...fun.

“You know it. Can I get you anything while I’m out, though? I don’t think I’ll be very late.”

“No, thank you. I’m probably going to walk up to Ned’s grocery and visit with his sister who’s up from Argentina. We’re sisters of the craft, you know.”

I didn’t know, but I agreed anyway. Calling farewell, I climbed into my beat-up Cavalier. Yasmine liked to remind me that people would make assumptions about me based on my car, but I laughed it off. Let the world assume that I was a struggling college student. College may have been left behind, but the struggling part was still true. Besides, after tomorrow, the only one who owned it would be me since the bank would be happy that they hadn’t had to repossess it.

The drive to the Mystic Vantage wasn’t a short one. It was a good half an hour away from civilization in a converted warehouse in the industrial district. In the daylight, it reflected the neighborhood around it and looked seedy. At night when the neon flashed, it promised wild nights and decadence. Like all things associated with alcohol, sex and fantasies, it seemed like exactly where you wanted to be in the dark; but when daylight came, you had to ask yourself how much was real and how much was desperation? Especially if you woke up with someone you didn’t know.

The huge parking area was filling up fast, despite the early hour. I debated on whether or not to use the valet service provided for the elite members, but decided the walk would do me good. It still made me uneasy to be a part of that set where dues began at the five-figure mark. And that was before the decimal point. Had I paid for mine? No. It was a gift from the owner hoping to lure me further into his world. Was it working? Probably better than I’d like to admit. Or it had been working until I decided to go cold turkey. Even now, after my hiatus from the lifestyle, there was still a certain enticing mystique.

I recognized the vampire at the door and felt the smile dawning despite my unease at being here. He met it with an answering smile but didn’t move down from his post. He signaled the man in charge of the rope to let me in. I breezed past the gatekeeper, glad I didn’t have to stand in the haze of his cologne.

“Destiny, come to sample our...pleasures?”

I rolled my eyes at Peter who apparently had drawn the short straw to be put at the door supervising the human bouncers who were holding back the growing line.

“Yeah, your charm just couldn’t keep me away.”

He slapped a hand that could only be called delicate across his heart and made a sound as if he were wounded. The sheer drama of it made my smile widen despite my best efforts. Peter was Roman. As in the

Roman Empire, not a citizen of the Rome we know today. He would have made an excellent stage actor, if he could be bothered with such plebian pursuits. In his former life, he had been a senator before being seduced by a mysterious person of the East. That was as much of his story as I'd managed to glean. He was very good at deflecting curiosity.

"Nonetheless, *he* will be glad you've come." Like the really old ones, Peter didn't call Marcus by name. In days gone by, the anonymity of the king had been what kept not only him alive, but also helped the group escape when the authorities were set to exterminate them.

The vampires were a lot like a tribe of gypsies. Their king was their authority and the entire system was still slightly feudal. By rights, I should have known more about Marcus than I did. But if Peter was good at deflecting curiosity, Marcus was a master at it. Somehow, our conversations didn't get around to answering my questions. Maybe he was better at distraction because he had my number in a way Peter never would.

"Let's hope so."

Even though I grumbled it under my breath, Peter heard it as he signaled the bouncer to open the door. The heavy base of the club music drowned out the sound of his laughter and I was glad for it. My last visit had ended badly. Marcus had been content to wait me out. And they said cats had patience.

It always surprised me not to be stepping into a mass of people when I walked into the foyer, but the Vantage was laid out better than that. Most of the people were packed onto the central revolving dance floor on the main level. Two sweeping staircases on the sides of the foyer led to the elevated members-only areas. More public seating ranged closer to the bars stationed on each of the remaining walls on the main level. I took it all in at a glance before sweeping my gaze up the staircases to find the target of my visit.

Marcus Smythe, his latest pseudonym, had a woman pressed against the sweeping banister on the staircase on my right. Closer examination brought the realization that his hands might be around her and on the banister, but it wasn't him doing the pressing. She had herself practically glued to the front of his silk shirt and designer pants. Having fallen victim to his allure before, I could definitely relate to the feeling. Today, though, I was made of sterner stuff, or at least I hoped so. Crow never tasted good, but I'd be eating it before I could ask him to come down to examine the file photos.

I trotted up the stairs without a second glance at the loitering bouncers beside them. They made no move to stop me thanks to the little gold pin on my shirt. Reaching Marcus, I slipped my hand on his arm and tugged. He let me pivot him as I moved past. Because of her insanely high heels, his would-be body decoration had to let go or risk being knocked down the stairs. Stopping a couple of steps higher, I turned to see a touch of laughter shining back at me from his face. I felt that bright, almost happy look all the way to my toes.

"Pardon me for interrupting your takeout. You can have him back in a second, miss. Can you spare me a moment, Marcus?"

“For you, always.” Even his voice was smooth as honey and absolutely without an accent. It promised all sorts of sinful things. Having experienced a wide variety of them, my body revved up against my better judgment.

“Well, remember you said that in about five minutes.” I muttered it under my breath, but I knew he heard me. We’d see how far his *always* went after my apologies.

Leaving him to make his amends with his date, I turned to climb the rest of the stairs, veering off toward the private alcoves once I reached the top. If I weren’t afraid he’d take it the wrong way, I’d have gone over to the personal elevator that rode up to his apartment for extra discretion. With my luck, he’d take the change in venue to mean I wanted to totally make up for our last fight. Since I wasn’t ready for that, I chose a private alcove with a sheer curtain where anyone could see us talking because talking was all we were going to do.

Even reminding myself of it for the third time, I could hear the echo of the lady protesting far too much about her innocent intentions. Were my intentions totally innocent? Could I have turned to someone else to identify Betsy Vincent’s mysterious lover?

Probably, but Marcus really was the shortest road down the path. After a week missing, short paths were the only way I could find her alive. If she was still breathing on her own, that is.

Settling into the alcove facing the stairs, I watched the sexiest dead man I’d ever seen glide toward me. It took some effort to remind myself that alive was better than dead, any day. Really.

Chapter Two

“So, what brings you back to me, Destiny?” Marcus went straight for the seduction purr as he pushed the gauzy curtain aside to join me.

“For starters, I’m not back to you. I’m here on a mission.” I tried to make it sound firm, but my voice wavered. His mouth curled up a touch at the sound of it. He knew exactly what effect he had on me.

“Business first. Pleasure later.” If anything, the purr in his voice was even smoother with the suggestion. My reaction to it gave me the ammunition I needed to put my defenses back into place.

“Just business, Marcus. I need some help on a case. Your kind of help.”

His gaze sharpened and he settled on the couch next to me. Summing up the case to the bare bones, I brought him up to speed and waited. While he pondered his course of action, I took the time to soak him in. He’d let his hair grow out a bit, but it didn’t make him look shaggy. It added a certain rugged appeal. The only past I could be sure he didn’t have was Viking. He was far too short and dark for it. Not that he was short, but he wasn’t excessively tall, either. Before I was through looking, he turned those startling blue eyes toward me.

“This could be bad.”

Wow, no moss on that stone.

“It could be,” I agreed.

“You have the photographs at your office?”

“You’ll come look at them?” Hope tinged my tone and I didn’t bother to keep out my surprise. Until that moment, I’d thought our personal baggage pretty much ensured he’d send me packing. Something clouded his expression for a brief heartbeat, but it was gone before I could examine it.

“Of course. If her lover is a member of my tribe, I’ll have him brought in to tell us what happened the night she disappeared. You’re sure Frank didn’t see anything suspicious?”

“Nope. He saw a car turn up the street and swears he glanced away to grab his pen so he could jot down the tag number. When he looked up, it was two hours later and there weren’t any cars to take note of.”

“That’s what his report says,” Marcus corrected.

I ignored his laughing tone. Something about our little professional rivalry was amusing the hell out of the underworld. When you’re practically immortal, I guess small things were more entertaining than big ones.

“This time, I believe the report. If he thought he could have solved the case, he would have kept it to himself. Whatever made him lose that time scared him enough to pawn it off on me right away.”

Marcus simply smiled and stood, offering me his hand. I made no move to take it as I looked up.

“I’ll make sure to send him a very nice present to thank him for his generosity. Now, if you want me to leave with you before I eat, you’ll have to pay the toll.”

I knew it had been too easy. “Toll? What toll? I thought you were going to help me because it could help you too?”

“Well, you didn’t ask me to do it out of the goodness of my heart, now did you? You simply asked for my help and waited. Considering the way we parted last, I don’t think a small token is too much to ask.”

Staring at the hand, I finally put mine into his and let him help me to my feet. He tugged with sufficient force to pull me against him, but I was agile enough to resist. He chuckled softly as I managed to end up at his side instead of plastered to his front.

“Define small token.” I put all the suspicion I felt into the demand.

“A dance. Nothing more. One dance while we wait for the car to be brought around.”

“Your date won’t appreciate that.” I grabbed the easiest defense I could think of.

“Maria’s gone on for a more promising evening with someone else.” His tone was dismissive as if his dinner entrée was of no consequence.

“We’re not dating anymore.” Why was I the only one who seemed to remember that? Worse, why did I feel the need to remind *him* of the fact? Or was I reminding myself?

“Yet, here you are.” His tone was droll and I knew he wasn’t going to budge. It wasn’t the dance he truly wanted, it was the concession.

I hate it when my words are used against me, even if he didn’t realize it. The irony of the situation brought a reluctant grin and capitulation. “One dance. Business, no pleasure. I’m not here to make up.”

“One dance, and then we go back to your place.” His tone was agreeable, but the words had too many interpretations to argue with. After a moment, I shrugged and let it go. We could argue about it later. It was hard to ignore the stares as he led me down to the spinning circle where people were writhing to the music. The crowd parted as he stepped onto the platform. Even feeling the eyes of the tribe on us, I couldn’t resist the thrill of pleasure. The man was a king in every sense of the word and he wanted me. I was vain enough to allow that to stroke my ego as I gave myself up to the music.

Heat flashed across his face as he moved into me, pressing his body against mine. Without warning, the music changed into something I didn’t recognize. It was wild and the cat in my soul responded. Closing my eyes, I let it race through me as Marcus’s hands found my waist and pulled me closer. Time, distance and history faded away as he lowered his mouth to my neck. I could no more stop from turning my head to give him fuller access than I could have stopped the tide turning. Bottom line, we might not be dating anymore, but part of me wanted those fringe benefits.

His kiss was hot, wet and greedy on my pulse. His arms slid around me to pull me even closer as he teased me with his teeth. I knew what he was asking. A few months ago, it would have been foreplay, but tonight it wouldn't be. I couldn't let it be. The same issues that had driven me out the door were still hiding in the shadows between us. I didn't move closer to give him the permission to feed like he expected so he pulled back enough to cover his teeth.

"Later." To anyone else, my whisper would have been lost in the fervor of noise around us. Marcus stiffened and sealed the deal with a firm kiss against the pounding of my pulse. Any person with an ounce of self-preservation avoids making promises to vampires and the devil. The fact I was so free with them went to show that I was either desperate for information or for another taste of the dark side. I tried very hard not to examine my motives as he pulled me back to the edge of the floor and spun me off with firm hands on my waist.

Before I had my feet steady on the floor, he strode for the door with my hand on his arm to sweep me along. It annoyed me, but I gritted my teeth with the reminder that I had come to him, not the other way around. Voices rose in an excited babble as the doors swept open ahead of us. Peter was already in motion to step between Marcus and the crowd of waiting patrons behind the red rope. At the rope, Marcus handed me into the waiting car before following me inside. I caught Peter's frown as the door closed, taking the noise level down to a bearable level.

The car immediately drove away from the curb and I knew Peter wasn't in it. Not even a vampire moves that fast, especially in front of humans.

"Peter's not coming along for the ride?"

My question seemed to startle Marcus. He looked at me with one of those mercurial gazes that made me very much aware that I was female and he was interested.

"He will come with your car shortly. I thought it best if we appeared to be leaving for more entertaining options so we weren't followed by an overly enthusiastic petitioner."

Petitioner, he said. I couldn't help but wonder how many disillusioned people like Betsy Vincent were out there begging to be saved. Instead of asking, I made conversation. Beating around the bush was a necessary skill in my line of work.

"Does that mean you get followed often?"

Marcus turned to face me on the posh leather seat. The artful arrangement looked casual, but I knew him too well to believe it. The burn of awareness rose a notch and I repressed a shiver. Not well enough, though. He reached out to trace a finger up the line of my thigh. It made me wish I'd worn a skirt so I could feel that careful finger against my skin. Grabbing his hand, I flattened it against the middle of my thigh.

"Marcus..."

"Hmmm?" His gaze locked on our hands, but I knew I had his full attention.

"Stop."

“You don’t want me to stop. Isn’t this why you came to me?”

Those blue eyes slowly rose to return my stare. I was taken aback by what I saw there. It was like staring into a tumultuous sea where none of the colors stayed constant. He trapped me as surely as the erroneous myth teased that he could.

I opened my mouth to deny it but knew the lie wouldn’t work. Instead, I tried honesty and hoped he would be gracious in his victory.

“Maybe. But I need to find this woman before she lets herself get dragged into something she’s not prepared for.”

“If it’s too late?” The way he said it made me believe he already suspected the same outcome I did.

“Then I need to know what happened so her husband can move on.”

Our gazes battled until he leaned forward. He stopped an inch away from me. His breath smelled of fine wine and herbs. It only reminded me that I’d taken him away from his dinner, not once but twice.

“And then what?”

It took a moment for his whisper to reach my brain. It took even longer for the implication to register. When it did, I put as much space as I could between us by pushing myself into the corner of the car.

“Good times are over. I’m still looking for a man who’ll love me enough to be faithful.”

Temper stretched the lines of his face across those sculpted bones and made him even more attractive, if that was possible. Leaning back, he settled himself into his own corner of the car.

“I have to eat.” Well, yeah. The argument was old, but I went on with it anyway.

“Food and sex don’t have to mean the same thing.”

“So you’d have me pay for my meals with a different coin?” He replied with enough snap to his tone to break something in my heart.

“It’s not the Middle Ages anymore. Women line up to bare their necks to you. You say I can’t feed you every night and you’re right. I’m still not willing to be your Wednesday and Saturday girl while you cuddle up to your other mistresses. We’re at the same impasse we were months ago. You’re not willing to change and I’m not willing to fall back into a routine that doesn’t work for me.”

He gave an exasperated sigh and flung his arm across the back of the seat. The limo was wide enough that I’d have to make an effort to take the hand he inadvertently offered. I reached out and placed my hand over it. It made him look at me and I searched for something to put an end to the fight. Not because I needed him to identify the mystery lover in the photographs, but because I cared too much for him to let this go on tearing us apart inside.

“We want different things. You’re going to outlive me by hundreds of years. When I start to age, you’ll move on to someone else. I’ll be left alone with nothing to warm my heart. There’s nothing wrong with that. It is what it is. Let’s not ruin our friendship over needs that we can’t meet for one another.”

Tension rushed out of him in a tight breath. His hand flipped up and he wrapped his fingers around mine. It was a peace offering. I took it.

“I will not stop trying to change your mind.”

“As long as you’re not going to act like a child when the answer is no and don’t interfere with my own attempts to find someone else.”

His laugh was spontaneous and the sudden joy in it was a rich undercurrent. “You always know what I’m thinking. Do you understand how rare that is?”

We shared a smile and the tension in the car faded into comfortable silence. I didn’t resist when he tugged my hand to urge me closer. There’s something sweet about a man who will wrap you into his arms knowing he’s not going to be getting anything out of it.

Too soon, it seemed to me, the car stopped at my front door. Marcus set me from him gently so he could step from the car ahead of me. He reached in to help me out as if I were wearing heels instead of my serviceable loafers. It was probably habit, but it still gave me a warm feeling.

Groaning, I realized I’d left my keys at the coat check at the club. Marcus’s soft laughter made my temper flare even as I watched him remove a slim ring of keys from his pocket. With no apparent effort, he flipped to one of the keys. Amazed, I watched him stride to my door and unlock it. Walking through the opened door, I disarmed the alarm system before turning to glare at my companion as he pocketed the keys. I had the grace to wait until the driver closed the door to leave us in privacy before stating the obvious.

“You have a key to my office.” A key that hadn’t come from me.

“From before, yes. I thought it might come in handy on those rare occasions when you might be open to a little indulgence.”

Put that way, it seemed a little obnoxious to be unhappy about it. I settled for leaning against the wall of the foyer with my arms sullenly crossed. It didn’t work. Marcus had always been immune to my less admirable character traits. He didn’t bother to respond to my ire.

“Shall we get business taken care of so we can move on to more pleasant things?”

Instead of reminding him of the obvious, I held out my hand. “Key.”

Without a word, he pulled the keys from his pocket and slowly extracted the one he had used on the front door. I watched and finally spoke up.

“Do you steal the keys for all your lovers?” It came out catty. I shouldn’t care, but it rankled to see that tiny string of keys. He let me stew a moment before extending the key with his own version of clarification.

“I have very few lovers, Destiny. But no, I don’t generally go through such effort.”

It made me feel petty for taking the key from him. Pushing away from the wall, I stalked through the door to my office. Business first, personal garbage later.

I walked over to pull out the center drawer of my desk. Dropping the key into it, I pulled LeCroy's file. Moving back, I held the file out. I didn't invite him to sit down because I knew better. Instead, I waited until he took the file and made myself comfortable in one of the armchairs arranged in front of my desk for clients. He joined me after a moment.

The chair across from him would have given me a clearer vantage of his face, but I doubted I would be able to tell if he decided to lie to me. I was good, but he was better. Age had advantages when it came to the lying game.

He opened the file and flipped through the pages. Picking up one of the glossy photos, he stared at it for a moment before moving on to another one. After the third, he closed the file, leaned forward and carefully placed it on my desk without looking through the rest.

"He's not a pretender nor is he one of mine."

"You're sure?"

Sharp blue eyes blazed before his face softened to a smile. "From anyone else, that could be considered an insult to how well I manage my people. No, the vampire Ms. Vincent was seeing is very young and not one of mine. If he's hunting here, it's under the mentorship of an older soul."

"He picked her up at the Vantage."

Marcus gave a small shrug and settled back into his chair. I knew he was being artful to tempt me, but I refused to let myself get distracted from the job.

"It's not unusual for young vampires newly on their own to make the rounds to several cities trying to find a place they feel comfortable. If he's here, someone knows him."

Marcus leaned forward to pick the file back up. He sorted through the pictures until he found one that showed little more than the young vampire's face leaving his partner anonymous. Holding it up, he lifted a questioning brow.

"May I borrow this one? If anyone from my tribe knows him, we'll find out when he arrived and with whom he's associated beyond us."

I nodded and watched as he sprang from the chair with a fluid grace that reminded me of things best left forgotten. The driver was still loitering on the sidewalk. Marcus opened the door and handed him the photograph.

"Make copies and find out who brought him into the Vantage. I want to speak to them tomorrow."

The driver muttered something that I assumed was acknowledgement before the door closed again. I turned to find Marcus leaning on the doorjamb.

"Business is concluded for the day. There isn't anything left to do for Ms. Vincent until morning."

He held out his hand and I knew what he was asking. Marcus had made his intentions clear, but he wouldn't take the evening one step further than I would let him. I understood how Eve felt in the Garden. Even wanting to turn him away, I knew I wouldn't. When he left, it would be a microwave meal and a

salad in front of the television. If nothing happened between us, the simple companionship he offered was too much to pass up.

Chapter Three

After locking up and resetting the alarm, Marcus followed me to the tiny door at the back of the house on the first floor. Neither of us bothered with the light as we both had excellent night vision. The top of the stairwell opened into the upstairs kitchen that still had the original outdated appliances. Someone had set the house up as a duplex years ago and it suited me to leave it that way. Yasmine had been an on-again, off-again roommate for years. The layout of the house had allowed us to coexist without stepping on each other's toes.

I checked the back-door lock out of habit before turning to survey my guest. His smiling face was temptation incarnate. I was very conscious of the fact we were alone, in my apartment, where he knew the way to my bed. The thought made something low in my belly clench. He was obviously thinking the same thing from the way his smile faded to a far more sensuous expression.

He glided across the space between us and I didn't back away. When he raised a gentle hand to my check, I found myself leaning into it. The move bared my throat to him. It wasn't my intention to tempt him, or was it?

Desire chased away apprehension as he lowered his mouth to kiss the pounding pulse. Whether it was healthy or not, I wanted him for more than a roll on my clean cotton sheets. His kiss turned to the graze of teeth and he scraped them along my skin ever so lightly. In answer to his unspoken question, I leaned into him, pressing against the sharp points. He took me at my actions and bit.

I gasped at the immediate pain, but didn't pull away. He sealed his mouth to my neck and drank with vigor. His hands pulled me closer, kneading into my softness with growing urgency. My own urgency rose to match his.

By the time Marcus sealed the wounds made by his teeth with a long drag of his tongue, we were both panting as if we had run a marathon. He stared at me for a moment before swooping down to kiss my mouth with the same fervor his hands had worked on my body.

I met his rush with my own, pushing up on tiptoe in my eagerness for that kiss. The months I had put between us washed away under the metallic taste of my blood on my tongue. The lioness inside me jumped up to join in, causing my own magic to flood into the charged atmosphere created by the feeding.

Suddenly, we were standing in the middle of a powder keg of possibilities. If I let him, we'd become lovers again. With this much magic, the sex would be explosive. The temptation almost made me forget my resolve.

Without consciously intending to, I pushed away from him and stumbled back a few paces. To the vampire's credit, he let me go. I opened my eyes and stared at the world in hyperfocus. The colors were vivid, but it was more than that. Colorful waves of magic danced on the moonlight washing in through the window. Reds, blues and greens from every hue imaginable tempted me to cross that tiny distance, and the magic that released them onto the world pulsed with it.

"No." The breathy tone gave the word a distinctively insincere note. If he pushed, I'd give in. I think he knew it as well as I did.

Marcus's face showed a momentary flash of temper, but he closed his eyes and got a handle on it. Can't say I blamed him, really. It's hard to go from all systems blazing forward to full stop in a heartbeat. Settling my voice from the breathy quality of desire was easier after that first word. Gently, I went on hoping he understood and wouldn't push me.

If he decided to seduce me, it wouldn't take very much to change my mind.

"Nothing's changed. I can't do this. If I fall back into bed with you, you'll still carry on with your other mistresses and I'll still hate myself for going along with it. I need something...more."

He didn't speak for a moment. The tension built over the silence. Finally, he opened his eyes and let his breath out in a long rush of exasperation. I could see the knowledge of my precarious resolve lurking in his gaze. I expected him to plead his case, but he surprised me.

"Okay. I understand your point and respect you enough to let it rest for now."

For now, the man said. It was a temporary reprieve, but better than nothing. He turned and opened the cabinet that held my glasses. After removing two wineglasses, he reached up to one of the storage cabinets I never put things in because it was too high for me. He pulled out a bottle of wine I hadn't known was there. The label was in Italian. I wondered how long it had been gathering dust. He must have hidden it as one of those surprises he mentioned.

Marcus plucked the corkscrew from the canister of utensils on the counter and set about opening the wine. The ease in which he moved about my kitchen reminded me of how domestic he could be and that sent a shiver of unease through me. I didn't want to be reminded how close he was to my ideal man since he couldn't seem to embrace the idea of monogamy.

The lioness in me didn't mind sharing, but she liked companionship, too. To have a mate who wouldn't be faithful but was a good companion was one thing. Being a woman on a string was quite another. Neither of us liked that. The morality the nuns had beat into me was always at odds with my nature. It was one of those battles with myself that I faced on a regular basis.

"Maybe you should go."

His hands froze over the wine bottle. Without turning, he resumed twisting the corkscrew into the wine cork.

"No car," he reminded me.

Oh, right. He had sent the driver to find out news of the new vampire in town. Criminy. I latched on to the next solution.

“When did you tell Peter to bring my car home?”

“He’ll bring it after work tonight.”

Which meant not until the wee hours of the morning at best. I watched Marcus pour the rich red wine into the glasses.

“Cab?” I suggested out of desperation.

The look he gave me as he turned to me with the glasses in hand was all the answer I needed. The idea of Marcus in a cab was a little bit ridiculous.

“I’ll grant that it may have been overly optimistic of me to assume I would be invited to stay the night. Nonetheless, you’re stuck with me for the moment. Come, have a glass of wine. Let’s not let my ego ruin this reunion. We can talk a bit and if you’re still anxious for me to leave, I’ll call the driver back.”

Why did the man have to be so reasonable? Simple. Time was on his side and he knew it. I would have loved to say his confidence was misplaced, but we both knew how much I wanted what he was offering. The question was if my strength of will was stronger than my desire?

I needed action. Walking past him, taking a glass from his hand as I went, I flipped on the outside light and kept moving to the living room. The apartment wasn’t very big, but it boasted a small dining room, a living room, a bedroom and a centrally located bath. Considering I spent most of my time downstairs, it was all I needed.

He followed like a shadow, not needing any more light than I did to travel the familiar path across the worn carpet. I skirted the doorway to the bedroom, grateful that I had closed it before heading out earlier, and led him to the couch and love seat. Pointedly not looking at the oil painting centered above the couch that Marcus had given me for my birthday last year, I leaned over to flip the lamp on low before settling into the corner next to it with my feet curled under me. It was a very catlike pose, but it was too late to change as Marcus settled close to me.

If he felt awkward, it didn’t show. He sat with a casual grace and surveyed the room with an imperial air. Considering nothing had changed since the last time he visited, the rush of anxiety I felt was totally absurd. Of course, my jumble of emotions may have been the kiss and the remaining hum of unfulfilled desire. My libido hadn’t quite realized I was going to be frustrated by morning and responded to the promise of his presence.

Hell, whom was I kidding? I was already frustrated and the solution was close enough to touch. I couldn’t have been more miserable if I were staring at a display of chocolate-covered strawberries behind the glass of a closed shop. Since breaking the glass wasn’t an option, I had to tough it out with the reminder that I had gone to him, after all.

I drank from the glass but couldn't appreciate the rich taste of the wine. The quality of it indicated Marcus had my number on more than one level. The silence stretched from awkward into downright rude. When he finally spoke, I jumped, sloshing wine across my hand and onto my slacks. Even as his gaze dropped to the red staining the tan fabric and heated with all sorts of lascivious promises, his words registered.

"You've stayed away a long time, Destiny. I've missed you. My heart has been lonely."

The tension shifted back to the sexual undertones and I had to beat back my libido. Grabbing on to the only lifeline I could find, I tried to pick a fight.

"I noticed you said your heart was lonely and not your bed."

Months ago, it would have had the desired effect. Either Marcus had gotten wise to me or he had mellowed. Vampires as old as he was didn't change readily, so I was betting on the former. Instead of rising to the bait, he met my challenging look with a contemplative gaze.

"Why is my lifestyle so repugnant when yours wouldn't be very different if you followed your instincts?"

Our time apart had made him smarter too. I was screwed and not in a good way. I sensed retreat might be in order, but argued anyway. "For starters, female lions are very selective in their breeding habits and don't have a different male every night of the week."

"So your objection isn't to the other women, just the variety?"

On one hand, my ego was stroked that he'd wasted so much time thinking about why I'd left him. On the other, it meant I was going to have to be totally honest with both of us. Since moral outrage hadn't worked, maybe honesty would.

"I don't know, Marcus. I wasn't raised among lions, so my moral code doesn't exactly jive with my genetic programming. Lionesses in the wild will commit to a male coalition if they're strong enough to keep the pride safe and they'll share those males among them. Do shapeshifting lions abide by that same code? You tell me since you've known more of them than I have."

It came out with a wealth of bitter undertones. I cringed, but held my ground. I thought I had come to terms with the fact my mother had left me on the doorstep of St. George's Children's Home as a newborn, but apparently my abandonment issues were creeping up to haunt me at the most inopportune time. It also gave away more than I wanted Marcus to know. Intuitive as always, he picked up on the hidden clue.

"So if it's not the sharing that offends you, what is it, dear Destiny?"

I took the opportunity to look at him, really look at him. The first moment I'd laid eyes on him, his presence had hit me like a blow to my middle. He still had the ability to do that to me. Now it was tempered by familiarity and genuine affection for the man underneath which made it so much more dangerous. With that in mind, I strove for gentle honesty for both our sakes.

“It’s the being left behind, Marcus. You make time for me on my allotted days and then you disappear until my turn on the rotation rolls ’round again. What bothers me is I’m a type of casual fling for you. It’s not enough for me. Not when you’re more than that for me.”

His temper prickled along my senses, but he quickly bottled it. Without meaning to, I’d offended him.

“I gave you more time than any of my other women. Even you can’t feed me more than twice a week without harm.”

“And did you think that you don’t have to use me as dinner to be with me? How about having your dinner then meeting me for a movie or for a quiet night in? That never occurred to you, did it?”

His head snapped back as if I’d struck him and I knew I was right on the mark. With a deep breath, I set my wineglass on the side table and turned to face him by shifting my back to the arm of the couch.

“Destiny,” he began. I watched him decide on the words to use. Apparently, he was being as careful as I was. “You’re right. It never occurred to me to consider spending time together unencumbered by need.”

I was expecting more outrage and a true argument so his capitulation gave my mounting frustration no outlet. His gaze lingered on mine and he nodded as if making a decision of his own that I wasn’t privy to. He rose with all the grace of his station and held out his hand to me.

“When was the last time you truly rested?” he asked. “When have you truly felt safe in the world enough to sleep?”

So he was going to use his knowledge of my secrets against me.

“The absolute last place I want to be right now is in bed with you.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire. I ignored my subconscious taunting.

“Just to rest.” He left his hand out to me in invitation as he tried to reassure me. “I give you my word that I’ll take no liberties that you don’t want me to take.”

“Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of?”

His voice was rich with laughter. Mine was far too breathy for my peace of mind.

“Is it a crime for a man to want to hold his lover while making amends for wronging her?”

I almost reminded him we weren’t lovers anymore, but the temptation of having his arms around me was too much. I wasn’t even capable of a smart quip as I placed my hand in his and let him draw me from the couch. His word was stronger than my resolve. I’d made my position clear and he’d respect it.

With all the enthusiasm of a woman going to the headsman, I let him lead me across the living room. I broke away with a smile and detoured to the bathroom to regroup.

Staring at myself under the harsh light, I wondered what I was doing. I found comfort in the routine of washing my face and brushing my teeth, doing my best not to think of the vampire waiting in the next room. A smarter woman would have sent him packing half an hour ago. Insisted on the cab or that he call

another car to pick him up. No, a smarter woman would have taken the pictures to him at the club and never brought him home.

Guess that goes to show how my own hidden agenda had come around to bite me, literally.

Tossing my clothes in the laundry bin even though I knew the wine stain would ruin the pants, I pulled on a simple pair of blue silk pajamas left folded over the towel rack. At least I was going to be comfortable, even if Marcus wasn't.

Stepping back out into the hallway, I saw flickering candlelight coming from the bedroom and the living room light switched off. Those three feet to my bedroom door were crossed before I could change my mind. I found Marcus dressed only in his boxers and an undershirt turning down the bed with my decorative pillows piled high in my bedside reading chair. Since I didn't see his clothes, he must have hung them in the closet.

The sight was arresting.

Marcus turned to me and smiled as he held out a hand.

"You're ravishing by candlelight. It always makes your hair shimmer like the mane of a lion full of golden colors too subtle for the eye."

I shivered and crossed the room to him. What I wanted to do was rise up on tiptoe and kiss him like I used to, but he wasn't mine anymore by my own insistence. He would have let me, but the wounds of the revelations in the living room were too fresh. Instead, I slid into the cool cotton sheets and patted the bed beside me.

"Well, if you're going to be all romantic and poetic, do it in the right setting."

His laughter was low and carried with it a wild rush of memories best forgotten. As Marcus climbed into the bed and gathered me close, I had one more mad moment of reconsideration before he squashed it with his next comment.

"I've missed having you close. If we're never to be lovers again, know we'll always have this between us."

The peace was too fragile to break, so I settled against him and let the warmth of his body seep into me. I didn't think I would sleep, but the beat of his heart under my ear and comfort of his presence lulled me away.

Chapter Four

I awoke to warm sheets and the reality I wasn't alone. Rolling over, I found Marcus leaning against the windowpane with those first warm rays of sunlight washing over him. His hair was lighter in the daylight and he looked so much less fierce with his face raised, eyes closed, to greet the dawn.

"Isn't that tempting fate a little?"

My voice was still husky from sleep and other things. Marcus didn't bother to open his eyes as he answered.

"When I'm old enough for the sun to be my enemy then I've outlived my usefulness. Until then, I'll enjoy the feeling of it on my face."

Vampires liked to trade on the mystique of being nocturnal creatures, but it was a lie. Only the oldest were banned from the rays of the sun.

When he finally turned to me, his gaze locked with mine, full of hunger, frustration, and a wealth of other things best not examined if I wasn't going to let him crawl back into bed with me for something other than sleeping. That sex was the first thought after seeing him didn't bode well.

"I'm surprised you're still here, Marcus. Don't you have plans for your day?" It sounded a waspish. Marcus didn't take offense. Mornings weren't my best time of day, a fact he knew firsthand.

"You expected me to leave you sleeping?"

Yeah, I had. It would have saved both of us from the awkward moments without the armor of our clothing. I took a deep breath, trying to think of what to say when the sharp scent of sausage tickled my nose. Awkward moments aside, my stomach growled at the hint of breakfast. Jumping up from my bed, I trotted to the back stairwell. I was heading down the steps at a fast shuffle before Marcus crossed the threshold.

I barreled into the downstairs kitchen and nearly ran over Peter. He had heard me coming and didn't even flinch at the close call. The stove was full of pots and pans brewing up a meal fit for a queen, or one very hungry shapeshifter. Since vampires don't really eat solid food, it surprised me.

"I love a man who thinks to feed me. Thank you, Peter."

I gave him a quick one-armed hug as I skirted around him to grab a cup of coffee from the timed pot on the counter.

"Well, you could return the favor," he bantered back as Marcus came through the door. "You look good enough to eat."

“Oh, I think not.” The icy tone surprised me and I turned to frown at Marcus.

Peter blanched as he ducked his head. Was that fear I saw on his face before it was obscured by long locks of sandy bangs?

Vampires in the morning were totally different than they were at night. Like nightclubs, the real thing was not the fantasy. They still had a mostly liquid diet, but the mysticism of them was wasted in the daylight. Despite that, they could still kill you before you ever saw them coming because they were that deadly.

They might look as ordinary as the stranger passing on the street, but they weren't.

Peter scooped sausage from the pan and onto a plate followed by fluffy scrambled eggs and hash browns. He had to have brought it with him since my idea of breakfast was a bagel or cold cereal only so the coffee had something to digest with.

He put the plate onto the tiny table in the corner and stepped back with a definitely deferring posture to Marcus. Ignoring the dynamics, I sat in front of the feast and reached for the powdered creamer. As much as I preferred the real thing, I was notorious for letting it go bad. Both the refrigerators in the house were apt to decide not to work on any given day and I was tired of replacing easily perishable things. So, powdered creamer and sugar it was.

While I mixed my coffee and breathed in the rich aromas of my breakfast, Marcus was putting Peter through the third degree.

“Did you find the man?”

“No, but we did find the youngster who brought him into the Vantage.” Peter wouldn't meet Marcus's gaze and I wondered what he didn't want to say in front of me.

I took a bite of the eggs and found them lightly seasoned with paprika and something else that exploded on my tongue. Who knew the Roman vampire could cook? Swallowing, I washed it down with coffee as the silence stretched out.

“You might as well say it, Peter. He's going to turn around and repeat it, anyway.”

Both of them frowned, but neither countered me. After another moment, Peter gave in with as much grace as he could.

“The boy's a fledgling. He's waiting to talk to you, but I don't think he'll have anything useful to say. Poor fool's shaking in his boots at being called forward for an audience.”

Guessing that was my cue to get dressed, I ignored it. It wasn't every day I had a home-cooked breakfast and I wasn't wasting it in a rush over a vampire who had already spent who knew how long cooling his heels.

The two vampires talked about the Vantage while they waited. Marcus put on his own water for tea with a disgruntled comment about priorities to Peter. Listening, I learned more about the behind-the-scenes

workings than I wanted to know. When the last bite was gone, I pushed the plate away with a contented sigh.

Peter was watching. The speed with which he swept it up and put it in the sink told me how eager he was to get on with the unpleasant business at hand. I graciously thanked him for breakfast and headed back upstairs. Marcus strolled casually behind me without an invitation.

He followed me to the bathroom door and lingered as I brushed my teeth. His gaze kept straying to the toothbrush holder conspicuously missing the blue one that used to be his. In fact, there was a shiny red one in its place. He wanted to ask about it, I could tell. But he didn't. I was glad because he would have heard the lie.

And I would have lied. There was absolutely no reason for the man to know I hadn't replaced him in my affections.

"Shouldn't you go ahead and get dressed, Marcus?"

His gaze met mine in the mirror as I rinsed. If I hadn't been looking for it, I would have missed the flash of power there. It was the only indication to how badly he wanted to reinforce his place here.

I shivered.

He saw it and guessed the cause. His answering smile let me know he knew how close to winning the battle back into my bed he was. With a significant swagger, he turned and strolled away. I watched him in the mirror until even his shadow disappeared.

Calling myself all kinds of names in my mind, I swept a brush through my hair and tied the tawny mass into a ponytail. My hands froze at the two pink pinpricks of new skin made more obvious by the flush of excitement our little battle of wills had caused.

For several heartbeats, I debated using makeup to cover the marks. My hand even reached for the compact on the glass shelf beside the sink, but I didn't pick it up. He was a vampire who had spent the night with me. If I covered the marks, the poor fledgling downstairs would probably read all sorts of things into it and carry gossip to whoever would listen.

With a final check in the mirror, I strolled into the bedroom hoping beyond hope Marcus had already dressed. He had taken pity on me and was buttoning the silk shirt as I moved to my walk-in closet and closed the door behind me.

His laughter called me a fool, but I stuck to my guns as I settled on a pair of dark slacks and a wine-red-colored shirt. I told myself I didn't care that it set off my tan and made the flush look natural, but even I knew how big of a lie it was. Polished black loafers finished it off. A glance in the mirror hung against the back wall proved me fit for company.

Marcus stared out the window as I exited the closet. His gaze broke away to take me in from head to toe before settling back on my face.

"You look lovely." The sincerity in his voice caused the heat from my flush to multiply.

“Thank you. Let’s get on with it. Betsy Vincent is counting on me.”

Marcus was enough of a gentleman not to contradict me as he allowed me to precede him back downstairs to a clean kitchen.

We found Peter leaning against the archway that led to my waiting room with a very nervous young man so new he still had acne scars. Give him time and he would be as pretty as the rest of them. I found comfort in the detail nonetheless. The poor boy jumped when we stepped past Peter. At the sight of Marcus, I thought he was going to break down and cry.

“Hello,” I said with the warmest smile I could muster. “I’m Destiny St. George. I understand you might be able to help me. Let’s go into my office, okay?”

The young man’s gaze latched onto my neck and never rose to my face. He turned even paler if that was possible. He nodded jerkily and moved to follow me, giving the two male vampires an extremely wide berth.

I moved around my desk to pull out the folder. The original photograph Marcus had sent with the driver was carefully centered on my desk blotter, but I was hoping the young man could help in a more direct fashion.

I turned to find him hovering uncertainly in the middle of the room. His gaze darted back to the doorway. Peter and Marcus waited on either side of it. It provided a formidable image. Not exactly the kind of scene to encourage bad little vampires to talk. I did my best to smooth the young vampire’s obvious fear.

“Relax. I give you my word that nothing you say here will put you in danger.”

Marcus gave me a disapproving look. I ignored it. Waving the young man to a seat, I came back around to lean on the front of the desk.

“What’s your name?”

“Sean Thorpe.” His response was immediate, automatically cracking a little around the edges. He had probably been a smoker while he was alive. His voice had that quality.

“Have a seat, Sean. I have a few questions regarding the man Peter showed you last night.”

“It was Ivan.”

“Excuse me?” His correction confused me and I made no effort to cover it up.

“Ivan showed me the picture. He’s the one...who...well...killed me.”

That was one way of putting it. I knew recruitment was carefully monitored, but he was the first newly made vampire I had ever spoken to who referred to his transition as being killed. It made for another question to be dealt with later so I mentally filed it away.

“Ivan, then. You recognized the young man in the photograph?”

“Yeah.”

Somehow, I hung on to my patience and managed a reassuring smile as I watched him continue to hover between the vampires at the door and me.

“Sean, the more you can volunteer, the fewer questions I’ll have and the sooner you can go home.”

“They won’t let me go.” His tone was accusatory as he flung out a hand toward the vampires.

“If there’s a problem between you and the hierarchy, Sean, it’s not over this case. I’m sure they’ll be willing to make some allowances for whatever you’ve done if you cooperate with me.”

His eyes lost a little of their wild set, but he still made no move to sit down. Considering his agitation, I didn’t either. Instead, I tried to look casual.

“I don’t know his name. I met him in a hell across town. We were…” He faltered and I knew this was the part he was sure would cost him his head. “We were juicing coeds together.”

A hell was a rave that hosted illicit activities for various sets of patrons. Juicing was another word for random feeding, usually in group settings. The victim was usually high, drunk or impaired some other way. They also didn’t generally survive the encounter. Because the rituals hadn’t been observed, they wouldn’t rise into a new life as a vampire. They’d just be dead. Most of them didn’t realize the difference. The ones that did were suicidal anyway.

Sean was right. I couldn’t save him from something like that.

“How did you meet him?”

“We didn’t meet, exactly. A guy I knew in college who was a junkie had tipped me off. He was trying to make me bring him across. I showed up and he was there with this stripper. My buddy was egging me on while I fed when that guy joined us. I swear to you, I stopped before she was dead.” He ended on a panicked note as he furtively glanced back toward Marcus.

“But you didn’t stop him, did you?” Marcus’s voice cut into the rising panic in Sean’s. He worked so hard to obliterate this kind of thing. People say anger is a hot emotion. Not with Marcus. It was very, very cold.

“No.” Sean’s reply was so low I nearly missed it.

“Moving on,” I said to redirect the conversation to the information I needed. This was a limited-time engagement. I needed to get what I could out of him. “What happened then?”

“We left and he asked where he could find respectable entertainment while he was in town. I told him I generally hung out at the Vantage, but my king wouldn’t allow this kind of thing on his turf. He came with me to check it out. I got him a red pass at the door claiming he was an old friend of mine in for an extended stay.”

Visiting vampires were given a red pass while they were in town if someone from the tribe vouched for them. It gave them safe passage to places like the Vantage where willing donors could be found so they wouldn’t be reduced to hunting the streets.

“Did he give you a name?”

“He called himself Sam, but that’s not his real name. Damned man lied worse than I do.”

“So you didn’t press him?” I pushed because this was my last chance. It was a good thing that I wasn’t going to need to produce him as a court witness. Dust can’t talk.

“Hell, I didn’t care if he said his name was King Kong. He gave me a cell number and told me to tip him off for the next rave. It rang as out of service about a week ago so I figured he’d moved on.”

I reached around me to grab a pad of paper and pen for him to write the number down. I took my eyes from him for a moment, but he was waiting for it. Only my finely honed feline reflexes saved me. He leaped toward me. I reacted without thinking. Diving to the side, the edge of the desk caused a sharp pain as it connected with my hip on my way to the floor.

Sean, with all the finesse of a bull in Pamplona, crashed into the desk where I had stood and nearly flew over it. He righted himself, but the wild movement of his arm scattered the blotter, papers, jar of pens, and telephone over me and the floor. I knew as I ducked away from my flying stapler that I’d never be able to get to my feet in time.

Marcus was suddenly there between us. I could see Peter coming at Sean from behind as Marcus met the charge. It wasn’t even a contest. From behind, I couldn’t see what Marcus did, but the result was a shower of ash-fine dust all over my carpet.

I lay there for a moment with adrenaline racing through me. Inside, the lioness roared and strained against my control. Fight or flight generally meant shift in my case, but I held it back by the skin of my teeth.

Marcus turned to kneel next to me with a soft, “Are you all right?”

Meeting his concerned gaze with an annoyed one of my own, I said the first thing that came to mind.

“You couldn’t have waited to kill him until I had that phone number, could you? I didn’t even get to ask him if he knew Betsy. And you made a mess of my carpet.”

So much for gratitude.

He stared at me as if trying to decide how to take my outrage. Without a word, he rose to his feet and glided toward the door. Sitting up in the middle of the mess, I saw Peter looking torn between us.

“I’ll send cleaners, Destiny.”

“Peter!” Marcus bellowed from the front door.

Peter scrambled after his boss. To see a man like Peter scramble was almost worth the disaster my office had turned into.

With a disgusted look, I inhaled the oily, rank smell of dead vampire. Some of them burst into dust while some of them bled like humans. I’d always thought it was the old ones that dusted, but this proved me wrong. One day, after Marcus stopped being mad at me, I would get around to asking, now that the distraction factor was definitely out of the equation.

Chapter Five

By the time Yasmine strolled through the front door, I'd done my best to straighten my office. Even after three vacuums, the smell remained. The way she stopped in the doorway and wrinkled her nose said it was even more repugnant to her sensitive senses.

"Did you finally have enough of that snake?"

"Yas..."

"I know, I know." She held up a delicate hand and my eyes were drawn to the flashing diamond. "You care for him, though I still say love is pushing it. Someone turned into a dusty bunny in here, though."

"Yes and it was the very man you're so busy maligning that did it to save my skin."

She tossed her mahogany mane and laughed as she put her hands on her hips.

"Then it might be love." Yasmine and I had agreed to disagree on our relationship ideals a long time ago. In college she had been looking for Mr. Right, even before her first shift, while I was content with Mr. Right Now. She thought every relationship needed to be viewed from the compatibility factors instead of the fun quotient.

There were a lot of reasons she was getting married instead of me.

The thought made me glance at the calendar and groan. It was the bridesmaid's luncheon and I'd forgotten all about it.

"Don't worry, sis." Yasmine laughed as she caught my frantic look. "I couldn't call myself your sister if I didn't know you always forget things you don't want to do."

Yasmine had been left on the same doorstep as me a few months earlier. Since we'd scared all the families that tried to adopt us, we had become roommates and lifelong friends in the dormitory.

"Hey, I'm proud of you. I'm actually looking forward to the wedding. It's all the other things I don't like."

"Not true. You loved the lingerie shower you hosted at the house. Kale said to tell you he heartily approves of your taste, by the way."

"So glad I could make him happy." My tone was tart, but there was affection underneath it. Kale wasn't my idea of the perfect man, but Yasmine loved him and that was all that mattered.

Standing up, I glanced down at my dusty clothes and cringed. "Come on, you can tell me all about whatever has gone wrong while I change."

“You probably should shower before we go. You stink of moldy dust with a particularly acrid odor everyone will recognize.”

“Do I have that kind of time?”

I hurried to lock the front door and put up the closed sign. The jingle of the charm bracelet I’d given her for her sixteenth birthday told me she was making too much of a production out of checking her watch.

“Of course you do. Like I said. I had the driver drop me off with instructions to swing back by in an hour to pick us up. That’s plenty of time to get you presentable to the pack witches.”

I felt for her. Kale was something of a prince among wolves. His decision to marry an unpedigreed mutt had meant that Yasmine’s introduction to the pack had not gone smoothly. Her alliance to an equally unpedigreed lioness was also a bone of contention.

An hour later found me washed, styled, dressed and painted in a way I’d only do to help my sister. I’d bought the blue dress for this and would probably never find a reason to wear it again, but seeing her glow with pride over how well I turned out made it worth it.

“Now, I think you’ll do.”

I rolled my eyes at the mental pat on the head but hugged her anyway. Tears threatened to well up, but I fought them back. The wedding was going to cement changes in our relationship that had begun when Kale hauled her out on their first run. With the coming baby, she would be well settled into a life that wouldn’t have any room for me.

I started to make a snappy comment, but the ringing of the doorbell cut me off. It was probably better that way as we burst into laughter and she saved me from tumbling down the stairs to meet her driver.

I opened the door laughing over my shoulder at her and ran into a chest. A man’s chest, to be precise. Strong arms swooped in to grab my elbows, keeping me from falling down in my unfamiliar heels. I registered everything just ahead of the strong scent of lion that assaulted my nose.

I froze, trapped between Yasmine at my back and this strange lion holding me fast. Panic welled up, but I fought it as I reared back my head to stare at the face obscured by the brightness of the sun.

“Whoa, sweetie, I’ve got ya.”

The deep drawl broadcasted he wasn’t a local, but I knew that already. I was the only lion in town. If there had been another, especially a male, he would have found me years ago. He steadied me as he lowered me back on my heels. I was torn between bolting and standing my ground. The lioness instincts wanted to do one or the other. I compromised by stepping away, trying to force Yasmine back through the doorway.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered into my ear as she urged me onto the sidewalk. To the lion, she said, “It took you long enough. You were supposed to be here ten minutes ago.”

“You said about an hour, Yas. If you want punctuality, ask someone to drive you around who wears a watch.”

Betrayal was a bitter taste on my tongue. Whoever this man, this lion was, Yasmine had brought him here. Turning her around, I pushed her through the doorway.

“We’ll be right back, Luke,” she called over my shoulder as I kicked the door closed in his face.

“What are you trying to do?”

She looked down at me with a full pout. I frowned until she gave up the cute act with a heavy sigh. “You’re lonely. I asked Kale if he knew any lions and he happened to have a friend...”

“Stop! You asked your fiancé to find me a lion? By all that’s holy, Yasmine, what were you thinking? Kale doesn’t even like me.” I threw up my hands and stalked into my waiting room to pace and think.

“Destiny, Kale does like you. He wants to see you happy and settled down as badly as I do.”

And there it was. What was it with couples in those first throes of passion and their need to pair all their friends off? Granted, Kale and Yasmine had been chasing each other around for years, alternating on who was doing the chasing and who was being chased, but they’d only recently established themselves. Yasmine’s pregnancy had been the catalyst to make things permanent between them.

“I don’t want to settle down, Yasmine. We’ve been over this a thousand times. Just because you’re happily setting up house with the local pack doesn’t mean I need to find myself a pride and prostrate myself before the King Rex.”

“Fine. You still need a date for the wedding on Saturday. He’s come a long way to meet you, so at least give him that.”

“Funny, he got a glowing report and I got blindsided. Whose side are you on?”

“Mine.”

I pulled up short and turned to stare at her framed in the doorway. Her linen dress was immaculate and worth more than my car, though that didn’t say much. She had come a long way from the urchin at St. George’s. With a start, I realized I’d put enough distance between us so that we were barely friends. The only thing keeping us together was her dogged determination not to leave me behind.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what, Destiny? You’ve not done anything.” Her tone was so carefully neutral that I knew I’d hit the nail on the head. I tried to explain, wanting nothing more than to make things right between us.

“I’ve not been a good friend to you. When was the last time we had Saturday breakfast and gossiped over our week?”

“Since before I moved in with Kale. I’ve missed that. I’ve missed you. I know it was wrong to spring Luke on you, but I had this misguided idea that if we could get back on the same level in our lives, we’d be as close as we used to be.”

Yasmine had always been the one constant in my life. Shame replaced my temper. I pulled the drapes aside to see the lion leaning against the hood of the black sedan. Without the sun behind him, I could see him clearly. His cotton shirt stretched across broad, muscled shoulders. He was taller than my usual

preference, but it made me wonder what kind of lion he could make. Size displacement can be a daunting prospect in relation to a shapeshifter.

“I have to admit,” I said conversationally, “he is nice to look at. I could do worse for my wedding escort. No promises, but I’ll give him a chance to be nice to me.”

I knew better than to promise to be nice to him.

“That’s more than I’d hoped.” The relief was plain in her voice.

Yep, she knew me better than I knew myself sometimes. I let the drapes fall back against the window and we shared a smile.

“Okay, it’s trendy for the bride to be late, but we’re pushing it beyond what’s polite because of my issues. Let’s get this show on the road and take your lion for a spin.”

She opened the door and stepped through it, leaving me to follow. Setting the alarm and locking the door took a moment, but I dragged it out a few extra seconds to compose myself. Usually when I ran away from a man, I didn’t have to face him again five minutes later.

When I closed the door behind me, I put on my brightest smile and crossed the sidewalk to join them. Was it me or did he straighten a little bit taller when he turned to me?

I was very glad Yasmine had my number as far as my ideal male stereotype, even if he was probably the only lion in the jumbled assortment of Kale’s associates.

Rich brown eyes started at my toes and swept back to my face. Ordinarily, that would have offended me except it made sense this time. He’d already seen my face close enough to kiss so why shouldn’t he check out the rest of me?

He crossed that final step with his hand out and his smile showed the flash of a dimple.

“Hi. Yas tells me I was a bit of a shock. Sorry about that. I didn’t realize we were blind dating. I’m Luke.”

“Is that what we’re doing?”

I offered him my hand even though it was a little bit ridiculous. It felt small and dainty in his. I lifted my gaze from our joined hands back up to his. The earnestness and interest there was a balm to that feminine core of me.

“God, I hope so.”

The fervor in his mutter made laughter boil out of me. I tried to remember when the last time I’d been shocked to laughter.

“Make a deal with you.” I leaned closer to whisper even though Yasmine’s ears were more than keen enough to hear me. “I’ll go along with the blind-dating element of the weekend if you promise to be on your absolute best behavior.”

His mouth twisted up into that dimpled smile again. His hand closed lightly around mine as he lowered his own face closer to my ear to meet my whisper with one of his own.

“Absolute best?” I nodded, and he chuckled low and full of promise. “I think I can handle that.”

We stood like that, drawing in the scent of one another, until Yasmine broke it up with a quick reminder that we were going to be late. Luke dropped my hand and stepped back to the car, making a show of gallantly opening the door to the backseat.

“Since Yas tells me she doesn’t know how to drive, I’ll be your chauffeur for the afternoon. Hop in and let’s be off to navigate this crazy place you gals call home.”

We both laughed as I slid in first, followed by Yasmine. She gave an excited little bounce and a poke to my thigh when he closed the door and hurried around to the driver’s seat. All I could do was shake my head and smile at her enthusiasm. This week was her week to shine. If she wanted to imagine herself matchmaker extraordinaire, I’d play along. At least I’d get the chance to observe a lion in action. How much action remained to be seen.

By the time we reached Daffodil’s, I’d found out three things of interest. First, I should have driven because I was obviously the only one in the car qualified to get us there in one piece. The fact Luke didn’t crash the car was stupid blind luck. Second, in the process of not crashing the car, Luke had displayed quite a colorful language variety. Third, language notwithstanding, nothing seemed to ruffle his good humor. When he opened the door and offered me a hand out onto the sidewalk, he was smiling as if we’d taken a Sunday drive.

“Now, if you ladies need anything, I’ll be in the bar.”

“Driving under the influence is still a crime, Luke.” My jibe was met with a widening of his smile and a shrug.

“I’ll stick with unleaded drinks, then. I wouldn’t want anything to dull my hunting instincts, after all.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to decide if he was serious or not before tossing my nose in the air and stalking after Yasmine who was already three steps ahead of me. And if I put an extra sway in my walk, it was the unfamiliar height in the heels. Honest.

The appetizers and small talk were made bearable by frequent flirting between the table and the bar. It passed the time, anyway. His attention was a heady thing considering the looks he was getting from the women scattered around the restaurant. His eyes would pass over the room and come back to our group. It might have been egotistical to assume he was watching me, but it made me feel better about being stuck in the middle of snide and snippy werewolves.

Kale’s sisters weren’t bad, but the rest of them seemed to be at their most obnoxious. Of course, it could have been because the wedding was days away and time was running out to scare Yasmine off. I nearly told them how futile the effort was but didn’t want to make things worse. So I sat back and smiled pleasantly since I couldn’t trust my mouth to listen to the better judgment my brain was handing out.

When the waiter brought our meals, mine came with a very large, very fruity drink that reeked of rum, compliments of the man at the bar the waiter was quick to assure me.

I nearly sent it back on principle, but I needed the fortitude. Raising it in a toast, I took a long drink, relishing the burn of the rum down my throat. Yasmine turned to look over her shoulder to see what was going on since I'd taken the one seat left that faced the bar.

Her smug grin made me wish I'd been more discreet. One by one, my fellow bridesmaids made their excuses and left until only Yasmine, her soon-to-be sister-in-laws and I remained. The looks they exchanged set off every bell in my body. As a unit, they stood. Yasmine turned on the thousand-watt smile that had gotten her out of more trouble than I could count.

"Luke will be happy to drive you home. It's his rental car we came in. We've got to zip back to Kale's mother's house for some last-minute arrangements for some unexpected guests."

"You've got to be kidding me." I couldn't hide the dismay in my tone. "I can take a cab. He can go with you."

"You're nuts if you think I'm getting back in the car with him days before my wedding. Absolutely not. He's all yours."

She had the gall to wink at me as she whirled on her heels and strolled away with the two very happy werewolves flanking her. I vowed to find a suitable payback method someday. A quick glance toward the bar found my gift lion with his back to the dining room. I hesitated a moment, rose, grabbed my purse and beat a strategic retreat. Cabs might be too plebian for Marcus, but they suited me just fine.

Chapter Six

Letting myself into the office, I was glad I'd skipped out on Yasmine's artful matchmaking attempt. The stench of vampire had been replaced by the soft smell of mint. The cleaners had come and gone. Obviously, Marcus had another key stashed. I let myself into the office only to stop dead in my tracks. A vase of sterling roses, my favorite, decorated the center of my desk blotter. A small gift-wrapped box sat beside it.

Cursing the flutter around my heart, I hurried across the room to pull the card from the flowers.

The card read, *Judgment and Good Intentions often conflict. I hope this token makes it right.*

Rolling my eyes, I dropped the card and picked up the box. Pulling it open, I grinned as I picked out a tiny cell phone. Who needed the confession of a suicidal vampire when someone has a line to the person who pays the bills? Flipping it open, my guess was confirmed. The address book had a variety of interesting entries, but I stopped at the one I needed. Jotting it down, I hurried behind my desk and called my favorite hacker.

Milo of no last name was one of those geeks who loved to find things out for kicks. The phone rang six times before he answered.

"If you're a telemarketer, I can find you."

"Well, I'm not. It's Destiny, Milo. Are you up for a *real* challenge?"

"Oh, my favorite lady. Whatcha got for me?"

"A number...mobile. I need to know what numbers have come in and out with any regularity, who pays the account, and an address. Think you can do that for me?"

I held my breath, hoping he couldn't tell how badly I needed the information. Milo was the best and he generally cut me a break on prices. If he knew how much I needed this, he might decide now was the time to get greedy.

"Is it still active?"

"Maybe."

"Destiny, you always give me the most fun. What's the number?"

I gave it to him and found myself talking to the dial tone. Hanging up the phone with a smile, I shook my head as I stood to move the roses to the credenza against the wall so I could see them. Marcus was going to have to get used to the word no, but I'd take the tokens anyway.

The door opened behind me while I was pulling the plastic stick holding the tag from the flowers.

“Destiny St. George?”

“Yes?”

I turned and blinked. The vampire standing in my foyer surveyed me like a cat would its prey. He was old. So old the only flesh showing to the world was his face. A fedora covered his head and shaded most of his face while a very expensive trench coat belted about his middle. He wore equally expensive driving gloves to cover his hands. A pair of sunglasses hung casually from his right hand.

There was something familiar about his angled features, but I couldn't place them. I put on my best professional smile even as I slipped the card from the flowers into the tiny pocket of my dress. We stared at each other for a moment before he smiled and nodded as if reaching a conclusion to a debate I knew nothing about.

“I begin to see what Marcus's fascination is, I think.”

I started to argue, but restrained myself. If he was a friend of Marcus's, then the smarter thing would be to let it lie. A vampire that old must be a friend. Instead, I waved him to a seat invitingly. He stepped into the office, but didn't cross the small space to the chairs.

“Can I get you something, sir? Coffee? Wine?”

His gaze flickered to my throat where the marks from last night's feeding were still very evident to a vampire of his age and strength. Something flashed there before he hid it behind a pleasant expression. It was too well practiced to be true and a very subtle shiver ran up my spine.

“Thank you, Ms. St. George, but I'm beyond such mundane refreshments. In truth, I've heard so much about you that I simply dropped by for an introduction.”

Sun sensitive and unable to drink anything but blood meant this vampire was probably the oldest one I'd ever met. The older a vampire got, the less tolerant his body became. I couldn't help but notice he didn't offer his name, so I took a step forward and held out my hand.

“I'm sure my reputation is misleading, Mr...?”

His smile widened to show the sharp points of his incisors. And then he was suddenly gone. I blinked and whirled, stumbling on my heels. I reached out and grabbed the credenza to keep my feet.

The sharp crinkle of paper under my hand made me spin around before I had my balance. The vase of roses was nearly upset, but I caught it in time. Blind luck kept me on my feet. My catlike grace had abandoned me. Beside the roses was a stiff sheet of parchment-style stationery with a typed message on it.

It read, *The man you're looking for in regards to the missing woman will be at 1128 Westmoreland in the subbasement at two a.m. Don't come without protection lest you become an entrée.*

Fear made my heart pound. No vampire had ever used magic on me to vanish. When the bell above the front door chimed, I turned toward it with a snarl. Luke threw his hands up and froze.

“Whoa, whoa. No harm, no foul and no biting.”

Instincts warred as I forced myself to calm down. My heart settled and I took a deep breath. The soft scent of roses, mint and lion was a balm against the fear. I tossed my head back and let go of the remaining rush of adrenaline. One day soon, I was going to have to drive up to the forest and let the lioness have her turn or situations like this were going to bring on a shift I wouldn't be able to stop.

"What happened?" Luke's tone was soothing, but there was an undercurrent of a low growl. The lioness stretched against the tight leash in response.

"Nothing. Wait. Wait. Just give me a moment."

Standing up, I kicked the heels off to stalk around the room. It took several turns before I had a firm grasp on myself. Turning back, I found Luke leaning against the doorframe waiting with a patience I couldn't help but admire. He simply raised an eyebrow.

"Okay. When you got here, did you see a reject from a Pink Panther film on the street? Come out the door? Any clue?"

"Pink Panther? You'll have to be a little more specific."

"Fedora, trench coat, gloves and sunglasses? Not ringing a bell?"

He shook his head and I cursed.

"Let me start at the beginning. I had a strange visitor. A vampire old enough to be sensitive to sunlight strolled through that door and I didn't see him leave."

"Is this related to a case?"

"Maybe. He left a note. He zaps me into oblivion and leaves me a blasted note." I took the paper and waved it at him. When I made no effort to bring it to him, he crossed the floor with easy grace to take it from me. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have shared, but I was rattled beyond client confidentiality. It only took him a moment to grasp the consequences.

"So, you're working a missing-person case and this guy strolls in and gives you the proverbial gift horse. The problem is?"

He didn't see the problem? Of course he didn't because I hadn't given him the full story. I was going to have to tell my potential suitor about my destructive relationship tendencies. Well, the beginning had been promising while it lasted.

"The problem is that he came out of curiosity because I've got this thing with the local vampire king. He apparently wanted to see what the fuss was all about."

"You're in a relationship with a vampire?" He managed to make it a polite question without any obvious effort.

"No. Well, not anymore. Marcus and I have this thing...on again, off again. I called it off for good a few months ago, but this case sent me back to ask him for information. I'm trying to find a woman I'm not sure really wants to be found. She was last seen with a young vampire."

I was babbling. I paused and tried to collect myself.

“I take it Yasmine doesn’t approve of Marcus?” His voice held laughter. In my frazzled state, I was having a hard time finding humor in anything. I glared at him until he forced it away.

“No. Well, actually, it’s not Marcus she didn’t approve of. It’s my inability to relate to men on any type of long-term basis. You’re her attempt to engage any latent mating urges that might exist in my dysfunctional psyche.”

“I see.”

I searched his face for some sort of outrage. In his position, I would have been livid at Yasmine’s manipulation and me for going along with it. It simply wasn’t there. I had an awful thought.

“You knew.”

“No,” he corrected. “I suspected. The marks on your neck were the first clue. I’m not so sheltered as to be ignorant of how vampires generally pay for their meals.” Oh, man. The situation was going from bad to worse.

“No. That isn’t what happened. He fed. That’s it. We didn’t... I said no.”

“Did you mean it?” Luke asked.

“No?” I wasn’t sure how to answer. My tone firmed as I went on before he had a chance to interrupt. “Yes. I’m attracted, but...” I struggled to figure out how to explain the bite without looking like I was making a play for him. “I walked away from the relationship because it was time to move on with my life. Being a woman on his string wasn’t doing it for me anymore. I wanted more.”

“But he wants back in your life?”

Luke’s tone was soft. I nodded, turning away from true fear of what I might see in his face. I’d gotten used to the condescension in Yasmine’s. Pulling the card from my pocket, I tossed it on the desk where he could read it. Sitting behind my desk, I crossed my legs and waited for the inevitable.

“I see. Is he your normal escort for late-night hell visits?”

I jerked my head up and searched his face. Wishing I knew him well enough to interpret his expressions, I shook my head.

“You can’t take the man who makes the rules and enforces them to a hell. Everyone would run away. Hells aren’t my normal haunts, anyway.”

“So what do I need to wear? You can’t go in there alone.”

I stared for a heartbeat before I cracked up. “Taking you would be providing another meal in there.”

“Destiny, you’re hard on a man’s ego. Don’t underestimate me because I’m a nice guy. I’m a lion and can be as fierce as I need to be.”

I gazed at him as he planted his knuckles on the edge of my desk and leaned over. He went from sweet and determined to imposing in two seconds flat. Magic swirled around us and I checked myself. His eyes shone with a gold ring and something flared deep inside his gaze. His voice was a low growl as he asked the obvious question.

“When was the last time you changed?”

“About three weeks ago and it’s irrelevant.” Even I heard the lie. With a male lion spreading pheromones all over the place, when I changed last was definitely relevant.

“Why are you running from me, Destiny?”

“I’m not.” I wasn’t in the habit of lying, but apparently it was a day of exceptions.

“You left the restaurant without so much as a brush-off.”

“Leaving without saying goodbye was the brush-off, Luke.” I made my tone bored with some effort. This lion may not have tripped my switches right off the bat, but he was growing on me. He certainly appealed to my animal side, which didn’t bode well for my peace of mind.

“No, that’s a way to see how interested I am in pursuit.” His answer earned him a very unladylike snort.

“That’s a pretty egomaniacal statement, Luke. Have you stopped to consider that I may not want another unavailable man chasing after me?”

“I can assure you that I’m very available.”

“Oh, please.” I didn’t bother to lean away from his looming posture. “You don’t live here.”

He narrowed his eyes as he stared down with his nostrils flaring. With visible effort, he shoved himself off the desk and stomped across the room to stand beside the roses. Just when I was ready to warn him about breaking the vase, he moved on to pace across to the front windows. His tone was back to calm joviality when he finally spoke over his shoulder. Apparently, he wasn’t a man who needed much time to collect himself. A fact worth noting down for later reference.

“Do you want me to go with you to the hell or not? If you’ve got someone else you can take, I’ll bow out. Yasmine will skin me for a rug if I leave you to go alone.”

He had a point. Standing up, I walked to the front door, expecting him to follow. He didn’t disappoint. I leaned against the doorway as he strode from my office to stand in the hallway.

“Meet me here an hour early and wear something that doesn’t paint a target on your neck.” The words left my mouth before I had a chance to think about the consequences.

He simply nodded as he stepped through the doorway. I closed the door behind him, doing my best not to notice or to care that he stood there listening to me lock the door and set the alarm. He was still standing on the sidewalk when I turned and walked to the back of the house to go upstairs.

Chapter Seven

Somewhere between the shower to wash off the makeup and hair junk, and my closet for more serviceable clothes, my personality returned. With it came several interesting revelations. The first, and far from the most important, was that Luke had read the note and instantly known it was a hell. How could anyone associated with werewolves, who were about as straight-laced and conservative as they got, also be associated with vampire hells?

My surprise visitor had to be the one who'd visited Betsy Vincent on the day she disappeared. The odds of having two vampires old enough to have mastered that particular skill were slim to none.

I couldn't even remember his face. It had seemed familiar. I knew that much, but not even his eye color sprang to mind. Eyes were my weakness. I was a sucker for a pair of pretty eyes.

It sent a whole new shiver down my spine as I stood in my room made dark by blackout curtains. With some effort, I pushed the disturbing thoughts aside and managed to make a plan of action. Idleness didn't go well with my current state of paranoia. I needed to be somewhere else if he decided he wanted to come back for another chat.

With that in mind, I moved to my closet and surveyed my clothes. I'm not a clotheshorse, so it wasn't a large selection of options suitable for a stroll down to the seedier side of town. Worn jeans and a T-shirt with a bronze mock-turtleneck collar high enough to hide the marks from last night were about it. I didn't want to get mugged, but I didn't want to look like I was a regular either.

Locking the door behind me, I trotted down the back stairs. Traffic was as atrocious as usual, but my mind was awlirl with the details from my case and that kept me occupied as I crept along toward the beaches. Slowly, traffic thinned until the streets were nearly empty and the buildings were covered in graffiti. Finding parking wasn't a problem. The meter was broken, but I doubted any cops were patrolling down here.

Locking the door seemed like a waste of time, but I did it anyway. It wasn't like my Chevy was a prime catch. If a thief wanted it, my paltry alarm wouldn't have been a deterrent. Since I wanted my hands free in case I needed them, the copies of the photos of Betsy and her mysterious lover were stashed in a messenger bag along with a sizeable cash donation for my source. I hurried onto the sidewalk and strode down it purposefully. If luck was on my side, my source was still spending his days in the alley beside the pastry shop.

Even though I couldn't see anyone in the shop windows, I felt people watching me as I walked away from my car. Stopping to look at a drum display in a pawnshop window, I used the reflection to observe the street behind me. A shaggy blond head peered around the corner of the alley. Diesel Dan was a junkie. Somewhere in his mind warped by addiction, he had decided he wanted to be anything but what he was. It had taken me weeks to convince him that he wouldn't turn into a lion if I bit him. It had taken Kale to convince him that he couldn't live in the alley by my building in hopes I'd change my mind.

Even if it were possible to contaminate someone like that, I wouldn't have. I just didn't trust his sanity that far.

Diesel Dan had moved on to the vampires when he realized it was possible to be transformed by one of them. Every time I came down here, I half expected to find his corpse waiting for me. Marcus had the same reservations I did about his state of mind and passed the order that he was not to be brought over.

So that left Diesel Dan lurking on the fringes of the underground, which made him an excellent source of information. Provided, of course, he was willing to talk to me. The last couple of times I'd come calling, he had still been mad at me.

Turning slowly, I didn't look away from his reflection until I could meet his gaze directly. This time, he didn't dart back into the alley like he had during my last attempted visit. I watched him and waited for a sign that he would be willing to talk. He cocked his head like a bird, obviously listening to the voices in his head. After a moment, he backed a step into the shadows and waved me over.

It took some fancy footwork to get across the street without becoming roadkill, but I managed. Stepping past the opening and walking toward him took more faith than I wanted to admit. He couldn't hurt me, but I didn't want to startle him and have him lash out. If he did, I would have to defend myself. That would end badly. I needed information, not to hurt one of the only informants with total access to the underworld. There were benefits to being considered certifiably insane. People, no matter the distinction, managed to ignore you to the point they forgot you were there.

My gaze drifted to the fresh bite marks over his relatively clean T-shirt. He had recently bathed, but his hair was the same oily blond shag. Someone was trying to take care of him it seemed.

"Hey, Dan. How are you?"

He looked at me with piercing blue eyes vacant of true understanding. Dan concentrated on listening to something I couldn't hear and nodded slowly to himself. When he finally spoke, it was slow and deliberate even if it didn't make a lot of sense. A direct contrast from the wild, rambling way of speaking to which I had grown accustomed.

"I'm good. I'm better than I used to be. Caroline likes me to be at my best. I'm trying to be worthy. I am."

I hoped Caroline was the vamp he was feeding. I made a mental note to check up on her. His hand drifted to his neck and I slowly reached up to tug down the collar of my own shirt. Diesel Dan's expression lit up and I was instantly forgiven all wrongs he might have imagined.

"You understand. You do." His voice was rapturous. "But you must be careful. Someone wants you. He wants you bad. He told everyone he would give anything he could to have you."

"Who wants me, Dan?" I asked carefully.

"The big bad vampire that lurks in the shadows. He's been asking about you. Caroline told me not to tell him anything. I didn't, I swear."

His tone was edged with intensity and I had a moment of suspicion. Was he being especially vehement because he had or was he trying to reassure me of his loyalty? Considering how badly he wanted that transformation, either one was possible. It didn't bode well for me.

"Did he say what he wanted with me, Dan?" I asked as gently as I could. It was a more abrupt question than I would have liked, but I was afraid I'd lose my moment if I didn't rush a little. Dan was apparently having one of his better days, but who knew how long it would last?

Dan shook his shaggy hair wolfishly. "He didn't say, but we think he means to hurt you. You shouldn't be scampering about even in daylight. We can't protect you from him. We can't. You need to go back where someone can look after you. You need protection."

His voice was beginning to get agitated, so I interrupted. "It's okay, Dan. I came out because I needed to ask you a question and then I'll go straight home. I promise. But right now, I need your help."

That brought a huge grin to his face and his mounting agitation melted away. With careful fingers, I opened the messenger bag and pulled out the photographs. Holding them in one hand, I reached back in and pulled out the folded bills I had tucked in a different pocket.

He wouldn't take the money if it were offered. Diesel Dan didn't like charity. I dropped the bills onto the pavement away from the trash bins. His gaze flickered behind me. He'd pick it up after I'd gone. At least, I hoped he'd remember. The key was not to stay too long even on his saner days.

"Have you seen either of these people, Dan?"

He looked at the pictures and frowned. He started to shake his head and reached out and snatched the picture of Betsy Vincent from my hand in a movement faster than it should have been. The move made me question how close his mentor was to bringing him into the world of the undead. I added a note to my mental list to have Marcus talk to this Caroline and reinforce the decision not to observe the rituals regarding the shaggy vagabond.

"I know this woman. She was with *him*."

"Who?"

"The one in the shadows. She was his *special* toy."

So, that answered a couple of questions. My mysterious visitor wasn't random. Granted, I'd gathered as much from what he'd said, but it was nice to have some things confirmed. Mr. Pink Panther also had Betsy Vincent. Of course, that didn't tell me why he'd tipped me off about the vampire she had disappeared with.

Gently taking the photograph back, I slid it under the one of Betsy's lover.

"Thank you. That helps me a lot. Can you look at this guy and tell me if you saw him?"

Dan beamed at the praise and stared at the picture with renewed concentration. He cocked his head yet again and finally shook his head.

"He wasn't there. I know it."

Tucking the pictures into the bag, I prayed he was sane enough to be able to answer the question I'd saved for last.

"Where, Dan? Do you remember where you saw the vampire hiding in the shadows with the lady?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but dove for cover behind the dumpster when a car playing far too much base backfired on the street. Just like that, it was over. He cowered and stared at me with a wild expression, gibbering. Mentally cursing old cars, I backed away carefully. At the mouth of the alley, I leaned against the old bricks and loitered while I considered the pieces to the puzzle he had given me.

Now, I knew for certain that my mysterious visitor had Betsy Vincent. Hearing that he was after me made me glad I'd taken the lion up on his offer. Scaring me was a hard thing to do, but this vampire had done it. If he wanted me, there wasn't much to stop him from trooping in and zapping me into submission. It made a strong argument for not going anywhere alone until this case was over, provided my suspicion that it would be harder to zap more than one person at a time was correct.

There were reasons vampires that old were historically hunted down. Bram Stoker's "fictional" diary account was one case in hundreds. Fear was a powerful motivator.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before Diesel Dan poked his head out from behind the dumpster, but it was long enough for my paranoia to make me jumpy. He looked out, saw me, and jerked his head back. He didn't hide as long the second time. He peeked out cautiously before scuttling out on all fours to grab the cash from the pavement and hurrying away without so much as a making eye contact with me.

At least he had enough money to get a hot meal and maybe a bed for the night. With a tired sigh, I pushed away from the building and made my way to my car. The drive home didn't answer any of my lingering questions. I let myself in downstairs and into my office.

Making notes in the file only took a moment, but it gave me a chance to unwind from my adventure. After locking the notebook securely in the desk drawer, the clock showed there was enough time for a nap before I had to meet with my evening escort. I trotted upstairs for my pajamas and blacked-out bedroom.

Chapter Eight

Sleep came fitfully. The toneless beeping of the alarm snapped me awake. It took another shower to bring me back to life and fresh coffee to prepare me for the night to come.

Wandering into my closet, I surveyed my selection of clubbing clothes. When going into a hostile situation, I had two options. I could appear harmless or I could go for fierce. Leather was best for putting together a look that displayed my assets as the huntress I was. Since black was the only shade I had, once I made my choice of attire, I was set.

This look, I could do with my eyes closed. It didn't say good things about my entertainment choices.

At a quarter to one, I pulled on the boots that went with the pants and chuckled over the low heels. At least I wouldn't have to worry about breaking my neck if I made a run for it. Finishing off the outfit with the messenger bag carrying the pictures and my ID, I was ready to go.

Locking the back door and trotting down the steps, I smelled lion a heartbeat before I saw a shadow move away from the wall. Moonlight bathed Luke in a glow and I pulled up short.

Gone was the conservative boy-next-door and in his place stood a species I wasn't prepared to face. He wore leather pants that weren't new. Even in the shadows, I could see they clung to his body with loving familiarity. The shirt was silk. Two steps closer revealed them both to be the same deep brown of his hair instead of the black I first thought them.

"Glad to see you packed prepared."

It sounded waspish, but I meant it to. Anything to cover up the way my body clenched at the sight of him. Maybe it was simple deprivation, but I wanted to get the business of the night over so I could explore the sudden potential wrapped in leather before me. When I'd called him a dead-end candidate earlier, it was only physical distance that made it so. Distance suddenly wasn't such an obstacle. When he answered, his voice showed a rougher, more edgy growl.

"I never know when I'm going to be invited to visit a hell with a hot lioness in need of taming."

I laughed as I skipped down the last few stairs. "Dream on, lover boy. Better men than you have thought it and tried."

"Better *men*. I'm not a man. I'm a lion and you're beginning to realize there is a difference."

I tossed a look over my shoulder as I moved to my car only to have his hand stop me with a gentle grasp on my forearm.

"My car is a rental and insured. Something tells me we might need the extra precaution."

“Sexy, professional man who packs leather for out-of-town weddings and can think in precarious situations. Does your dating profile read like that?”

White flashed as he laughed with me. It softened the tough image enough to make him seem approachable. It also served to remind me exactly what kind of danger I was about to put him in. We turned toward the street and passed through the alley that doubled as the entrance to our parking area, and the lion was obscured by the shadows once more. By the time we stepped onto the sidewalk and were bathed in the artificial light from the street lamps, a hunting lion had replaced the man. His gaze canvassed the area with an experienced air.

The sudden change only added more questions to be asked later.

“Don’t even think about leaving me behind. I’ve shed my Clark Kent persona and turned into Superman for you. If you think to go it alone, I know where you’re going and whom you’re going to meet. I will bring reinforcements.”

His perception stopped me in my tracks, literally. Finally, I shrugged and motioned toward the dark car at the curb. “Then let’s get this done.”

His hand slid along my arm and around my waist. He must have felt the shiver as he handed me into the sedan but had the grace not to comment. The car had seemed roomy and luxurious sitting in the back with Yasmine. Sitting in the front with Luke, it was still luxurious but definitely felt a lot smaller.

The navigation system broke the silence as he drove across town. I wasn’t sure what to say and he seemed to be happy with his attention on the streets. Thankfully, there weren’t many cars on the road.

The street he turned onto wasn’t the kind of place where I thought I’d find something like a blood hell. It was upper middle class, quiet, with cars that screamed of soccer moms. We parked on the curb and walked to the house. I felt somewhat ridiculous until we rang the bell and met the woman who answered the door. She was wearing a flaming scarlet bustier with a pair of striped Spandex pants that left absolutely no doubt about her lack of underwear preferences. She took one look at us and pointed to an open door halfway down the hallway from the foyer.

“Downstairs.”

In the process of checking out the two-story foyer, a tiny face peeked around the open railing on the second floor. Fear and outrage swamped me. What kind of woman hosted vampires with killing binges in her basement while her children slept upstairs?

Luke’s gaze followed mine as his arm locked around my waist. He was right. First things first. I vowed this would be the last time it happened. For the moment, the children were safe. It would be too high profile for someone to prey on the hosts’ family.

I let him steer me to the door and preceded him to the basement. A man sat in a recliner beside a doorway hidden behind a bookshelf that had been pushed aside for the event. He set his book down, straightened his glasses and surveyed us before standing up.

“You’ve not been here before?” He made it a question, but there was a keen intelligence in his gaze that the woman who opened the door had lacked. Obviously, we weren’t going to be able to waltz past this doorman.

“Nope. Nice house. Yours?”

“Thank you and yes. We like it.”

He turned to face me while sliding between the not-so-hidden door and us. The movement made the collar of his rugby drop enough to show not one, but two healing sets of bite marks. So it wasn’t the lady of the house catering to vampires, after all. The realization that the woman who had opened the door had been lacking that telltale mark made me feel a momentary flash of guilt at judging her so harshly.

Luke slid his hand from my back to my arm and tugged me ever so slightly. He had obviously reached the same conclusion I had.

“Come on, Anne. I knew this was a bust. Just because that vamp gave you a good ride yesterday doesn’t mean we’re going to stroll in for a repeat performance. He obviously was blowing you off. Let’s go find that lioness he told us about and see if she wants to play.”

I blinked at him and covered it with a glare. Acting was never my favorite element of work, but I gave it a go.

“Harry, you only want to get us both into bed and her into our pride. If you want to wake up sandwiched between us, this is what it’s going to cost. I want another go at that vampire before I have to share my mate with some strange lioness. Especially since you don’t even know if she’s going to want anything to do with you. Come on, she’s living alone. What kind of lioness lives without a pride?”

The man watched our exchange with increasing interest. Subtly, I nearly missed it, he wrinkled his nose and scented us. My first thought was shapeshifter, but he didn’t feel like one. There was absolutely no magic clinging to him. Something flashed in his gaze and I knew that while he might look human, he wasn’t. I didn’t know what he was, but human wasn’t it.

We were obviously into something deeper than the average vampire hell.

“Anne, I’m telling you, he blew you off. This cloak-and-dagger hunt is another way to ditch you. You’re wasting our vacation on an obsession. If you’re that interested in having another bloody ride, we can find one for you when we get home.”

I used his comment as an excuse to let my magic out a little, as if I were getting angry. It washed over the doorman and sparked absolutely no magical clashes. I wanted to feel him out more, but he spoke up.

“Perhaps, if you can tell me who you’re looking for, I can help? We’re a very tight community and the fact you’re here means that you’re obviously familiar with one of the intimate crowd.”

“We don’t know his name. We met him at the Mystic Vantage last night.” I prayed that whatever he was, he couldn’t hear the lie. He smiled and I added that to my growing list of characteristics to research later.

“Describe him, then.”

I described the vampire from the photos and watched the man’s face as he obviously recognized him. He opened the door and waved us through.

“He’s in the back. The combination to the room is twenty-six, seventy-four, twelve.”

I moved through the door wondering what he meant and found myself at the head of another stairway. While I heard nothing, I put my hand on the wall to steady myself and felt vibrations. Luke stopped me at the bottom of the stairs. The vault-like door was the reason for the combination. Without asking, he stepped around me to swirl the large dial. When the last number was in place, there was a loud sound as the tumblers gave way. He glanced at me and hesitated before opening the door.

At my nod, he pulled the handle, disengaging the door, and nearly fell when it came open soundlessly on well-oiled hinges. Music blasted us. It was so shocking after the relative quiet that I flinched. With more bravado than I owned, I walked into the room with Luke at my back. It was a small comfort.

Vampires of all shapes, sizes and lifestyles watched us survey the room. Booths, chairs and couches provided comfortable arrangements for everyone, and it wasn’t nearly as full as I expected. Of course, some of the denizens of this place were probably down the hallways that sprang off the main room. I was willing to bet the vault area was larger than the perimeter of the house.

With a feeling of having bitten off more than I could chew, I spotted the man from the pictures at the last booth-style table against the back wall. He huddled there, his gaze darting about nervously. He looked scared.

I didn’t even want to think what could make a vampire look that scared, even a newborn like this one.

As I crossed the room, one thing struck me as out of character. Most hells specialized in the rare opportunity to feed on people willing to embrace death. They were usually either suicidal or working on the mistaken belief that simply being killed by a vampire was enough to make them rise as one. The vampires didn’t correct them by telling them there was a ritual involved. They simply enjoyed their willing food. But this one was lacking in victims. A few humans snuggled up with vampires who obviously weren’t interested in sharing them as blood for the pool.

It was a setup. Not only had I walked right into it, I’d brought another victim along for the ride. Me and my grand ideas.

Chapter Nine

Sheer force of will kept me moving across that wide expanse of carpet. “Sam” watched us come like a fox watches the hounds when the hedge is too thick for it to get away. I stopped beside the table with Luke close behind. Since being trapped between the table and the wall wasn’t my idea of comfort, I leaned on the table and spoke as softly and calmly as I could.

“Hi, Sam. You look like you’re expecting us.”

“My name is Todd. I don’t know anyone named Sam.”

I inhaled, hoping to find a hint of honesty. The room smelled too much of blood, alcohol and smoke. Maybe Yasmine’s nose would have picked something up, but not mine.

“Okay, Todd. Where’s Betsy?”

“Who?”

His face hid nothing and showed honest surprise and confusion. This was definitely not going according to plan. Since I’d packed pictures that showed faces rather than incriminating positions, I didn’t even have the proof to show him that I knew exactly how well he knew the lady in question.

“Maybe she used an assumed name, then. You do know her. Tall, leggy blonde with a very expensive stylist and clothes to match? Blue eyes...and favors blue lingerie?”

His face remained blank and I cursed. The proverbial bad feeling pooled in my stomach as I pulled Betsy’s picture from the bag, leaned forward and pushed it toward him. Whatever I was going to say was forgotten as a psychic tremor rocketed through the room when the vault door opened. Glancing over my shoulder, I gaped at Marcus strolling toward me with Peter and Emanuel at his back. The look on his face was not happy.

Two things stuck me. No one ran for cover and he was apparently not a stranger as he nodded a greeting to several of the closer sets of vampires.

Then the realization clubbed me over the head. This was no more a hell than the Vantage was. I cursed myself for a fool. It was a private Blood Club and Marcus knew all about it. Lord, I was slow. Feeling incredibly stupid, I straightened and had the forethought to move between the approaching vampire and the lion. My romantic life was about to rain all over my investigation and all I could do was watch the storm come.

Marcus’s face was carved into chiseled lines of perfection as he looked past me at his rival. With a dismissive tilt to his head that was vaguely insulting, he turned his attention to the vampire at the table.

Todd's gaze wasn't on the picture on the table. It was locked on Marcus with an expression that could only be described as pure unadulterated terror.

Peter and Emanuel, like two avenging angels, one light and one dark, stepped around Marcus. Emanuel, with all the courtesy of the Spanish gentleman he had once been, gently urged me back from the table by sliding beside Todd in the booth. It wasn't very subtle, but effectively put himself between the rogue and me. I watched him slip the photograph off the table and tuck it way in the folds of his jacket.

"Destiny, you seem to be picking up strays. I thought you didn't like pets?"

Marcus's caustic comment brought my attention back to him and I flinched away from the mild acid in his tone. Stepping back until the heat of Luke's chest radiated through my skin, I could feel the other vampires in the room watching us with a sharpening interest that only came with the threat of blood being spilled. Unable to resist, I replied in kind despite that tiny voice in my head screaming I should let it go.

"Marcus, how nice to see you here. Were you just in the neighborhood or is this a place where one of your...meals frequents? I didn't think vampire whores were your thing."

It was mean, catty and beneath me. He had started it, but I didn't have to lower myself to the level of trading insults. I waited for the next volley, but Luke touched my arm and slid it up to my shoulder in a proprietary way. I didn't move from under his hand, but I didn't encourage him either. Marcus's gaze dropped to that hand and stayed there for a heartbeat before rising to stare into my face. Something dangerous and close to rage lurked in the depths of that gaze, but I ignored it.

Marcus reached out in a lightning move to grab my hand. He pulled me away from Luke and steered me a small distance away. With the noise in the room, even a lion would be pressed to hear us. I let him do it because I couldn't stop him without a fight. Digging in would have given Luke an excuse to escalate the violence. What surprised me most was that Luke let him do it. Maybe he was one of those men who didn't need to prove himself at every turn. It was a refreshing change of pace.

"What are you about, Destiny?" Marcus hissed close to my ear. "This is the last place you should be, especially with *him*."

"What's wrong with him? I needed someone to watch my back and he was both available and willing." I didn't mean for it to be suggestive. Marcus read into it.

"As would I have been, if you had bothered to mention this was on your agenda."

"You were mad at me." It sounded petty. The sting from the way he'd stormed out of my house roared back to the forefront. "Besides, I didn't know I was going to be here when you left. It was a last-minute lead."

"You came here following a lead from your missing-person case?"

"Yes. I received a tip that our photogenic vampire would be here tonight just waiting to be questioned."

Marcus's face darkened. He understood the significance. The case now involved two of his places in addition to being centered on a vampire. A less trusting woman would have suspected he might be involved. Maybe I was a fool, but Marcus's honor was the one thing I would bet my life on. In this case, I wagered both Betsy Vincent's and mine. The lion could fend for himself.

"Was he able to help?" Marcus asked in a neutral tone.

"Casanova can't remember his own name much less the woman in question. Since you're here, maybe you can talk some sense into him. Care to give me a hand?"

At the word *hand*, Marcus's gaze flickered toward Luke. With a snarl, he stepped past me to make his way to the table. "You're so right. Let's deal with the business so we can turn to more important matters."

Even with vampire hearing, his voice was low enough that only those in our immediate circle heard him, but I felt the blush bleeding up from my chest. He *would* put our personal issues above a woman's life. Of course, he also knew me well enough to understand I wasn't going to be turned aside until I had what I had come in here for—information.

Magic, strong and furious, poured out of him and washed over us even though it was directed at the man in the booth. Luke responded with a noise deep in his chest. I didn't know anyone could sound like that in human form. As discreetly as I could, I jammed my elbow into his ribs and barely caught the small grunt of pain at the impact. He stopped, though. I'd hurt myself more than him, but he'd gotten the point.

Abruptly, the magic pulled back and Marcus straightened. With a sharp nod to Peter, he stepped away from the table with a terse order. "Bring him."

Marcus turned and had my elbow in his hand before I even felt the movement. He started toward the door leaving me the choice of digging in my heels and making more of a scene, or allowing him to sweep me along. Since I had already met my quota for embarrassment for the night, I followed his lead, hoping Luke would too without any noble gestures. If I managed to get both of them out of the room minus bloodshed, I was willing to call the night a success without finding the elusive Ms. Betsy Vincent. The thought didn't make me feel any better about myself.

Marcus let his temper get the better of him during my moment of distraction. Without breaking stride, we swept through the doorway a kind vampire had jumped up to open. It sealed behind us and the sudden silence was deafening. The sound of my boots on the hardwood steps seemed so much louder than the vampires' or Luke's, but then men's shoes aren't made the same. Even the shoe industry was sexist.

We barely cleared the doorway at the top of the stairs when Marcus let go of my arm and spun from me in a move too fast for my eyes to follow. Luke, who had followed us up the stairs, tried to sweep me up and out of the line of fire, but I saw him coming. Vampires might move at that faster-than-sight speed, but a werelion was my equal. A duck and a dodge carried me under his arm and past his rush. My one thought was to keep Marcus's temper from putting him in a corner he really didn't want to be in, if I knew him half as well as I thought I did.

Marcus had the man guarding the stairway door pushed against the wall with his hand on his chest. From the way the man struggled to breathe, he exerted more force than was healthy on the man's sternum. The man's eyes were wild with fear and he breathed in shallow gasps, but it was the sight of Marcus's face contorted with rage that made me hesitate.

"You would give refuge to this? A vampire that slaughters innocents among you?"

"I did not know, Master. Truly...we would not..." The man's voice trailed off from lack of air and I heard something crack. It was enough to snap me out of my moment. Grabbing hold of Marcus's arm, I attempted to wrestle it away, but I had forgotten how terribly strong he was. In his current frame of mind, I didn't think logic would do it, but I had to try.

"Marcus, stop. He didn't know."

"He is trusted with the safekeeping of intimates of the inner circle. It is his job to know."

For the first time since I had known him, an accent I couldn't recognize thickened his speech. It shook me to the core because it told me more than words how close he was to losing himself to the urge to do violence. Time to play dirty.

"His children are in the house. Any damage you do, they will see and it will scar them for the rest of their lives."

For an instant, I didn't think I had gotten through to him. He stood with all that impressive killing strength pressed against the man in absolute stillness. In a movement fast enough to send me sprawling onto the basement floor, Marcus let go and stormed away from the man as if he didn't trust himself to remain within arm's length. If he had been human, he would have been shaking with the rage suddenly boiling off him.

He blinked down at me on the floor for a heartbeat before dropping to a knee beside me. "Are you hurt, dear Destiny?"

I searched his face for some hint of the jealous suitor from seconds ago, but it was washed away in his outrage. He did have a right to be angry; however, I thought he was taking it out on the wrong person. The proprietor of the club obviously had failed in his job. If my visitor had paid a visit and had zapped him like he had me, I could understand it. With a show of trust I really didn't feel, I offered Marcus my hand to help me up before replying as carefully as I could so as not to stir that rage.

"I'm fine. Warn me before you start making those faster-than-light moves next time."

He smiled as he took my hand and the weight of his temper slowly receded as he pulled me up against his body. It was entirely too up-close and personal, but I went without protest. If his passions were high, I'd let him start thinking of other things besides murder. He had a date tonight with another woman. Maybe she'd send me a thank-you note.

The moment may have stretched to uncomfortable awkwardness, but Luke carefully cleared his throat. It served to remind Marcus privacy was an illusion. With a glare over my head, he loosened his grip and allowed me to step away.

With casual dignity, Marcus smoothed his shirt and redirected the glare to the man holding his chest.

“It’s no more than a broken rib, but go to the hospital and have it bound. Peter will pay you a visit tomorrow to discuss our arrangements.”

He turned on his heel and strode toward the stairs leading to the exit, leaving the rest of us to follow. Luke closed the distance and was a warm heat against my back. It took some effort not to look at the stairwell at the front door to see if the impish child was still watching.

Breathing in a deep breath of cool night air, I veered away from the vampires toward Luke’s car. After Marcus’s show of temper, I wasn’t about to be stuck in a car with him. Luke might drive like a maniac, but he was the lesser of the two evils.

“Where are you going?” Marcus’s question didn’t slow my stride.

“We’re going to follow you so try not to dust him off your seats before I have a chance to talk to him, okay?”

“Destiny...”

I kept walking and he didn’t push. Maybe he knew he was on thin ice with me and was being good. I was more inclined to believe he wanted to question the errant vampire without me in his way, though.

Luke stepped around me to open the car door and I managed not to glare at him. Where, exactly, had he been while Marcus was being all dangerous-vampire-bent-on-murder? I waited until he slid behind the wheel before pursuing the topic. And they say I had no patience.

“Were you going to let him kill the man?”

“You had everything well in hand.”

The engine started and he seemed totally unfazed by anything that had gone wrong in the last half hour.

“Gee. Thanks for the backup, buddy. Way to be the muscle I thought I was taking in with me.”

He pulled the car out of the parking spot and followed the black limousine. At my jibe, he slanted me a terse look and appeared to consider his words before he spoke.

“Destiny, think about it. Marcus is a vampire powerful enough to maintain a firm hand over his tribe while letting them operate more freely than any other tribe I’ve ever seen. We could slug it out, but that wouldn’t have helped you because it was way too public. I’m not a fan of dying to keep a vampire king’s reputation intact, thank you. Besides, he was brewing for a fight and he didn’t come after me for the same reason. If we’d gotten to blows, one of us wasn’t walking away. So, he picked a fight with someone he had a real grievance with other than personal jealousy. Putting myself between him and how he manages his safe houses would have been enough reason for him to make an example out of me.”

“You talk like you don’t think you can win.” I didn’t mean it as an insult and he didn’t take it as one. His laughter teased my skin while he settled deeper into the seat as if he had been gearing up for a fight and I’d surprised him out of it.

“The man was born in an age where warfare and hand-to-hand combat were taught from the cradle. I’m a realist. Fighting him with no-holds-barred? Only has one outcome and it’s not in my favor unless he’s feeling suicidal. Vampires that old always think they’re in the prime of their lives. They usually aren’t looking for a nice lion to put an end to them.”

“I’m surprised your ego can take that kind of logic.”

He glanced at me with a hint of the teasing grin I was coming to like. Well, honestly, the entire lion was beginning to grow on me.

“Don’t get me wrong, Destiny. I think you’re the best thing I’ve seen in a really long time, but I’m secure enough in my own appeal not to pit myself against impossible odds to impress you. At this point, you’ve made up your mind as to how far this is going to go and are just playing the game.”

“Why would you say that?” His analysis surprised me. I hadn’t reached any such conclusion, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Because, unlike you, I was raised in a pride. The one thing you can count on with young lionesses is that they can string a male along until they have him right where they want him.”

The way he said it gave me a clue so I guessed. “You have sisters.”

“Four of them. I’m the baby. You should know that identical twins run on my father’s side. They’re in the genes.”

“Your genes are the last things I need to know about.”

He grinned and continued driving. It seemed surreal to be chatting like we were on an actual date and not tangled with vampires. Of course, it could have been the rush of adrenaline of expecting tigers and finding housecats instead. The sheer insanity of the thought made me match his grin and settle more comfortably in the seat. Without a word, he reached up to the console and flipped on the seat heater. It was a tiny gesture, but the thoughtfulness made me uncertain how to act.

In my experience, random acts of kindness expected to be rewarded with something tangible at a later date. I pushed the thought away and turned my attention to the car in front of us, wondering what was happening. Luke let me retreat to my own thoughts. He made no effort to push his advantage. That soothed the rush of suspicion regarding his motives.

I expected Marcus to take us back to the Vantage. Instead, his driver turned toward the industrial district in the other direction. The warehouses were far apart when we began to slow down.

“Where are we?” Luke’s question made me jump. I said the first thing that came to mind.

“Where no one can hear you scream.”

His face jerked toward mine as he followed into an empty parking lot. I waved his attention back to the front of the car. “Don’t worry. If he wanted to hear you scream, he would have found a way to send me somewhere else. Guess I’d better get my questions in order because I sincerely doubt our amnesic vampire will be around come morning.”

“Do you really think they’re going to kill him?”

The question was so terribly naïve I could only shake my head. He pulled the car to a stop behind the limousine. Before Luke cut the engine, the door opened and Marcus emerged into the glare of the headlights. He closed the door behind him and strode toward Luke’s car as the limousine pulled away.

Chapter Ten

Luke and I watched him come. For a brief moment, I considered telling Luke to follow the car, but I didn't. A loud click echoed in the silence as Luke pressed the button and the doors unlocked. When Marcus opened the door, I turned to face him as he slid into the seat.

"Did the company become that tedious?"

He closed the door and buckled his seatbelt without rising to the bait. Luke looked at the vampire in the rearview mirror and waited for instructions. I gave him bonus points for letting me handle Marcus.

"Destiny." Marcus's voice was filled with enough sadness to make me feel bad for trying to antagonize him. "I'm afraid Todd isn't going to be able to aid you in your hunt for Ms. Vincent. His memory has been erased."

"Well, the experts say time is the cure for amnesia. Are you taking him to another safe house to wait it out?"

Marcus gave a bitter bark of laughter before he responded. "You misunderstand. Todd doesn't even realize he is a vampire. His master removed all remnants of their time together. There is no cure for this type of amnesia."

"What are you going to do with him?" I feared I already knew the answer. "You can't hold his crimes against him if he doesn't know he did it. He can start over as a truly reformed criminal."

Marcus shook his head and dropped it back against the headrest. That he would let Luke see him look so defeated shocked me. Me? Well, I'd seen him at his best and his worst. But a stranger? There was definitely more going on here than I understood.

"I did point that out to our forgetful friend. Regrettably, he decided he couldn't bring himself to feed on people like a leech. He requested a quiet end to his situation."

The irony wasn't lost on me. A vampire who had reveled so much in the power of it that he was willing to take human life suddenly wished for beheading in a dark corner of some forgotten underworld crypt.

"You granted him his wish." It wasn't really a question, but Marcus answered it, anyway.

"I did. His memory is fragile and killing him now is kinder than watching his mind fail and putting him down in madness."

"So there really wasn't a choice." My tone sounded defeated. I shared the weight of the decision with Marcus.

“No. His mind was too compromised. It would have failed him. Tomorrow or ten years from now, the outcome was inevitable.”

“You should tell him about your Pink Panther man,” Luke said.

I jumped. I hadn’t forgotten he was there. Marcus’s logic bothered me to the point I’d hyperfocused on the mental image. The thought crossed my mind that if blackouts made your brain go to mush, I might be in trouble.

“I had my own little moment this morning after I got back from Yasmine’s luncheon.”

I brought him up to speed with the bare basics of my encounter with the Pink Panther vampire. At the description of my visitor, Marcus’s attention sharpened and the tension in the car skyrocketed as he straightened in the seat.

“We need privacy to talk about this. Mr. Stanton, would you please drive us to Destiny’s?”

If having Marcus know his last name fazed Luke, he didn’t let it show. He put the car in gear and began to retrace our steps. The tension hadn’t gone down between the two men.

“Your last name is Stanton?” Luke nodded, but didn’t comment. Turning to face Marcus, I continued, “And you knew that, how exactly?”

“I make it my business to know of males that come into my domain seeking to carve out territory, regardless of species.”

I thought his tone was dark before, but now it took on a positively aggressive edge. I glared at him and shook my head. “You always read too much into things, Marcus.”

“And you always underestimate what drives men to do the things they do.”

“Well, if he’s here to carve out territory, that’s between me and him since we’re the only lions in town. You stay out of it.”

“Ah, but it’s not only territory he’s after. He also wants something I hold precious.”

I rolled my eyes and caught a glimpse of Luke’s smile as he drove through the dark street. It was aggravating to have him so sure of his place already.

“Do you recall the ‘no’ part of our conversation yesterday, Marcus? That still holds. I’m not one of your girls anymore. I don’t belong to anyone and certainly don’t see myself settling down with the first lion that prances into town.”

Luke’s smile slipped as Marcus began to smirk. Their respective attitudes made me mad.

“But understand this, Marcus. You’ve gotten a firm answer to your offer and his is still solidly on maybe.”

“Maybe?” Luke’s question was full of heat and I shivered as the lioness in me purred against my control. The smile order reversed and I wanted to throw up my hands. How could men as powerful as they were be so willing to bicker over a woman like toddlers over a toy?

“Maybe. But don’t let it go to your head. If I did take you up on it, you’re going to have to learn to get along with Marcus because he’s my oldest friend next to Yas. If we can ever get past the point where he accepts my answer, we’ll still be friends.”

Neither of them smiled at that. Guess it wasn’t what they wanted to hear, but oh well. My life wasn’t cookie-cutter neat. And I was woman and feline enough to want the freedom to change my mind with an annoying bit of frequency.

Silence reigned during the drive across town. I let each man have his own thoughts and didn’t pry. I concentrated on trying to remember the face of the vampire this morning. What had been so familiar about it?

Then it hit me. Turning, I scrutinized Marcus, glad of my kitty-cat vision.

“He looked like you.”

Marcus simply stared at me and waited. He wasn’t surprised in the least. I pressed for more when he didn’t volunteer it.

“Who is he?”

“He’s my father.” A wealth of emotion rested in that simple statement, none of it kindling warm familial feelings.

“So, what? The same vampire brought you both over?”

Marcus’s mouth turned up in an expression that usually made my heart turn over. Except there was no giddy sensation this time.

“Have you spent so much time around us that you truly don’t know the specifics?” It was a rhetorical question, so I didn’t bother answering. He gave a heavy sigh. “I’m not some bitten fool to throw away my mortality so easily. I was born as I am, as was my father and my mother, as well. The lines of hereditary vampires are thinning, but there are still some of us.”

A chill ran down my spine. Vampires were a species as well as an aberration of nature? It almost seemed too much to wrap my mind around. The last few years flashed through my mind, along with all the questions I had never asked about why Marcus was so different from the other vampires I knew. What hit me most, though, was the fact that he was someone’s child in the infant sense of the word. Granted, everyone was someone’s child, but in his case, unlike the other vampires, he only had one sire. It made him obviously capable of having his own biological children as well as blood children. That, of course, made me realize that I hadn’t always been as careful about contraception with him as I should have been. My mind slithered away from that uncomfortable thought and landed on another as it dawned on me that I was the only one this was news to.

I glanced at Luke and saw none of my surprise on his face. He nonchalantly drove down the street as if he had known all about them. For all I knew, he had. After all, a werelion who packs prepared for

vampire hells obviously showed a more complete and intimate knowledge of the vampires than me. For some reason, it made that sliver of doubt about him splinter into several shards.

I'd have to wait until Marcus and I were alone to ask all the questions lingering in the back of my mind. Letting it go, I turned back to a topic that I could talk about without revealing too much information to unfamiliar ears.

"So, let me give this a logical spin. Your father, as in the man who put you in the cradle, is behind our mysterious memory-zapping madness which happens to have long-term consequences?"

"He is one of the few kings old enough to have acquired that particular skill. Having said that, he used a gentle touch on you if you can still remember his face well enough to connect him to me. He was careful not to damage your mind and in being so careful, wasn't as thorough as he could have been. Poor Todd lost entire segments of his life."

"So he really can't help me find Betsy?" I couldn't keep the disappointment out of my voice. Finding Betsy Vincent was suddenly of paramount importance. I'd love to say it was because I was that goal-driven, but it would be a lie. The sooner I put my hands on my target, the sooner I could deal with the overflow issues unfolding around me.

"No, sweet lioness, I'm afraid Todd cannot help you hunt your prey. And before you ask, my father is the last soul you need to even consider utilizing in your search."

Sometimes I wonder if I'm that transparent or if he just knew me that well. Luke took in a deep breath and that's all that kept me from jumping when he rejoined the conversation.

"You think your father is behind the woman's abduction, don't you?" Luke didn't even try for a neutral tone. His voice was full of accusation and an undercurrent of pure aggression. I saw Marcus's temper immediately soar to meet the fight, and interrupted.

"Luke, shut up and drive. Marcus and I are trying to figure out what's going on. One day in town doesn't make you an expert on the local population so please let us work through this."

He growled, but didn't fight back. I was glad because the last thing I wanted was the two of them fighting, even verbally, while Luke was behind the wheel. He simply wasn't a good-enough driver for that. Unfortunately, I thought less of him for it. Having a man around who required less maintenance than Marcus might have been a refreshing change, but not if he wasn't strong enough to stand up to me. I'd make him a lion-skin doormat in no time flat. I put another mental tally mark against him.

What was I thinking? Betsy Vincent waited for me out there to find her, and I mulled over my choices for a bed warmer?

Shaking myself, I turned my attention back to Marcus and gave Luke a bone.

"What he said. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"It would be the logical conclusion."

The tension level in the car was too high for him to make it sound as casual as Marcus probably wanted. It left me more questions, but I wasn't sure how to ask them diplomatically. An hour ago, I'd have played the hard-ass and tried to bully it out of him, but now I wasn't sure about my present company—either of them—enough to do it that way. Funny how lust managed to creep up and complicate every aspect of your life when you least expected it.

After a moment of contemplation that yielded absolutely no results, I asked the obvious question. “So if I can't track down the next lead in the case since every contact seems to be suicidal, what do I do now?”

“Do you really want the answer to that, Destiny? Are you ready to dance the dance at my father's lead? I can guarantee you that it won't be pleasant. Exhilarating, maybe, but definitely not pleasant. My father comes from an age where you were born to power and respect is reserved for those of the nobility. Everyone else is a pawn to be used.”

I watched his hand tighten on his knee. It was the first outward sign of how much this was affecting him. “Do you think we can set the tune?”

Marcus's laughter eased some of the mounting tension as Luke turned onto my street. As he pulled up to my building, I released my seat belt and got ready to make my escape. “Thanks for coming along, Luke. I'll see you at the rehearsal dinner tomorrow night.”

Marcus opened his door, stepped onto the sidewalk and moved away from the car. As I turned to slip out to join him, Luke's hand snaked across the seat to grab my arm. I instantly stopped under it and fought not to snarl at him to let me go.

“Destiny, you can't keep running from me. He may not be classically dead, but he's still not a fit mate for you.”

I tugged my arm free and got out without saying anything. His gaze followed me and I moved to the other side of Marcus before I looked back to meet it. There was something dangerous lurking deep in his eyes that made the lioness in me perk up with interest.

It made me wonder if I underestimated him. In fact, it made me sure of it. There was more to Luke than I knew. It made me wary of him on a new level. What, if anything, was he hiding?

After a moment, he pulled the car out onto the street and drove away. There wasn't any traffic at half past three in the morning. Marcus and I stood on the sidewalk for a moment and watched his taillights turn the corner.

“May I offer a word of advice?” Marcus waited for me to nod. “Even the tamest animals can be riled with the proper motivation to revert to their instincts. Be careful of that one.”

I couldn't disagree. Instead, I took him by the hand and led him to my front door.

Chapter Eleven

There was a little light on my phone that indicated voicemail. It blinked at a slow, steady pulse which I ignored as I reset the alarm. Whoever left the message would have to wait because I had faced the last truth I wanted to face for the night. There wasn't a need to invite Marcus to join me, but I held out my hand to him anyway.

We didn't bother to turn on the lights as we went upstairs. We both knew the way.

I tried not to think about what bringing him to my apartment meant. The conversation could have taken place in my office, but I wanted the comforts of home around me.

Closing the door behind us, I took a deep breath and let it out as I flipped the lock. Yes, I was being paranoid, but I was feeling a tiny bit freaked over the ease in which Marcus's father had done his Houdini.

When I turned around, Marcus stood cloaked in shadows. Even with my night vision, I couldn't see his face. He stood pensive and waiting. The set of his body broadcasted it. For a second, I wondered what flashed through his head, but then I let it go.

I strode past him into the living room and turned on an adjustable lamp as low as the setting would allow. Walking over to the wine rack, I pulled out a bottle of my favorite Australian wine. I loved the flavor and it was perfect for my pocketbook, cheap, exactly the mood I was in tonight. Cheap, easy and available. It didn't say much about me, but at least it was honest.

He followed. I expected him to crowd and pressure me even if he wasn't going to feed on me tonight. Part of me was counting on it—praying for it.

Handing him the bottle, I took the glasses from the hanging slots above the rack and moved to the couch. Mustering all my grace, I flounced onto the couch and hoped my ending pose was worth the effort. His gaze followed me as he worked on the wine seal and his breath hissed as the blade slipped and nicked his finger. Slowly, he raised it to his mouth and sucked the blood from it while I watched with a fascination that wasn't feigned in the least.

The atmosphere ripened with tension and possibilities. Was it only last night I'd turned him down? What had I been thinking?

"Start talking about vampire babies, Marcus." My voice was husky and did more to disclose my desire than any amount of flirting could have. The knowledge flared deep in his eyes and he popped the cork on the bottle without even glancing at it. Let's hear it for talented hands.

“Hollywood has broadcasted the basics about created offspring. Most of it is accurate with the a few notable exceptions. The only way to become a vampire is to have a master whose magic is strong enough perform the rebirth ritual.”

I waved my hand to move him along. “Know all that, Marcus. Give me something new.”

“Oh, demanding, are we?” His tone teased, but there was an edge under it. I was obviously pushing a topic he didn’t want to talk about. I had a moment of sympathy, but it passed.

“Start sharing since I’ve shucked my clothes without a care for birth control more than once because I was naïve. Enlighten me, please, especially if you ever plan to get the opportunity to go there again.”

Our gazes locked across the room and he prowled toward me. Wereanimals have a certain grace even in our two-legged form, but in that moment, Marcus was the greater predator. The potential for speed and strength made my body tighten as he came to me to pour my wine with another glass for himself.

I expected him to take the line I’d given him, but he surprised me.

“In order for a vampire to sire or carry a vampire child, they have to be born of a vampiric union. It doesn’t have to be two pure vampires. In fact, the odds of conception are higher if one of them is not. Vampires have long lives, the born more than those created for companionship.”

He sat on the couch beside me, closer than he should have, but not nearly close enough. I capped my impulses. There would be time for that later. He paused as he picked up my legs and pulled them across his lap.

“Vampires have bred themselves to the brink of extinction. More and more of our born offspring are too weak to hold our magic and do not share our needs. Others still cannot carry a child to term when they can conceive. Entire bloodlines have become extinct.”

He stared at his wine and finally took a long drink, savoring the full flavor of it. I used the opportunity to ask a question.

“So, you’re saying that you’re practically sterile?”

He looked at me with an expression so full of affront that I very nearly cringed. He replied in an equally indignant tone. “I’m more virile than most of my kind, Destiny. It’s only timing and fortune that made our union fruitless.”

“So you have children out there in the world?”

“No.”

It was a short answer and obviously something he didn’t want to talk about. Curiosity made me want to pry, but I resisted the urge. Instead, I filled in the blanks from our night, hoping for clarification.

“Your father has come to town to see you or just to be a nuisance?”

Marcus considered the question while idly spinning his glass. I took the moment to appreciate the fine bones of his profile.

“My father and I parted under quarrelsome circumstances. He could be here because he happened to find himself in the area or he could have intentionally come to bring me grief. My leaving the tribe cost him the kingship, so there is no love lost between us.”

There were a lot of clues in that simple explanation, but little actual information. I opened my mouth to question the circumstances when he leveled those baby blues at me.

“Destiny, it’s an old story that still brings me pain. Suffice it to say there are several things about Betsy Vincent that will appeal to him. He likes his mistresses fashionable, but it’s her barrenness that most likely attracted him. He has no desire to breed bastards on the world because I will not fight for the succession of his power. He knows that if he breeds another son, I will abdicate my birthright as soon as the boy comes of age.”

“You’re his only son?”

“Only surviving one, yes.”

“Tell me the story.” My voice was soft and it came out more of a request than a demand. I was getting more information from him now than ever before. My curiosity tingled like Spiderman’s spidey senses and I feared he’d realize how forthcoming he was being.

“I was the second-born son of a pure vampire union. My brother was my idol. He taught me to fish, hunt, live and laugh. He was there to help me learn to control the bloodlust when it rose in me and gave me the direction I needed to become the man I am today. He was everything to me.”

“You actually fished for food?”

He looked at me and smiled. “It’s not until we hit our full growth that our needs change. As we mature, the need for blood slowly replaces the need for food.”

“I’ve never seen you eat, just drink wine.”

“I’m not to the point I exist solely on blood as yet. I enjoy wine and a few other delicacies. The more dependent we are on blood, the more the other weaknesses offset the benefits of age.”

He settled back against the couch and swirled his wine in his glass. From the look on his face, he was light-years into the past. I sipped my own wine and waited him out. It didn’t take long.

“My father never noticed me until the summer my brother and I journeyed to the accompanying village to petition for the chieftain’s daughter. Xavier had been courting her for years, but it was me she had her eye on. I bowed out and respected my brother’s claim, but our father decided we should fight for the right to her. Her father thought my refusal was an insult and they reached an agreement that the surviving son would wed the girl. Xavier and I wouldn’t fight. My father stepped in and challenged him in my stead. It wasn’t a worthy match. While Xavier was still bleeding out on the ground, my father pledged me to the girl. I wouldn’t honor it. He thought he could force me into it. Had he not challenged Xavier first, I would have been the one dying on the ground. But, as it goes, I survived, if barely. He lost face that day

and the tribe ousted him in favor of a more tolerant chieftain shortly thereafter. We've run into each other over the years, but we've never made peace."

"So what does this have to do with your father's aversion to fathering another son and Betsy Vincent?"

His gaze rested on me and sharpened. I had all the pieces but they didn't fit together.

"I am the last male heir to one of the only remaining vampire families. The one thing he has over my head is the reality that I will not let that line die with me. Up until now, I've avoided significant entanglements and refused to give him the satisfaction of an heir. Until you."

And the reason for the mysterious visit became clear. "So how did he know that we were dancing around the proverbial family tree?"

By admitting that much, I conceded the point of our relationship. Children or not, an actual committed relationship or not, we had a life together even if it was only as friends. There was too much history between us. What I had said to Luke in the car rang true.

Lion or vampire...choices, choices. Right now, the vampire was winning, but was that because he was the warm body curled up next to me on the couch? It didn't say anything good about me.

"He has spies. He's been waiting for centuries for this. I took everything away from him and now he has the chance to do the same to me." He held up a hand to halt the protest I wanted to make. "Whatever you decide, I hold you dear to my heart, whether you're in my bed or not. That puts you on a level no other woman has reached and my father knows it."

"Fine, we're beating a dead horse. Let me ask another question. Why Betsy Vincent?"

"Because she's barren and looking for an escape from the hand that life dealt. He'll woo her with acceptance, compassion and promises of immortality. When she's aged to the point he finds her unattractive, he'll throw her away like countless others."

There was bitterness and sadness prevalent in his tone, but his expression never changed. Without thinking, I set my glass on the end table and rose up on my knees on the couch, catching my balance with a hand on his shoulder. At my touch, he turned his face toward mine. The despondence in his expression made my heart stutter. He didn't move forward to meet me as I leaned in to kiss him lightly on the lips, but he didn't stop me either.

He was still as stone and I thought he was going to reject my advance after all, but he softened. The kiss turned hungry and my body responded to the promise. He tugged me forward and I straddled his lap without breaking the kiss. I pressed into him eagerly. He seemed more than happy to have me there. My hands fell on the buttons of his shirt only to be caught by his. Pulling back, I expected him to take over the task himself.

I was disappointed.

Instead of undressing, his gaze was heavy as his hands held mine. It took a minute for me to realize that we weren't going to be heading to the bedroom so I could make up for the fact I'd kicked him out the day before.

Tension of the entirely wrong sort mounted as we stared at one another. The sound of his phone beeping in a text broke the spell. He let me go to fish it from the holster on his belt. With a glance, he put it away and turned that inscrutable face back to mine.

"The car is here. I sent for it before I joined you and your new pet."

And the world came crashing down around me.

Marcus had a previous engagement...for dinner and so much more.

"You're leaving." My voice was soft and full of the pain I wanted to hide. Sliding off his lap, I did my best to shake it off. I couldn't have it both ways. Either I was willing to play his game or he was going to play mine. It was a sour taste to swallow.

Marcus let me process the information in no apparent hurry to rush off to his date.

"Nothing would please me more than to stay and see this to completion. However, ask yourself why you are so quick to agree to something you were adamantly against not a full day past."

I raised my gaze back to his, wanting to argue, even knowing he'd see the lie all over my face.

"Consider your options, Destiny. Tonight you offer what you denied me yesterday with cold logic. You say you want a man who will be true to you? If so, why are you so eager to fall back into the comfort of my embrace when the lion is all too willing to negotiate his case? Then ask yourself if you've found what you think you want with your lion? It's no more in his nature to be faithful than it is possible for me to be. Shapeshifting lions live much like their feline counterpart. One or two males with a harem of females are the norm. With me, you know I would be true to you if I were able. But it's impossible. With him, it's simply against his nature to be content with a single lioness."

He stood up and offered me a hand. Even though I didn't need it, I took it for the olive branch it was and let him pull me from the couch. I expected him to release it as soon as I steadied on my feet, but he tugged me closer instead. Gently, he brushed my hair back from my forehead and placed a gentle kiss on it. Maybe he was trying to take the sting out of his words and the gesture did soothe the blow to my pride a little.

"When you're ready to make the same offer, when you're not running from another man's attention, I'll still be here waiting."

With that final whispered word, he turned on his heel. I heard him unarm the alarm and set the delayed rearm before the back door opened and closed with a finality that seemed to echo through the apartment.

Part of me couldn't believe he had left me standing there burning for him. The rest understood it all too well. Hadn't that been what I had done yesterday? With a frustrated curse, I snatched up my wineglass

along with Marcus's from the other table and stomped to the kitchen to dump the remaining wine down the drain.

The window over my sink looked out over the small lot and I found myself watching the vampire walk away. Just when I was calling myself all kinds of a fool, he turned to look back toward my window. Even knowing he couldn't see me watching, I pulled back and glanced away.

My eyes found something darker than shadows lurking against the building on the far side of the lot. Curiosity piqued my interest and I stared at the dark shape until the form of a man separated from the familiar outline of the building. The height and build gave him away and I wondered how comfortable that worn leather was against the night air.

My temper ignited the frustration burning through me. Snatching up the phone, I punched Yasmine's cell number by heart, ignoring the staccato beep that told me there was voicemail. Yasmine's sleepy voice answered the phone with a curt, "Do you *know* what time it is? There had better be a body we need to hide or I'm hanging up."

Kale's voice was sharp in the background, but I launched into my tirade.

"Do you realize your lion is playing stalker outside my building?"

"Is that the body we need to hide or did you call to be obnoxious because the man's into you? Wait. Why is he outside your building instead of inside? Didn't you two have a late-night date or something?"

Her wits were sharpening as she woke. Without losing track of Luke in the shadows, I turned my attention to Marcus as the car door closed behind him. I couldn't help but wonder if Marcus had picked up the scent of the lion because the driver, a man I didn't recognize from that distance, paused before getting into the car and closing the door behind him.

"We did," I told her while I watched the car glide out of the cramped parking lot. "And it was a bust. He got a little miffed that it was the vampire who walked me up instead of the lion. Go figure."

"Vampire? Wait. Give me a minute to catch up. When did you run into Marcus and why is Luke stalking you?"

The car carrying the vampire in question began to carefully navigate the alley toward the street as Kale's voice came over the line making me jump.

"Destiny." Kale's voice definitely didn't sound sleepy. "Are you okay? Who's stalking you and what is going on with Luke?"

I would have loved to demand he give the phone back to Yasmine so I could vent but knew it was too much to hope for. Just one of the reasons I'd stopped calling at odd hours. There was no getting around the man.

As quickly as I could, I gave him the condensed version of the night. While I talked, the lion melted deeper into the shadows of the building across the way. I knew without straining my eyes that he was gone long before I finished telling Kale what had happened. Of course, getting the story out in the open made me

feel better, even if it wasn't to Yas. Kale, as much as I liked to pick at what he represented, was a good man for a werewolf.

"Do you need me to send someone out?"

"I wouldn't need any backup if you hadn't sent the blasted man after me, Kale. But no, I'm fine."

It was snippy, but the heat of my temper washed away in the tide of my story. Even though it was kind of Kale to offer, it rankled my pride that the thought of accepting actually lingered. He must have sensed it or knew me too well after the seven years he had spent chasing Yas, because he countered with laughter lacing his voice.

"Don't blame me. That was your sister's doing. I'll talk to him, though. Let him know that you're not without your own pride at your back. Family is family no matter what form it's in."

It was his way of reminding me that the day where it was me and Yasmine against the world was over. The final throes of my temper washed away under his compassion and it left me tired.

"Thanks, Kale. That means a lot. Can I talk to Yasmine? I promise not to keep her up too much longer."

"Well, since you were kind enough to wake us up early, I fully intend to put the time to good use, so hurry up."

The love and affection in his tone made me smile and envy my sister a hair more than I should have. She came back on the line in a rush.

"Destiny? Cut that out, Kale." Laughter bubbled up in her voice.

"It's okay, Yas. I take it you heard the story?"

"Yeah. Watch yourself, Destiny. I'm not sure I trust either of them at this point. You and your taste in men are going to drive us both to an early grave."

"Oh, and yours is so much better?"

"I heard that." There was no reprimand in Kale's voice, only amusement and determination. Yasmine's sharp intake of breath told me why. Rolling my eyes at them, I shook my head. Somehow, it seemed cruel that I was denied the very thing Yasmine was fighting off at the moment.

"Yeah, yeah. You two have fun. I'm going to go to bed. It's been a rough night. I'll call you tomorrow when I wake up. Promise."

She was still trying to rally and talk when I clicked the phone off. Carrying the cordless phone toward my bedroom, I found myself being glad that one of us was getting lucky.

A cold shower—okay, lukewarm—later and I sat on my bed staring at the phone. I wanted to go to sleep, but the voicemail called to my curiosity. No one ever left me voicemail. My friends generally used my cell if the voicemail picked up at home, which meant the call related to a case or a potential client. Of course, very few potential clients called after midnight, so that limited the choices to one: the Vincent case. It was the only one on my books.

Snatching up the pad and pen from the bedside table, I punched in the code and waited. Milo's voice sent my pulse racing and not in a good way. His words were low and a little rushed.

"I've got your information, Destiny. You'll have to pick it up in person. It's not something I'm going to leave on your voicemail and it's too important to wait. Meet me at one at Carvelli's. I'll spring for lunch."

I frowned as I put the pad, pen and phone on the table. Milo, as far as I knew, never came out of his hole in the wall. Not only did I have no idea what he looked like, I didn't even know his last name. Carvelli's wasn't exactly going to let me stroll through their fancy foyer without a reservation. It made me wonder how Milo could carry that much clout.

Damn, two days in a row that I had to put on a dress and pretend to be civilized. Milo wasn't going to rate makeup. I was already one over on the men count and I wasn't about to fancy myself up on the chance to add to it. Of course, I could be overestimating my charm. For all I knew, Milo was some geeky old goat with a sexy voice that had long since passed the point of chasing skirts.

Shaking my head at the thought, I turned down the bed and climbed in. Case or not, I could snatch a few hours of sleep before duty called me to lunch. My last thought before I drifted off to sleep was that at least he had picked a restaurant that I wanted to go to.

Chapter Twelve

In the end, Milo didn't warrant a dress. Sadly enough, I simply didn't have one that I felt comfortable wearing to a lunch meeting. Instead, I pulled out the pantsuit I wore on the occasional times I had been called to testify. It was simple basic black, cut to flatter my figure. Adding a vibrant blue shirt for contrast and a pair of low-heeled boots and it set the perfect tone.

The Carvelli valet didn't even blink when I handed him the keys to my car. He smiled and pressed a claim ticket into my hand. I caught a trace of his scent under his very expensive aftershave and it made my nose twitch. It wasn't shapeshifter, but it was something.

It told me two things: Carvelli's obviously paid their valets by the minute and there was a game in town I knew nothing about. Both made me step lightly as I strode toward the door.

The moment I stepped into the foyer and the door closed behind me, I wished I'd come armed. Unfamiliar odors rode the air-conditioning right alongside the rich and fragrant smell of Italian food. My stomach gave a rumble and I grinned in embarrassment.

Of course, the man in the black suit standing behind the podium wasn't so coarse as to comment. Instead, he studiously consulted his book and nodded in satisfaction. Waving away a man dressed totally in black save the white waiter's apron, he turned a practiced smile to me and stepped down to floor level.

On the podium, I'd thought he was tall. On the floor, I towered over him by a good three inches. Being vertically challenged, I felt like a giant and it threw me off my stride mentally.

"Right this way, Ms. St. George."

He strode away, light on his feet, without waiting to see if I was following. His scent washed back to me in his wake. He wasn't human, but I couldn't place what he was. I took a closer look around me as I trailed after him. There was a sense of sameness among the staff that marked them of a kind. Most of them were tall, but even the shorter ones had a certain lithe grace and slender build. They also had dark hair and deep brown eyes that made their claim of Italian ancestors believable despite the lack of swarthy skin tones. If it was a ruse, it was a good one. I was betting that there was at least a kernel of truth to it.

The little man stopped in front of a booth tucked into the corner of the dining room and stepped aside. Reluctantly, I let my gaze stop scanning the restaurant and brought it to rest on the young man sitting with his back to the dining room effectively leaving me in the secure position of having my back against the wall. I liked him immediately for that alone.

Sliding in, I took him a good look at him. Like the others, his hair was dark but had enough auburn highlights to prove he was a really dark brunette. His eyes were nearly black against a pale face, though they sparkled with mischief. He shared the same striking bone structure with his kinsmen, but there was something sharper around him I couldn't put my finger on.

"The elusive Milo of technogeek stardom, I presume?" It wasn't hard to make my tone light. Seeing the face behind the voice was actually helping me put together a lot of jokes over the years. I realized I knew him well enough to count him as a friend even if I didn't know what species, exactly, he was.

"And Destiny St. George, everyone's darling. It's very nice to see you in the flesh."

The way he worded that made me grin and jibe back. "Spying is against the law."

"Only if you're caught, Destiny. Only if you're caught."

Before I had a chance to volley back, a waiter was suddenly beside the table with salads, fragrant bread still hot from the baking, and a bottle of red wine. Instead of opening the wine, he plunked it down on the table next to Milo and served the food. If that wasn't curious enough, Milo shifted as he pulled a small wine cork from his pocket. With practiced ease, he flipped the blade out and began to cut the foil seal away. The waiter moved on without a blink, smiling at the next couple in our section.

Even deciding I was going to count him as a friend, it made me uneasy. There was a lot of distance and people between the door and me if things went wonky.

"Are you afraid to be seen with me, Milo?"

His mouth turned up in a half grin as he shook his head. "Ah, you know better than that. I thought you might want a little privacy considering we're going to be discussing privileged information and all that. Besides, if you're worried about appearances, the only tale someone's going to carry back to your beaus will be that you had a quiet lunch with a strikingly handsome man."

"Oh, don't think a lot of yourself or anything like that, do you?"

The way he'd said it made me laugh and it went a long way to easing the tension. Whatever they were, Milo's people hadn't offered me violence and there was nothing but a tranquil atmosphere around us. Until they changed their tune, I'd trust him because he had always come through for me in the past.

"I've never had a complaint to date. Besides, you're just my type."

Milo made a show of breathing across his knuckles and polishing them against the emerald silk of his shirt...and I realized what he was with a jolt. Selkie. There went my theory about Italian roots. But how had a nest of selkies taken up residence in town without anyone being the wiser? Our gazes locked for a moment and the way his smile flashed at me let me know that he knew I had figured it out.

"I bet. Do I need to start combing the beaches for a certain treasure to make sure you mean it?"

"It's the modern age, Destiny. Nooks and crannies went out during the dark ages. I've never been called a traditionalist. Speaking of traditionalist customs, I took the liberty of having the kitchen prepare my favorite dishes for you. Please don't take offense, but I thought it would make things go a little

smoother. Kevin will leave us mostly alone until the food is ready. Now that I have you in my evil clutches, I'd rather not rush to the business end of things."

His teasing had the desired effect. Instead of being offended that he'd ordered for us, I was glad not to have to stare at the menu and fret over the prices. He slid the cork from the wine bottle with practiced ease and I couldn't resist teasing him in return.

"You do that like you're an expert. Do you work as a waiter in your spare time? From the smell of things around here, I think they pay pretty well."

"You're fishing, Destiny."

"And you're not biting. Come on, cut a cat a break and satisfy some of my curiosity. I don't even know your last name."

His grin never lightened as he poured the wine into the glasses. His tone was bland as he answered the obvious question.

"It's Carvelli and no, I don't work as a waiter here. I happen to own it by default. My siblings decided that they wanted a freer life than one tied to a restaurant by the sea. Now that I've answered your question, you can share the intimate details of your life next."

"I doubt very seriously that I have any that you don't know about."

"Ah, but knowing facts is far different than knowing what motivates someone to make the choices they do. Lie to me and make me feel better."

I couldn't resist a chuckle over his technique. It was no wonder people were willing to break laws for him. To buy time, I took a small bite of the salad. As a carnivore, I usually passed on the leafy filler associated with fancy meals, but this one hit the right chord. The lettuce and baby spinach leaves were crisp and the vinaigrette tangy enough to complement the herb croutons and offset the tomatoes. With a total disregard for manners, I practically inhaled it.

Milo didn't comment, not even to tease. He simply buttered a roll and placed it on my bread plate. The motion brought me up short and I glanced at him guiltily. He smiled at me and I was struck by the thought that he was one of those men who would smile his way through the gates of Hell and have a comment for the gatekeeper.

"It's good, isn't it? They do a wonderful job in the kitchens. We're having a salmon-stuffed manicotti with a cream sauce, in case you're wondering. It's my favorite and the chef has perfected the dish to an art form. But don't think you're off the hook. I would honestly like to know what your personal motivations in life are."

"About anything specifically or in general?" I was suspicious and didn't bother to hide it. Charming men had that effect on me.

"Specifically? What's the fascination with the vampire? It can't be his wealth because he's always been furtive about it with you. Other women get jewels and trinkets. You get wine and conversation. He's

wooing you, but to what end?" Milo buttered his own roll and set it on his bread plate before continuing. "And just when I thought he had you, you walked away. Up and left like that." He snapped his fingers. "And now he's back again. What is up with you two?"

"Why do you want to know?" I was defensive as I pushed the remaining bit of salad away. Granted, there wasn't that much left, but I had lost the taste for it.

"Because you're a fascinating subject to follow."

"So, tell me, then. Don't you have anything better to do than be the city's little voyeur?"

"Don't knock voyeurism unless you've tried it. It can be a very rewarding hobby."

The way he said it made heat rush up to my face. In the game of innuendo and flirting, I was totally out of my league. Knowing that helped me keep my footing as I took a sip of my wine and mentally debated how far to let him in. Milo lifted his hand a fraction off the table and the waiter, who was obviously paying closer attention than I had given him credit for, hurried over to take our salad plates. In the end, I decided to tell him nothing. It was partially because I didn't know the answer but mostly because it was simply too personal an issue to discuss over lunch with a virtual stranger. Of course, this could be his method of payment for the information he was carrying, but I was willing to take that risk. Instead, I bantered back.

"Somehow, watching has never been my style. Doing is much more rewarding. Wouldn't you rather live life?"

Milo conceded my point with a bare nod of his head. Tension I hadn't realized I was carrying melted away as he moved on. "Perhaps. Ah, here is our lunch. I hope you like it."

The smells wafting up from the plate made my mouth water. The salad had kept my stomach from rumbling, but this was a *meal*.

By unspoken agreement, attempts at polite conversation were put aside in favor of savoring the chef's masterpiece. And it was a masterpiece. It reminded me how involved I was with my microwave. It would be weeks before anything that came out of it would taste good again.

The portions were too generous for me to finish and Milo noticed how I stared at the plate forlornly.

"It reheats in the oven. You do have an oven, right?"

"I do. I don't know if it works, but it's in my apartment."

"Not even to reheat pizza?" The look of horror on his face was worth capitalizing.

"Pizza microwaves."

"Blasphemy."

We shared a smile as he pushed his very empty plate toward the edge of the table. A hot meal full of rich food had mellowed my attitude. I needed to start dating men who could appreciate a good meal. It was a point in the lion's favor, stalker tendencies aside.

"I'll have Kevin box any dessert you'd like from the cart and add it to another full portion to take home. If it's too much food, freeze part of it to reheat later. I know you have a freezer."

"You're too kind."

"Well, I feel I owe you since I'm about to shatter your sense of goodwill with bad news."

The waiter scooped the plates up as he walked by. Milo's hand dropped to the booth seat beside him and came up with a plain manila envelope. He pushed it over the table and waited until I put my hand on it before he pulled his away. The way he did it made the skin on the back of my neck tingle.

"What, exactly, am I going to find in here, Milo?"

"Did you know your lion was from Phoenix?"

Of all the questions I was prepared for, that wasn't one of them. What did Luke have to do with a dead vampire's cell-phone records?

"No," I answered slowly. "I didn't know where he came from. Why does that matter?"

"Because the records from this phone are a quandary of questions. Most of the numbers are local and easily identified. There are three that are in Phoenix. One is to an apartment of a woman who was found dead in the desert a couple of months ago. Apparently, the rent's still getting paid and the phone's not been changed over. The other is to a gentleman's club concierge who has no idea which of his clients I could possibly mean. The third is to a prepaid mobile number without a name or billing address attached. It has the same area code and prefix as your lion's cell number. There are six calls to it. Two before his arrival and four from the time the lion came to town until the vampire's death."

"Coincidence?"

The look on Milo's face told me he believed in coincidence about as much as I did.

"I took the liberty of accessing the cell records of the lion in question. Before his arrival, there were three calls to the same concierge number from his home phone."

"But not from his cell number?" I asked the question around the knot in my belly. There were half a dozen innocent reasons why Luke would have numbers in common with a homicidal vampire. There were more logical reasons that weren't innocent at all.

"Not that I could find and trust me, I looked. If it were there, I would have found it. I can't have my best source of outside diversions compromised, after all."

It was a weak attempt at humor, but I took it in the spirit it was offered. "Somehow, I don't think you lack for female diversions, Milo."

"Ah, but few are as interesting as you. After all, you're not after my body or my skin."

I acknowledged his concession with a shake of my head. The waiter brought the dessert cart over and I stared at it. Ten minutes ago, it would have been a woman's dream. There were several things on it that I was sure would taste better than sex felt; however, none of it was particularly appealing after Milo's revelations.

In the end, I made a random choice of a cherry custard tart. Finishing my wine, I stared at the selkie across from me as he passed on the instructions to box it with my leftovers and another portion to take home.

“Thank you for the dinner and the conversation. What do I owe you for the information? It’s hard to make an electronic transfer in person.”

“Consider it a gift. I’ve been overcharging you for years.”

It made me smile even though it was one of the few facts I had figured out long ago. I started to slide out of the booth but he stopped me with a movement that was too fast for my eyes to follow. One moment, he was a congenial host. The next, he was holding my hand. Amiable behavior or not, he wasn’t human and I reminded myself of that. Selkies might be lovers, but any sentient being could be moved to violence.

“Be careful, Destiny. I was serious about not wanting to see anything happen to you.” Milo pressed a hard piece of card stock into my hand. “That’s my private number. If there’s anything you need, call me.”

I nodded in answer and he pulled his hand away. He didn’t move to walk me out and I didn’t wait around to see if he’d play the gentleman. As I passed the maitre d’, he smiled and bowed slightly as he offered me a bag.

“Your takeout, madam. Enjoy and know you’re welcome back at any time you choose. No reservation required.”

“Thank you...Roger, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed.”

“I appreciate the offer and tell your chef that he is worth far more than Milo pays him.”

That earned me a warm smile. It’s always better to leave on a glad note. Stepping out into the bright light of the day, I tried my best not to think about the lion or the vampire as I slid behind the wheel of my car and drove out of the restaurant parking lot.

Chapter Thirteen

The silence in the car let me mull over the questions Milo had planted in my mind. What did Luke have to do with the disappearance of Betsy Vincent? Since I didn't believe in happenstance, I weighed the evidence against him as I fought the traffic snarl that went along with life in the city.

I blame my mental distraction for not recognizing the woman strolling down the sidewalk toward me laden with shopping bags. I might have missed her altogether if the white bandage at her neck hadn't spoiled the image of the wealthy woman about town by standing out starkly against the vibrant blue of her sundress. Sitting in the idling hum of traffic, I stared at her for a full minute before I started cursing and blaring my horn as I angled for an empty parking spot. The car in front of me gave me clearance, but the only reason I didn't take out the front of the parked cars was dumb luck. Betsy Vincent passed me without so much as a glance before I managed to get the car into the tiny spot. Jumping onto the sidewalk by way of the passenger seat, I sprinted without bothering to lock my car or dig out change for the meter.

Tall svelte blondes were a dime a dozen in California, so it was no wonder I was darting through them, hesitating and glancing back to search their faces even though none of them were dressed right. Ten minutes and four blocks later, I gave up. Betsy Vincent had slipped through my fingers.

Walking back to my car, I tried to swallow my disappointment. On one hand, I had proof she was alive. On the other, I still had no idea where she was or how to find her. I hadn't even gotten close enough to get her scent. Failure made me cross as I worked my way through the crowd, stopping to step into the shops to see if I could see any hint of that vibrant blue dress.

By the time I made it to my car, the parking ticket was icing on the cake. Snatching it off and throwing it in the passenger seat, I edged into traffic and vowed to take the trolley next time I made a lunch date, and cursed my thoughtlessness that had put me behind the wheel instead of on the trolley.

After fighting traffic, the surprise waiting for me at home made me start counting to fifty. Ten wasn't high enough. Across the street, making absolutely no effort to hide, sat a black sedan with two familiar vampires behind the wheel. The driver watched my car turn down the narrow alley with no acknowledgement whatsoever.

The werewolves were a little more circumspect. If the vampires hadn't abraded my already frayed nerves, I probably would have missed them. They were standing down the alley past the parking lot, partially concealed by the dumpster we all used for our trash. One of them saw me looking in their direction and both of them disappeared behind it.

Stomping up the stairs, I nearly wrenched the lock and left it open while I disarmed the alarm. When the final beep of the system sounded, I slammed it with enough force to bring both werewolves out of hiding so I could get a good look at them through the back-door glass. Like the vampires out front, I recognized them by sight but had no name for them.

With Milo's revelations fresh in my mind, I debated whether or not Kale and Marcus were being overly protective or erring on the side of caution. With a deep breath, I picked up the phone only to put it back down again. Calling either of them meant a fight I wasn't willing to have. Besides, I wasn't too proud to take backup despite the fact I'd railed against it, especially since I had no idea exactly how deep this case was going to go.

Without changing, I deposited my bag of goodie boxes in the fridge and headed downstairs with the envelope Milo had given me. Hesitating briefly by the front door, I opted not to turn the sign indicating I was in until I had finished the notes on my brief encounter with Betsy Vincent.

On a yellow legal pad, I wrote all the details I could remember from my brief look. She had appeared in good spirits and excellent health, but if she was feeding vampires, who knew how long that would last? One thing for certain, she appeared to enjoy her walk on the wild side.

With a snap of my fingers, I realized what had bothered me so much about the incident. Even knowing she hadn't been abducted by force, it seemed strange that she would be out shopping in the middle of the day alone. Or had she been truly alone?

I was still puzzling over the fact when the soft scrape of a shoe on my stoop preceded the click of a key sliding into the lock. There weren't many people who had keys so I wasn't surprised to see Peter step through the doorway with Marcus close behind him. For once, I didn't feel invaded. His uninvited visit saved me a phone call.

"Where does your father live when he's not harassing his progeny?"

Peter hesitated in the process of going back outside and Marcus actually missed a step in his gliding strut across the room. The question had caught them both off guard. Good for me.

"New York. May I ask why?"

His manner was cautious as he seated himself across from me. I waited until Peter had closed the door before I elaborated. Granted, he could hear us if he stood close enough, but the illusion of a private conversation was appreciated.

"So, Arizona's weather isn't to his liking?"

The widening of Marcus's eyes was the only clue that I might have hit a nerve. Not for the first time, I wished my lioness senses could gauge vampires better. I wondered if his attitude was so cautious because of the subject matter or how we'd last parted. The way he answered my dig made me decide it was a combination of both.

“The weather would suit him well. He likes arid conditions. New York has better hunting and he’s gone lazy with such easy prey. Again, I ask why?”

Without opening the envelope, I slid it across the desk and waited until he took it and carefully opened it.

“The phone records for my dust problem.”

Even though I knew what he would see, I braced myself as he took the papers out and concentrated on his face. It was doubtful I would catch something he didn’t want me to, but a cat can hope even when hunting birds behind glass.

“That didn’t take long.” Marcus’s comment was bland, but there was an emotion behind them I couldn’t identify. Had he been expecting more time? I watched him flip through the numbers and a slight tightening of the eyes was the direction I needed.

“Who do you know in Phoenix?”

“A friend. Or at least a man I called a friend.”

Obviously, he reconsidered his connections as he stared at the highlighted numbers on the printed page. From the angle he sat, I had a clear view of the highlights if not the numbers or the notes written in the margins in a neat hand. For a moment, I questioned my judgment in letting him go over the pages. Marcus was not my enemy, but at that moment, I couldn’t guarantee his friendship. Ignoring that nagging voice of doubt, I waited until he shuffled the papers back together and laid them on the desk atop the envelope they had come in. His bright blue eyes rose to meet mine. I felt the chasm between us widen with more than fundamental relationship issues.

The stare lengthened as the tension between us escalated to the point I thought Peter might pop back in my door to make sure I wasn’t about to shift and attack Marcus. He had to feel it outside. The thought distracted me and I couldn’t hide my startled jump when Marcus finally spoke.

“I’ll call my friend and find out why a vampire from here was using his private service line. While I’m questioning, I’ll find out why your lion patronized his establishment. It could be coincidence that he happens to be here at the same time my father and his stooge are determined to make trouble. It could be his ill luck.”

He didn’t believe it and neither did I. Coincidence? It was possible no matter how unlikely. That Marcus tried to put a nice face on it made me want to forgive him for walking out and leaving me burning. Not willing to bring it up with the frustration so close to the surface, I settled on the closest thing I could say.

“Thank you.”

Marcus’s laugh made me shiver, but his words would have made my fur stand up. “Oh, don’t thank me. When this is settled, I’ll take my services out in trade.”

Before I could muster a suitably witty reply, he was up and striding for the door with a sense of purpose he had lacked on arrival. I called after him, proud of myself for steadying my voice so it lacked the breathless quality I felt. “What? No goodbye?”

He stopped and turned back to me with a smile I remembered from the days when our relationship was new. It stopped the breath in my chest.

“No goodbye. That would imply I’m leaving, but I’m not. I’m setting off for a quest to resolve this so we can move on to more important matters. It’s an entirely different situation. Questing knights never bid farewell because they always plan to return to reap their rewards in fair maidens.”

A sharp rap on the door had it opening and he was gone before I managed to stop gaping and close my mouth. Marcus waxing poetic? It was almost scary to consider. The ringing phone jerked me from my musing. I snatched it up and growled a greeting.

“Whoa, someone’s grumpy today.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. Frank LeCroy was not someone I felt like dealing with today or any day, really. Putting on my most professional telephone manners, I leaned back in my chair and stared at the cracks in the ceiling.

“Rougarou. What a surprise. What do you want?”

The man laughed at the nickname. He liked to boast over drinks at the seedy taverns around town that he was a direct descendent of a Rougarou werewolf waiting for the right situation to trigger the change. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that Rougarou werewolves always bred true. If he had one ounce of that blood he bragged about, he would have been howling at the moon years ago. The family-guardian nonsense he liked to throw in wasn’t even worth thinking about. Frank wanted to think he’d still get that chance to howl at the moon if he felt threatened enough. The nose doesn’t lie. He was so human that he didn’t need to bathe every day to avoid being rank to the feline senses.

“You really are grumpy. Could it be that your secret network hasn’t revealed anything specific on that special case I sent you?”

His tone was smug and fairly vibrating with eagerness to share whatever he knew. Of course, it was stating the obvious that he was calling me for a reason. He didn’t waste time picking on me worse than the tiny pricks, which meant it was probably a juicy tidbit.

“I’m making headway. Have you called to tell me what you truly held out of the file?”

Sounding bored wasn’t an effort. I was going to have to take some of my windfall from Dr. Vincent and have the plaster fixed on the ceiling. Maybe I’d add a fresh coat of paint to the walls while I was at it.

“Well, since you mention it, I do know something that might break the case for us.”

“There is no us, Frank. You sent the file to me. That meant you were done with it.”

“You wound me. Here I thought you were a team player.”

“No one goes into this business as a team player. Share if you want to, but if you’re going to yank my chain, I’m hanging up.”

“Wait. Wait. Don’t hang up. I know where our girl is. The Cosmopolitan Hotel.”

That brought me upright in my chair. It was up the coast a bit from Carvelli’s, in a more secluded area that catered to the idle wealthy. More than one police investigation had died in the lobby.

“If you know that much, why haven’t you trotted in and fetched her back to her husband. I’m sure he’d be generously grateful.”

“Because I don’t have a vampire army willing to come in to get me if I don’t walk out again. Whatever relationship you have with the king, he’ll come after you if you’re hung up in there.” His voice had lost the jovial, teasing tone.

“What makes you think the vampires care where I go and what I do?” This time, it was an effort to sound bored. My heart raced as I tried to think of how much Frank LeCroy knew about the deeper recesses of the underground. If he knew too much, someone might think it was more expedient to silence him permanently rather than count on his rather dubious discretion.

“Because there’s suddenly vampire and werewolf bodyguards hanging around your doorstep. I was going to have this conversation face-to-face, but decided that a phone call would do.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Destiny, I don’t know you well enough to trust you. Why do the monsters answer you when they laugh in my face? Could it be that you’re more than what you seem? What brand of shapeshifter are you?”

That was putting the dart in the bull’s eye. I was so surprised that I hesitated and I heard his intake of breath over the line. Having lost my chance to convincingly lie, I changed tactics.

“Guess and I’ll tell you if you hit it. If not, you have to let it rest.” I was tempted to hum the *Jeopardy* theme song while I waited. One minute stretched into three before he spoke.

“Feline. You’re too graceful to be a werewolf like your friend. I’ll guess lion or cougar simply because of the color of your hair.”

He waited and I didn’t contradict him. “Now that your curiosity has been satisfied, talk to me about Betsy Vincent. You obviously have a plan.”

“I knew it!”

I smiled when he presented his plan and even I had to admit it was a good one. By the time the conversation ended, I felt like my old self again.

Who said humans couldn’t rise to the occasion when they had to? Maybe Frank LeCroy had a little more of that guardianship instinct than he realized.

Chapter Fourteen

The Cosmopolitan Hotel sat on a hill overlooking the city with a majestic view of the bay. It catered to the famous, wealthy, connected, and generally untouchables in town. I jumped when the door to my rental car opened and Frank LeCroy slipped in with a grin. I turned to him and demanded, “This is your plan? Seriously?”

His plan had sounded so logical over the phone, but in reality, it was something else altogether. Sure, stroll in and ask to see Betsy Vincent. It sounded reasonable enough, but in the hour I’d been watching the general comings and goings from the parking lot, no less than a dozen vampires had walked out and looked around acting like security personnel. I had a better chance surviving a hit on Fort Knox than this place. It wasn’t nearly as carefully guarded.

“It’s a public place. What harm can come from it? You go in, have the front desk call Betsy down to the lobby, and invite her into the bar to set her straight. It’s simple. What could go wrong?”

He honestly believed it was that simple. It proved how little he knew the world he was trying to dabble in. The depth of his sincerity and naïveté melted away my ire.

“Frank, Frank, Frank. What’s to keep him from deciding no one needs to remember I walked into the place and add me to his collection of toys?”

“Because you’re better than that.” His tone held no sliver of doubt. I could only wish I was that infallible. Now I had to shatter all that confidence by admitting the vampire in question had already zapped me once. I didn’t want to do it, but there wasn’t a choice if any element of this blasted plan was going to work.

“Actually, I’m not. He came into my office a couple of days ago and did just that. Walked in, zapped me, then left me a note telling me where to find his accomplice. He was done with the poor fool and wanted us to take care of the problem for him.”

I didn’t look at Frank’s face, but I could feel the shock vibrating in the air. Defensively, I added a disclaimer.

“Shapeshifters aren’t immune to magic, Frank. Especially not when it’s being used by a vampire as old as civilization.”

“He’s not that old.”

Frank’s voice squeaked and I realized he thought my little exaggeration was a literal fact. Sighing, I dropped my head forward onto the steering wheel and counted to ten before I corrected him.

“No. He’s not that old, but he is old enough to pack some abilities that aren’t supposed to exist outside legends and fairy tales.”

Silence stretched between us as two vampires appeared around the corner. They walked up the sidewalk and into the lobby without even a questioning glance from the valets huddled by the key desk.

“I guess my plan really does stink, doesn’t it? I thought your vampire would back us up.”

He sounded so dejected that I rallied what little optimism I had to put a positive spin on it.

“It’s a good plan if we’re expecting everyone to be honorable, practically immortal monsters. The problem is that you don’t know the monsters half as well as you think you do. It’s not a bad thing. The local monsters like you. It’s the out-of-towners that we have to worry about.”

The worst of it was Marcus really would mount the rescue if I went in there and his father decided to draw the line in the sand over my body, dead or alive. It had the potential to be a bloodbath.

There simply was no right answer. I could call Dr. Vincent and tell him where his wife was and let him handle it or I could find a way to talk to her. I honestly thought I could talk her into confronting her husband on her own if I could get to her.

Reaching down, I turned the ignition.

“Where are we going?” The anticipation in Frank’s voice made me smile despite everything.

“To fetch reinforcements, of course. And you get to tag along. Don’t you feel special?”

I expected him to be happy about it. He was finally getting his chance to see the inside track of my life in the underworld. A quick glance at his face as I pulled out of the parking place showed how wrong I was. It was serious and his tone was totally devoid of emotion when he asked.

“Why? Why now? You’ve always said that it was too dangerous for a mere mortal to go where you so blithely go.”

“Maybe this is the last chance I have to let everyone know you’re okay before I go in there and don’t come out again.”

It sounded fatalistic. It also sounded true. No matter how good Marcus and his vampires were, deep down I was laying odds on the older being the stronger in a fair fight. And since I could almost guarantee it wouldn’t be a fair fight, Marcus was at a significant disadvantage.

“You don’t have to go, you know. You’ve done the job. We’ve found her and proven she’s not dead. The police can take it from here. Call Dr. Vincent, bring him up to speed. I have a friend at the department who can handle it delicately.”

As far as solutions, it was a good one. But I wouldn’t be able to look at myself if I didn’t see it through. I had to at least try to make Betsy Vincent see reason and talk to her husband. She might not listen to me, but I had to try. It was a hard truth to acknowledge, but even I wasn’t beyond being hit over the head by the occasional figurative baseball bat. Pulling out of the parking lot, I carefully answered his question.

“When you’re walking on the dark side, Rougarou, you don’t do the minimum and turn it over to the people in the sun. You see the job through. In this case, I go talk to Betsy Vincent and try to get her to talk to her husband. If she won’t, then we call him and tell him that she’s safe and doesn’t want to talk to him. He can decide whether he wants to tell the cops or not. Either way, he gets peace of mind and we’ve earned our pay. I presume you received one of those outlandish checks too?”

“Dr. Vincent is nothing if not generous and he has the funds to burn. Besides, my only job was to follow her and find out what she was up to. You had the harder task of finding her once she went down the rabbit hole.”

“Which, if you will recall,” I reminded him with no effort to hide the humor in my voice, “you called me with the word as to where she was. I was still jumping at shadows and chasing phantom blondes downtown to dead ends.”

“We all catch the lucky break, now and then. You’re paying me back by giving me a formal introduction to the mysterious vampire king that has you in knots. Did you know that there’s a betting pool about the two of you down at the biker bar on 5th?”

I didn’t. The thought made me groan aloud. Just what I needed. My romantic life was under the scrutiny of the entire supernatural community. Then a thought struck me.

“Where’s your money?”

“On you, of course. Anyone who can walk away from all that temptation has more backbone than to swoon after a little deprivation. No man is that good, vampire or not.”

Oh, how I wished I had his certainty. Since I didn’t, I hoped he didn’t have too much cash invested to lose. Silence stretched for a few miles and Frank changed the subject.

“Where’s your car? Did it finally keel over?”

The source of my original bad temper reignited my ire, but not at him. “It’s still at my office. Since I couldn’t get it out of the parking lot without tipping off either the werewolves or the vampires staking my place out, I simply snuck out and walked down the hill and caught a bus to the rental place.”

It was either that or have my reconnaissance mission chaperoned by enough muscle to tip even the oblivious valets that there was going to be trouble. I fully intended to slap Kale with the bill for the rental too. It was bound to annoy him more than it would Marcus. If I had to be put out and annoyed, someone had to suffer with me. Besides, Yasmine would think it a fine joke.

“Clever. I’d love to be a fly on the wall when they called their bosses and told them that they lost you.”

“They probably don’t realize it. For all they know, I’m hiding in my apartment doing who-knows-what. They’ve been having more fun growling and putting on a show for the each other. I’m only the toy they’re fighting over. How else do you think I managed to sneak away from wolves’ noses and vampires’ eyes?”

“Oh, this is going to be fun.” The glee in his voice made me question his sanity as we pulled into the warehouse district where the Vantage stood.

Peter and a quartet of guards were strolling from the doors as I parked. They froze when I popped out. Vampire sight is an awesome thing, but mine was nearly as keen. The surprise on Peter’s face was priceless. Yep, my guards had truly not missed me yet and that meant I was about to catch Marcus flat-footed. The prospect made me practically run to meet them without concern for Frank’s ability to keep up. He managed it, though he was a little winded as he pulled up a step behind me.

“Hello, boys. Marcus available? Of course he is.”

Sidestepping around them, only instinct and reaction time kept me moving out of the range of Peter’s suddenly outstretched hand. It all happened in a blink. The vampires with him closed ranks on us. All save one who was frantically talking into a two-way radio. The element of surprise was gone, but my opportunity to catch him unprepared was not. I wanted that moment to see Marcus as something other than the ancient, polished demigod image he personified. I wanted it badly enough to sweep my leg out and knock the feet out from under the vampire closest to me.

It was a mistake. I knew it the moment I escalated the encounter. They were faster than I was and I had a mortal with me. The asphalt was hot and gritty under my cheek as Peter took me down with far more gentleness than I would have if the situations had been reversed. He had my arm behind my back and his knee firmly pressed into the small of it as he waited for me to stop struggling. It was an instinctive response to being pinned, but a futile effort.

“Uncle.” It came out breathless and slightly strained, but without any heat. The vampire I had knocked down was climbing to his feet looking disgruntled, but not hurt, from being knocked over by a woman half his mass.

Peter let me go and watched me warily as I bounced up to my feet. Frank’s eyes were wide as he stood back with two of the guards. This time, his rapid breathing wasn’t because of his hurry to keep up with me from the car. Fear permeated the air and I wasn’t the only one to smell it. Both vampires with him watched as if he were the mouse and they were the cats guarding the door. To a mortal, our little display of speed and power would have seemed surreal.

Peter saw it too. A sharp, unintelligible command put them both in their places. I strode toward the building while I had the chance. Frank could follow or hide in the car now that I knew Peter wouldn’t let anything happen to him.

Instead of stopping me, Peter’s longer strides caught him up with me before we’d reached the shadow of the Vantage. “Do you really want to descend upon him like this? You may not like what you see.”

It was as diplomatic as any other way to remind me I no longer held a place here. Or was it? I glanced at him. As old as he was, Peter held a trace of anxiety in his expression. If I hadn’t seen it for myself, I wouldn’t have believed it possible.

“What’s wrong, Peter? You’re usually glad to see me no matter what the circumstances. I thought you were in favor of me and Marcus patching things up?”

“I am, which is why I think you should not drop in unannounced at this time.”

Then it hit me. I raised my face to the sun long past its zenith. Marcus had been to see me after lunch, most likely as soon as he’d risen for the day. In another couple of hours, he would be the suave vampire at play to the public as he meandered about the Vantage strategically handling all the duties of his office. It all added up to one reason why Peter would bar the door to me. Marcus was having his dinner. Instead of stopping me, the thought only made me quicken my pace.

The guards at the side entrance didn’t bother to try to stand in my way. They stepped back and opened the door. Peter followed like a ghost as I walked the familiar winding path to the penthouse apartment built to overlook the dance floor. Nerves ran to temper as I let myself into Marcus’s private sanctuary through the large double doors across from the elevator. It made an impressive lair and looked exactly the way I remembered it.

Marcus wasn’t in the great room. I ignored the bedroom door in favor of the one-way mirrored glass that displayed the club below. At night, watching people revel in the mindless search for pleasure was exhilarating, but in the daylight, the club looked staged, empty and forlorn.

The closing of the outer door was loud in the stillness and a glance over my shoulder proved that Frank wasn’t a coward when it came to tough choices. He stood a few steps away from the guard I’d downed in the parking lot. The rest were probably waiting outside since the only other person there was Peter.

Peter looked torn between going to fetch Marcus so I wouldn’t have to wait and loyalty to his liege. Marcus made his decision easy by strolling into the room from the bedroom wearing nothing but a pair of tailored slacks with his Italian loafers. The smooth perfection of his chest was marred by a crude tattoo on his left breast above his heart. I’d asked what it meant once, but all he’d say was that it marked him as the second-born. Now, having met his father and learned the story, I understood why he chose not to talk about it.

The look on Marcus’s face could only be described as stormy. He wasn’t pleased and neither was I. It was one thing to know he had to eat, but quite another to be face-to-face with his entrée even if it was my own doing. Involuntarily, my hand rose toward the pinkish scars on my neck. Given another day or two and they’d be faded totally. There were some benefits to being a shapeshifter.

Before we had a chance to exchange opening volleys, a brunette stalked out behind him. The snug bodice of her blouse displayed more than a little cleavage that was only emphasized by the still oozing fang holes on her neck. If Marcus’s face was stormy, hers was a hurricane. It definitely wasn’t the post-euphoric glow.

Either we had interrupted or Marcus hadn’t used sex to soften the blow of the bite.

“Peter, see Ms. Reynolds is escorted home by someone willing to ensure she’s properly paid for services rendered.”

She cast a venomous look my way. My gaze locked with hers, but my comment was aimed at Marcus.

“What? Didn’t see to the job well enough yourself?”

Ms. Reynolds opened her mouth, but hesitated. Peter didn’t give her a chance to say anything. He took her by the arm and propelled her toward the door. Her gaze flipped from mine to Marcus and the fight went out of her. Shaking her arm loose, she threw her head high and left with as much dignity as tight leather pants and heels could give her. Seeing her made me think less of Marcus. Perverse, but true.

“Leave us.”

Everyone moved to the door except Frank. He leaned pointedly against the wall with his arms crossed in a show of bravery. I shook my head and he gave me a putout look. After a marked hesitation, he followed Peter from the room and the door closed behind them.

The chasm between Marcus and I had never seemed wider. I had enough time to regret my waspish tongue before mustering the humility for the apology he deserved.

“I’m sorry. I should have called instead of dropping by. And I was wrong to be rude to your date. My only excuse is that my emotions got the better of me.”

“She wasn’t my date. She was my dinner. There has not been another woman for me since you strolled back through my door begging favors.”

It sounded entirely too much like what I wanted to hear. Searching his face, I looked for some trace that it was a lie. For once, he let all his emotions show. He very nearly looked like a human as he stood there meeting me glare for glare.

“For God’s sake, why?” The question came out breathless and an octave higher than normal. It was shock. Honest. A smile softened his face and he shook his head ruefully.

“Because, dearest Destiny, what is the biggest obstacle in our path? You do not want to share me with others. Only the nuns at St. George’s could turn a lioness into a monogamous creature.” The amusement in his voice helped smooth the lingering edges of aggression sizzling between us.

“So you were trying it on for size?” I let all the doubt I could muster color the question. It had only been a couple of days, after all.

“Monogamy? Love will make even a man as old as I into a fool. I was attempting to find a way to feed without paying the more intimate coin you object to in the event you decided I wasn’t a lost cause.”

I started to ask why he hadn’t told me, but I knew the answer. It would have put undue stress and pressure on our little dance. I had nothing to say to that and he started gliding toward me with a sense of purpose and fluid grace that made my heart speed up. I was moving before I’d made a conscious decision to meet him in the middle.

We came together in a clash of opposing forces. Our mouths met in a kiss that poured out all the things we couldn't, or wouldn't, say. The faintly metallic taste of blood on his tongue only fueled a desperation I hadn't acknowledged in myself. The pain of my tongue catching the sharp point of his canines brought me back to myself.

I was somewhat embarrassed to realize my hands on the waistband of his pants were the only things keeping them up. His hadn't been idle, either. My own pants were undone and his fingers slipped under the waistband of my panties as he pulled me closer.

When I pulled back, he froze, but didn't put any distance between us. Leaning away from him, I raised my gaze to his and found an answering fire there. It took me a moment and several tries to break the silence punctuated by our heavy breathing.

"This isn't a good idea. Not right now, at any rate."

One side of his mouth turned up into a crooked smile that made my breath catch all over again. In all the years I'd known him, he'd never looked so young and carefree. Gone was the debonair playboy and in his place was a man looking at a woman he held some complex emotion toward. Was it love? I had no idea, but it was something deeper than lust for both of us if that look was anything to judge by.

His hands eased back, sliding across my skin, leaving it feeling unreasonably cool in their wake. If Frank hadn't been standing outside waiting for his introduction, I would have grabbed Marcus by the hand and taken him to the bed I remembered so well.

It was Marcus who took that step back. His hands brushed mine as he refastened his pants, reminding me that I needed to do the same. The open smile faded back into the more polished mask that hid so much.

"Later, then. There's always time for privacy after business is done."

Which brought me back to the reason I was here. Once again begging favors.

Frank and I had decided that simpler was better when dealing with the problem of Betsy Vincent. But in order to make it work with the additional vampires I had observed, I needed to level the playing field by neutralizing the threat the muscle represented. The only way to do that was other vampires.

I ran through the plan, watching Marcus's face all the while. He didn't like it but was giving me the courtesy of hearing me out. When I finished, he waited a moment as if trying to think of the right way to say no. Looking at me, he delivered his verdict.

"You shouldn't go in there at all. I never thought I'd agree with Mr. LeCroy, but I do. Let the authorities handle it."

I let my face be my answer to that. He sighed and threw up his hands.

"Fine. It's something you must do. But you will not do it alone. There's no time to put it together today."

"Which is why we're doing it tomorrow. Tonight is the rehearsal dinner and I won't be ready in time if I don't get home and start primping."

That earned me a smile, another kiss and a ride home with the promise that he would take care of the rental car and Frank LeCroy.

Chapter Fifteen

Yasmine made a beautiful bride-to-be in the candlelight. She stood deep in conversation with her future mother-in-law with a champagne flute of sparkling cider in her hand. As her maid of honor, I stood in the shadows guarding the stash of chilled cider ensuring no one spiked it with anything stronger. Of course, I was drinking the real thing and had a bottle of very expensive, very good champagne in the chiller beside it. After the last few days, I thought I deserved a little bit of alcohol and Kale was just the one to foot the bill for it.

It was great to see Yasmine so happy. Kale hovered nearby accepting the congratulations offered by all the guests who had come to curry favor. The wedding party was appropriately dispersed throughout the room for crowd control. I wondered idly if the guests realized they were being managed. One step toward the wedding couple before it was time and a bridesmaid or groomsman, who happened to be crossing their path, instantly waylaid them.

I wasn't a coward, but I was glad that the stalking lion across the room was keeping a wide distance from the werewolves in question. He looked stunning in his dark suit and had been relieved of crowd duty. Well, he was technically my date though we'd been separated by our positions in the wedding party throughout the rehearsal dinner. The way he kept glancing our way told me that he was getting tired of that excuse. The look he leveled at Yasmine could only be described as wary. It made me wonder if she had taken him to task for my stalking complaint. I could probably give her the credit for the fact he'd been scarce today.

The lion took a step toward us only to be called up short by a sharp look from Kale. Yep, they'd definitely had a few words, but he wasn't held in check by it. In two days, he was leaving which made this his last shot to change my mind. With an answering speaking look at Kale, Luke gave the two female werewolves a wide berth to walk along the wall toward me. His eyes burned into mine. If he thought I was the type of female to run, he so didn't know me.

He didn't speak, just reached into the chiller to pull the champagne bottle from its ice to top off both our glasses. He buried it back into the ice with a practiced ease I could only envy. The silence stretched awkwardly until I finally murmured my thanks with my gaze canvassing the room for signs of danger. Old habits die hard, especially when it kept me from confronting the irate lion at my side.

I wondered if he really had come over for a fresh drink to annoy me rather than go to the bartender. I didn't jump when he finally spoke in a voice pitched low enough to be a challenge to canine eavesdroppers.

“I never took you for a faint-hearted woman, Destiny.”

I didn't look at him as I sipped my drink and continued to survey the werewolves in the room. Most of the females watched Yasmine with ill-concealed jealousy, but the males seemed oblivious to the undercurrents. They laughed and slapped Kale on the back as if he were the first pack leader to ever net his mate. I wanted to roll my eyes and beg Yasmine to sneak out the back with me. It wouldn't have worked and she wouldn't have appreciated the suggestion. Engagements could be called off, but the bonds Yasmine and Kale shared went far deeper. Even knowing that, it was hard to embrace the myriad of symbols around us.

“Luke, my best friend is seeing wedded bliss everywhere she looks to the point she's importing questionable males from strange places in a vain attempt to set me up. I'm not faint-hearted. I just don't like to be chased by uninvited men.”

“That's a lie.”

That brought my gaze around to him with the first stirrings of true anger.

“Need I remind you that you don't know me well enough to know my preferences? In any case, any chance you might have had died when you took up stalking my apartment to see what time my guests leave. Being the same species doesn't mean you have rights to my person or my territory.”

My whispered hiss made Yasmine glance over her shoulder and I tried to smile to reassure her. She scowled at me before turning back to Kale's mother.

“Well, that explains why Kale had a thousand things for me to do today. I pegged you for a woman who would confront problems head-on instead of running to the family dog to keep you safe.”

The bitterness in his tone made my ears perk. Considering it was his friend that he was calling the family dog, I was doubly intrigued. Turning my attention to him, I gave him a thorough look from toes to face.

He was handsome, accommodating, wealthy, and I found him attractive. Granted, that could be because he was also the only male of my species I'd ever been in close quarters with, but still. Facts were facts. I shouldn't have been able to resist him, but resisting I was. He might have the keys to my libido, but another held the keys to my heart.

“I didn't ask him to keep me safe, I simply told Yas I didn't appreciate you acting as if you had a claim to me. How he handled that was totally up to him. You came here to be a part of the wedding party so I guess he decided you needed to earn your keep.”

“I came here for you,” he said with a snarl, and I wanted to snap back but reined the instinct in.

“Kale doesn't have the authority to make those arrangements for me despite what he thinks. He's my sister's mate, but not my alpha no matter how much he might want to be, and a wedding doesn't change that.”

Luke took a long drink of his champagne and visibly composed himself. The long weeks without a run on four legs were beginning to wear. The lioness inside me wanted to take him out, fight with him, and put him through his paces to work off that frustration. Marcus might forgive me for giving in to the instinct, but I wouldn't. A couple of days ago, I would have considered it. Might even have done it, but today's revelations changed my outlook. It made the anger wash out of me.

"Why is it so hard to accept that you're a part of something larger? Kale wants to be your alpha, not to tell you what to do, but to make sure you're taken care of. Is that so bad?"

We weren't talking about Kale, but for him to put a finer point on the issue would have meant presuming still further about us. He could be diplomatic when he chose. I appreciated the effort and softened what I was going to say.

"Yeah, it is. Because I don't want to be around men who think I need a protector. I want to be around men who see and accept me for who and what I am. Someone who really wants to love me and not some idealized version."

"Someone like Marcus." Luke's voice held sadness, as if he knew the battle for my affections was already over. Or perhaps it was resignation.

"Yes. Someone like Marcus."

Marcus and I were doomed to be together. Not destined. Doomed.

It was why I couldn't seem to cut the ties he held to my heart even when I thought we were over. He was comfortable with me despite my strong opinions and obstinate streaks, or maybe because of them. And I liked that I didn't have to cater to his notions. Funny that it would take another man coming along, attempting to attract my attention, to make me realize it.

The silence grew awkward. Luke drained his glass and refilled it before I put a dent in mine, but he topped me off anyway.

"I'm sorry I came along too late. Be careful of the vampires, Destiny. They always do things with their own agenda."

As if I didn't know.

As I sipped my champagne, it occurred to me that he was taking the news rather well. I wished I could get a good solid scent of him beneath his cologne, but there wasn't a chance with all the strong scents.

Motion from Yasmine caught my attention. It was time for the pack to go. I handed my champagne flute to Luke with a whisper.

"Hold that until we're done here, please? I want to finish it."

The pack had a private ceremony on the agenda before the moon fell. Of course, that left Luke and I to see that the rest of the guests were appropriately entertained as the party broke up. Yasmine leaned down to hug me as she put in her own suggestion about how I could enjoy my hostess duties.

“Give the man a chance. We made him cool his jets, but I really think he’s worth a little housebreaking. You know how hard it was to make Kale reasonable.”

I caught Kale rolling his eyes over her shoulder and barely held back a laugh.

“We’ll have a nice evening. You two enjoy tomorrow because I’m going to drag you off when you get back. You’re not waking up on your wedding day with a grumpy werewolf.”

That earned me a laugh from both of them as they made their farewells. The majority of the guests went with them, so my job was simple. Taking my champagne flute back from Luke, I set about doing my best to be charming. I hoped I was doing a decent job of it, but was glad when they began to trickle out.

“I think we’ve been properly relieved of hosting duties.”

I jumped at Luke’s voice over my shoulder. I’d had entirely too much champagne if my senses were dulled to the point that he could sneak up on me. Turning to glance over the room, I realized he was right. The few guests still here were coupled up in corners. The staff would stay until the last of them were tucked away into cabs on the way back to their hotels. From the looks of things, none of them would appreciate the polite goodbye.

“I think you’re right.”

I licked my lips with a tongue that felt thick. How much had I had to drink? I didn’t remember getting a fresh glass after Yasmine left, but I could have. Walking to the bar, I moved to set my nearly empty glass on the polished wood. The glass caught the lip of the bar and fell, spinning end over end to the floor, spraying a golden shower of champagne in its wake. I watched it happen as if it were slow motion.

The crystal clarity of the drops slashing on the floor drove home the truth. Drugged.

Strong arms wrapped around me and I heard Luke laughing with the bartender as if through water.

“Easy, sweetheart. I told you to ease off the bubbly.”

“You’ll see her home, Mr. Stanton?” the bartender asked.

“Gladly, but she’ll not thank me in the morning.”

They both laughed as if it was uproariously funny. I saw things in flashes after that. Luke carried me out of the restaurant and into his car. There were snatches of familiar neon as he drove through the city. But it was the darkness with the occasional street lamp that made me fight against the impairment of the drugs.

Turning my head, I watched his face illuminated by the dashboard lights. His teeth were clenched in a way that had to be painful. Expanding my focus, I saw his knuckles white on the steering wheel. He must have sensed the movement because his gaze slashed from the road to me and back again.

“You’re awake.” His voice showed the same strain his body was broadcasting. I tried to talk, but speech was still beyond me. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Under different circumstances, I can take no for an answer.”

Panic welled up and I fought to change forms, but the lioness was as caged as the rest of me. He gripped the wheel tighter.

“I like you. I wish I didn’t. It’s either you or Scott and that’s not even a choice. My brother may be an idiot, but he’s still my brother. I stepped down from Rex ascension for him. You don’t even like me.”

The only argument he got to that one was the drone of road noise. It was hard to believe he hadn’t wanted to be a king. That disbelief helped fuel my determination to hold on to my wits instead of letting the haze roll over me. Keeping my eyes open and focused took an effort, but I managed. It seemed easier than it had when he put me in the car. If I could engineer an escape, I wanted to have an idea how to get home without relying on blind instinct. The effort paid off as the car sped around a bend and the one place I didn’t want to be loomed large.

The Cosmopolitan Hotel. Luke was going to deliver me to the enemy.

The sense of betrayal was sharp. It wasn’t for me, really. Kale and Yasmine trusted him and that betrayal was unconscionable. Then I realized what was going to be worse for Yasmine—losing me. Sisters in every way but blood. Our friendship had been the only thing we each had been able to rely on through our childhoods. At least she had Kale to get her through it. It made me feel better.

He pulled the car up to the back and slipped it into park. Out of the darkness, a vampire appeared as if conjured. Luke hissed, but his words were soft and meant not to be overheard.

“Close your eyes. We’re going up the servants entrance and it will cause less notice if you’re pretending to be passed out.”

I did it, but only because my limbs felt heavy and listless. I began to feel my face and it took less effort to manage my head, which was an improvement. I waited until we were inside to peek. Everywhere I could see, vampires loitered. In reality, there couldn’t have been more than twenty, but added to the security teams I knew patrolled and it amounted to a small army.

Luke’s chin tucked my head back against his chest. It reminded me that I wasn’t supposed to let anyone know I was cognizant. Obediently, I closed my eyes and forced myself to remain limp and passive in his arms. By the time we made it to the elevator, I was concentrating everything I had on moving a toe in my shoe. There. My toes moved. I wasn’t imagining things. Whatever he had given me was starting to process through my system and wear off.

When the elevator doors opened, Luke stepped out. The scent of jasmine and something else I couldn’t recognize washed over me. We were greeted by a very cultured, vaguely familiar voice.

“Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. I was beginning to give up on you, my lion friend.”

I opened my eyes to look at the face I couldn’t remember. The resemblance to Marcus had stuck in my mind, but the reality of seeing it in the flesh shocked me to the core.

I’d never seen a vampire with an aged face. He didn’t look old, but his swarthy complexion showed lines from spending time in the sun despite the lack of a suntan. It was an older, more mature version of Marcus’s face. He smiled at me with Marcus’s smile and it froze the urge to scream deep in my throat.

“I told you I would bring her no matter what the cost,” Luke said with a bitter tone.

“Ah, yes. So you did. Forgive me for my doubt. Most honorable men try to cheat after being backed into a corner with obligations they would rather not meet.”

Honorable? I let it slide as I desperately tried to move my limbs. Any movement would have mustered enough hope that I'd be able to make a break for it, but to no avail. My toes were all I had mastery of.

Without rising to the bait, Luke carefully set me down on the leather love seat in the suite. The ancient vampire closed the distance in a gliding walk so reminiscent of his son that I closed my eyes against it. Luke's words made me glad I had.

“My brother's marker. I've done what you asked of me. The debt is paid.”

“Not yet, my good lion. Not yet.”

His voice was closer than it should have been. My eyes jerked open to find him hovering over me. His hand snaked forward. I was helpless to stop it. Because I saw the hand, I tensed enough that it hurt when he grabbed my chin to stretch my neck. It was only a precursor to the pain as he struck to feed. The angle ensured it would be as painful as possible.

He sank to his knees as he fed. When he finally pulled away, I was seeing spots. The way he looked at me with my blood staining his face made the darkness descending a welcome relief.

Chapter Sixteen

Consciousness came in stages. Someone was wiping my face with a cool, damp cloth, but it wasn't making me feel any better. My mouth was painfully dry, and the sharp metallic scent of blood filling my nostrils did nothing to combat the threatening nausea. The smell wasn't strong enough to block out the sweet perfume. I forced my eyes open and faced Betsy Vincent.

She wasn't happy, but she didn't look harmed. Meeting my gaze, she stepped back and waited. I pushed myself up to sit on the bed despite the light-headedness that washed over me. Shocked to find myself naked except for handcuffs, I did my best to orient myself. From what I could see, it appeared to be a basic bedroom.

While nudity didn't generally bother me, it made me feel vulnerable. I hoped the dress I'd worn to the rehearsal dinner was hidden around here somewhere. It had been a gift from Yasmine when I had gotten my detective license and represented happier times. It was why I had chosen to wear it tonight.

I didn't worry about the shackles until I got a good look at them. Standard steel, I could have handled, but these were made of sterner stuff. I had a momentary hope that the chain was weak, but Betsy squashed it in a gleeful tone.

"Titanium. Alexander wanted to make sure you stayed where he put you. He chose your wrists so you wouldn't be able to slip them even if you shifted."

I jerked the chain and there was no give once the slack was gone. The chain disappeared under the bed, but it seemed that my host was too thorough to leave it anchored with something I could break with any ease. A sharp pain in my neck reminded me why I was naked on the bed to begin with.

I ran my fingers over the puncture wounds and found them neater than I expected. Nausea washed over me again, but I fought it back. Either the drugs were still wearing off or he'd taken too much blood. Or a combination of both. The room spun and I closed my eyes against it.

"What time is it?" God, was that my voice? It was rough and wheezy. I needed water and something with sugar in it.

"Not too late. The cocktail Alexander gave your lion metabolizes relatively quickly. It's why he left me here to sit with you. I normally have better things to do with my time than babysit strays. You have some intrinsic value, though. That counts for something."

Looking around the room, I spotted a water pitcher on a tray by the door. Seeing it made my mouth hurt. I licked my lips and debated the wisdom of asking, but need got the better of my suspicion.

“May I have some water, please?”

I watched her glide across the floor. Yes, she definitely had better treatment at the hands of our host. When she turned back to me, my gaze sought and found the scars on her neck. Alexander had been taking care of her fragile physiology unless he had fed from more intimate places.

I took the glass she offered me and drank gratefully, ignoring the initial pain as the liquid washed over the parched surface of my mouth. When I finished, I held the glass out to her and did my best to smile.

“Thank you. You do realize that he’s going to use you and throw you away too, right? It’s what he does.”

It wasn’t the smooth speech I had prepared, but there was no guarantee I’d have another chance to talk to her. She had the freedom to walk away from me.

“You don’t know him. He’s going to make me like him by bringing me across. I’m going to be young, beautiful and powerful forever.”

She said it with a smile. She honestly believed it. I hated Hollywood and their glamorization of the vampire culture. Myth and misinformation had brought more than one mortal to harm and Betsy Vincent was right on track.

“What happened to your lover, Betsy? Do you know where Todd went? What did Alexander tell you about his protégé?”

“He’s been sent to the next city to find an appropriate house. Alexander knows Marcus isn’t going to want us to stay here very long. A master doesn’t share his territory willingly.”

She sounded confident and a little too fervent. Oh, how I wanted to set her straight, but I was the one naked and shackled to the bed. Instead, I struggled to think around the problem, to take advantage of the opportunity talking to Betsy presented.

“So, you were going to skip town without even a farewell to your husband? He’s looking for you, but you know that. He’s worried. Dr. Vincent needs to know you’re okay. If you want a divorce, I’m sure you two can come to an understanding.”

“You want to talk about a man who plans to throw me away? My husband? After all the years I worked to see him comfortable with his practice, it’s over. I knew when the doctor gave us the news and Matthew didn’t even blink. Why? Because we decided to wait for children until he had time to spend with them. Until his practice could operate without him overseeing every single detail. That was his argument every time I brought it up until one day he said he was ready. But it was too late. Too late for me, at any rate. When I mentioned adoption, Matthew said he wanted a biological child. So I consulted a surrogacy agency. But that wasn’t good enough either.”

With every sentence, her anger and pain mounted. By the end, her eyes were full of tears and the pain had cracked her suave exterior. With her defenses down, I struck with the truth I knew, since I couldn’t argue about the way her marriage had fallen apart.

“Todd is dead, Betsy. Alexander raped his mind and left Marcus to pick up the pieces. Marcus gave him the choice of starting his life over or meeting a peaceful end. He didn’t choose amnesty.”

The first tears fell as she sat hard in the chair in the corner. “Dead?”

“I’m sorry. Alexander is in the habit of wringing what he can use out of people and letting them fall where they may. Don’t be one of his discards.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the reason her husband had tossed her away was the same one that enticed the vampire to keep her until her beauty waned. I pushed my advantage.

“Betsy, let me go. You can walk out of here with me. You can go back to your life. Dr. Vincent is ready to forgive you and see where things can go from here.”

It was the wrong move. Maybe it was the forgive comment or maybe it was the fact I was trying to get her to reverse her course while there was still time. Whatever the reason, she stood and her mask slid back into place.

“All the way to the judge, you mean. Thank you, but no. He needs to suffer. It’s seven years before he can declare me legally dead. That’s seven years he has to wait for that precious heir. He won’t settle for a bastard. If there’s any justice, he’ll be too old to get the job done or enjoy it if he does.”

She turned on her heels and stalked out of the room, leaving me alone with the water pitcher in sight but well out of reach. Lying back down, I stared at the ceiling and wondered how long it would take for someone to realize that I’d not gone home with the lion. More importantly, would Marcus come after me if he thought I had? Was his love that strong?

The thought made something shift inside me. Hot tears leaked from the corners of my eyes and flowed into my hair. I never cried. It had always been seen as a sign of weakness in the orphanage so I’d been taught early to avoid it. Angrily, I forced myself to remember the lessons learned at the hands of bigger, harder children.

The anger boiled inside me to the point I fought off the change. I would have given over to it if I thought I had the strength to do more than lie on the bed like an exhausted kitten.

By the time Alexander strolled through the doorway, I was ready for the fight. Unfortunately, in the way of vampires, it was a battle of wits and mine were still sluggish.

“I begin to understand what my son sees in you. Your beauty is only second to your boldness. I should have realized that a fainting rose would never hold him. It took a courageous woman to capture his attention long enough to engage his emotions beyond the superficial. I knew if I waited long enough, a woman would be the death of him.”

“What am I, the bait? You’re in for a rude awakening if you think he’s going to stroll in here after me. You had me hauled off like a prize by the man he felt was his chief rival. In light of the fact Marcus and I aren’t anything to one another anymore, that’s enough of a nail in any relationship’s coffin. It looks like I

chose the lion over him. He wanted exclusive rights to me while he slept around. It's why we stopped seeing one another. You need better intelligence."

I pulled my legs up to cover my nakedness. Pride kept me from using the comforter for cover. The temptation to do that was entirely too much like hiding. The way Alexander's gaze kept sliding down me during my little speech told me he enjoyed the view entirely too much. Of course, he could be enjoying the fact I was defenseless and the key to the revenge he'd spent centuries planning. He might kill me, but I'd go down fighting even if it was only with useless gestures.

"My intelligence tells me that he's given up his other feeding sources because you didn't approve of the coin he used to pay for it. A woman offers her life's blood so we may feed. It deserves a little pleasure to ease the pain, doesn't it?"

His tone was mocking and his gaze went to my neck. I flinched from remembered pain. Of course, that had been his point. He smiled smugly.

"It's not so pleasant being the cow on the table, is it? Would you doom Marcus to feeding like a demon? How long would it be before the authorities hunted him down for exactly that?"

It sounded so reasonable. But then, he operated on a different page. He played on a guilt I didn't feel. It gave me room to think. With as much bravado as I could muster, I smiled toothily.

"Alexander, you're acting as if I really care. Marcus and I had a good thing once. When he started getting possessive and making demands, I kicked him to the curb. If he's working under the mistaken impression that giving up his other women is the way back to my heart, he's mistaken. Lions don't exactly embrace monogamy. The only reason I even walked into the club the other night was to find Betsy Vincent."

There were so many questions he could answer there that it made my head hurt. I tried not to make it apparent how carefully I was listening for his answering volley. He didn't disappoint.

"We both know you're not the typical lioness. If you had been, you would have welcomed Luke's advances. For that matter, I wouldn't have resorted to something as unreliable as blackmail. I would have brought Scott to do the job as I had planned. Unfortunately, I knew at the first meeting that he wouldn't suit. Your tastes are too discriminating to fall for the typical playboy type."

He had come to town with a plan and we'd all walked right into it. How terribly predictable. All I could do was pray that Marcus stayed away. It was too much to hope for. Our assault plan had been for "our" vampires to begin filtering into the bar and restaurant area shortly before lunchtime with me coming in and having Betsy brought down for our little conversation after the place was secure. If someone made a grab at me, Marcus and reinforcements would charge in. It was so naïve to think the bad guys would play into our game of honorable intentions.

Alexander's chuckle broke through my thoughts and I raised my gaze to his without thinking.

“We shall see who knows my son better, you or I? Either way, I get the pleasure of taking something he prizes away from him. Small measure of revenge, but a measure I’ve waited a lifetime to have. One must take what one can when the opportunity presents itself.”

And he was suddenly gone, leaving me with a splitting headache. Apparently, now that he had me right where he wanted me, he wasn’t planning to be gentle with his mind tricks. I wrapped the comforter around me, rolled onto my side, and tried to work my hand from the cuff under the cover while pretending to sleep.

An hour passed and then two. The only thing I managed to accomplish was a bleeding wrist. Finally, I closed my eyes in earnest and let sleep come. If I was going to get free, I’d need my wits about me. A good soldier sleeps when they can so they can fight when needed. My last conscious thought was Marcus would come for me and I would be ready. Alexander had no idea how vicious the idea of revenge could be compared to mine.

Chapter Seventeen

The first clue that our side had responded to my kidnapping was a sudden explosive noise beyond my room. Throwing the covers away, I jumped from the bed at the sounds of fighting. Cursing, I yanked at the shackle without regard for the swollen flesh. A sharp intake of breath behind me whirled me back to the door where Luke stood bleeding. His gaze was hungry as he stared at me, but my own locked on the tiny silver key in his hand.

“That had better be the key to this damned lock or I’m going to eat you myself. You won’t have to worry about the vampires.”

He flushed and hurried forward, grabbing my wrist to steady it as he fought the lock. My hiss from the pain made him soften his touch, but getting the shackle open wasn’t gentle.

“You shouldn’t have struggled.”

“Says the man who wasn’t chained naked to a bed for his lover’s father to ogle.”

The shackle opened and I snatched my wrist out leaving the shell in Luke’s hands. Using my weight and the momentum, I slammed my fist into the lion’s face with all the force I could muster. Blood spouted from his nose and he stumbled back to tangle in the chain. He stared up at me from the undignified spot on the floor.

“What was that for?” he demanded indignantly.

“For being a traitorous bastard, for starters.” I shook my bloodied wrist at him angrily.

“I brought the cavalry. I wasn’t going to leave you to that monster’s whims.”

I almost believed him, but not quite. The betrayed part of me didn’t trust his motives. My instincts said Alexander had lied when making promises to a turncoat. A crash nearby gave my anger a new direction.

I bolted through the door and found myself running down a narrow hallway. From the mouth of it, I could see Marcus and Peter leading the charge. Mustering the adrenaline and the magic that made me what I was, I shifted in a blaze of power. With a scream, I launched myself at the closest vampire I knew for sure was not on my side of the battle.

Blood, salty and sweet, filled my mouth as I landed. The human spine was not meant to hold against such an attack and his neck snapped with a loud crack. My weight carried him to the floor, but I didn’t hesitate to ensure he was dead. A broken neck would keep him out of the fighting even if he was strong enough to heal from it. If he wasn’t strong enough to heal from it, it was his cost for going against Marcus.

My claws came out and the vampire in front of me fell with a scream as I sliced open his hamstring. Alexander came within sight once the man was down and fury gave me tunnel vision. The vampire who turned to face me and got in the way fell as I slashed open his soft belly. Someone tackled me from behind, and I screamed again as I rolled with him trying to shake him loose. My claws met flesh as I reached over my shoulder and I was happy to feel it give.

“Destiny. Destiny. Stop. Stop!”

Peter’s voice cut through my blooded rage. I went limp in his arms and hissed as he let me go except for a firm hand at the scruff of my neck. He gave me a shake for good measure. I let him do it from guilt at the sight of blood streaming down his shoulders.

“Stop. The only way this ends is man to man. King to king.”

I narrowed my eyes as I stared up at him, but the sounds of fighting were dying around us. Breaking the staring match, I glanced around to see that everyone was indeed stepping back to give Marcus and Alexander room.

The resemblance between the two was notable, but seeing them standing in the cleared space so close together made it striking. Both vampires were preparing for battle by removing anything that would give the other an advantage. Marcus shared his father’s build. They would be evenly matched on a physical level.

“I knew you’d come for her. Women have always been your weakness.” Alexander’s tone was self-satisfied and full of confidence.

Marcus pulled his shirt over his head and threw it in my direction. Peter caught it deftly, which was a good thing since I didn’t have hands at the moment. He spared me a glance before turning his full attention to the battle he’d worked his entire lifetime to avoid. Guilt washed away the last of my anger.

This was my fault. Granted, getting kidnapped, tied up and snacked on wasn’t, but the fight was. Marcus had undoubtedly had opportunities to force a confrontation with his father over the long years, but had managed to avoid physical violence. The inevitability of the situation was brought home with Marcus’s reply.

“No, Alexander. Women are your weakness. You use them, abuse them and toss them away. My weakness is love. But the one thing you’ve never understood is that there is strength in it as well. A wife is not a plaything, a temporary pleasure. She is someone who should be treated with respect and awe for the way she completes you. She is a trusted helpmate, companion and moral compass.” His tone was tired, but his gaze found mine in the crowd. Those sweet words were meant for me.

My heart was in my throat. Marcus stood against a man powerful enough to kill him and he spoke of love and wives? If he lived through this, I was going to kill him myself. If this was his way of proposing, it left a lot to be desired.

“I speak of women and you speak of wives. You still carry too much of your mother in you. I should have taken you away from her before she could leave such a mark. Your lioness says that you’re nothing to her. She’s noble enough to protect you, however. Would you sully our bloodline with a half-breed bastard? Perhaps I should have killed you long before now and gone about siring another son.”

Marcus’s face tightened at the mention of his mother. The final piece of the puzzle snapped into place. Alexander was everything Marcus did not want to be. And Alexander thought I was the key to turning Marcus into an unloving monster. Alexander had never intended to let me live because my death would have broken Marcus’s heart. If he didn’t know I was dead or alive, Marcus would still have mounted a rescue. Being too late would have crushed something inside him that I held precious. Marcus’s mocking tone brought my attention back to the two master vampires.

“Ah, but that’s beyond you now, isn’t it? You’ve lost the warmth of the sun. How many of the purebred houses have died out because they waited until it was too late to consider their bloodlines? Like it or not, I’m the only one left to carry on. You saw to that.”

“We shall see, shan’t we? To the victor go the spoils. If our line dies here, the fault lies with you.”

Anger shimmered in the air between them, from both sides. They began circling one another in long crossover steps, keeping their bodies fully facing one another. I wanted to shift back into my human form, but fear that the magic would distract Marcus kept me as I was. Peter’s hand loosened on my neck and he began stroking it. Whether his intention was to comfort himself or me, I let the sure strokes settle me.

Across the room, Luke urged Betsy Vincent down the hallway toward my room. The blood on his clothes and the swelling bruises made me feel a little less angry about what he had done, but not by much. I’d settle that score when the danger had passed. For now, he was trying to remove a potential distraction. I could appreciate that.

A hiss from the watching vampires snapped my gaze back to the battling kings. One moment, they were snarling and stepping and the next, they were airborne. The sound of flesh meeting flesh made me cringe, but I couldn’t take my eyes away. I’d seen fighting in all styles, but never a hand-to-hand battle to the death. It would be to the death. No quarter given.

Alexander drew first blood with a raking slash across Marcus’s chest. I realized that the barehanded combat between vampires held a different definition than between mortals. They were hardly without natural weapons. Their fingers were hooked into claws with elongated nails and those nails sliced through the flesh on Marcus’s chest as easily as my own would have.

It put an entirely new spin on things. Fear raced through me as the scent of blood sent a wave of anticipation through the crowd. Creeping forward, I crouched at the feet of the watchers, ready to guard Marcus’s back if the need arose. Peter stayed at my side. A glance told me his intentions were the same. He turned his head to continually survey the room, canvassing the crowd, not watching the fight.

Marcus and Alexander returned to stalking in an ever-tightening circle. They surged at one another and this time, it wasn't a tentative assault. Blood splashed in a wide arc as Marcus retaliated. They moved in a blur of movement too fast for me to follow. It was hypnotic.

Alexander's maniacal laughter was the only sound besides the panting of the crowd and the solid sounds of fists landing on exposed flesh, punctuated by the occasional ripping sound of skin parted by knife-sharp claws. It seemed as if they were both trying to pummel the other into submission or attempting not to maximize the damage. In crystal clarity, I saw Alexander's arm flying through the air straight for Marcus's throat. I felt the scream rising, but before I could loose it, Marcus's arm was there to block the blow.

Alexander's face showed surprise and shock when he realized he'd left his own throat exposed. Marcus's hand flashed into the opening, slashing the bulging vein open.

Blood splashed across my face and I tried to back away from the arterial spray. The vampires around me weren't that discriminating. The crowd surged forward. Several spectators stepped on me trying to reach the fallen king.

I struggled to the back of the crowd to find Peter watching for me. Gathering my magic, I flowed into my human form without stopping. He wordlessly averted his gaze as he offered me Marcus's shirt for cover. I breathed in the scent of him as I donned it and felt the tears flowing down my face in reaction. I turned back to see the crowd part ahead of Marcus with the deference his position and age entitled him.

"There's still some blood to be had, if you've a mind to take it. There's power in it." His words were for Peter, but his gaze was all for me.

Peter's reply was low enough where only the two of us could hear it over the growing excitement around us. "Thank you, but no. My loyalty is to you and I'll not leave you unprotected here. And while we're talking protection, she's not safe. Not even you can keep her safe once the blood frenzy starts."

"This will get out of hand," Marcus agreed. He raised his hand and Emanuel appeared like magic. "Anyone not willing to live by the Covenant laws will be gone by sundown or declared outlaw with the dawn. Make sure they understand and take the oaths."

Emanuel bowed low and stepped back. I had some idea as to the significance of what had happened, but to see two of Marcus's most trusted lieutenants acting so cautiously made me wary.

All I wanted was to be gone from this place and all the hungry vampires, so I didn't resist when Marcus took my arm and started angling for the door. I didn't even balk when Luke and Betsy were hustled out of the back room to join us as we made our escape. No one with an ounce of mortality should be in the penthouse when Alexander's blood ran dry.

Besides, it would be a shame to have finally tracked down Betsy Vincent only to have to tell her husband that I'd gotten her killed.

Peter escorted us to the elevators. The tiny car was filled with Betsy's quiet sobs, the stench of her fear, blood and adrenaline. I watched Luke's nostrils flare in the reflection of the doors as he inhaled the intoxicating mixture. I hoped Marcus let me have some say in his punishment.

It was a credit to the Cosmopolitan staff that no one even glanced at my bared legs or Marcus's bloody chest as we made our escape through the lobby. The sun was still low in the sky, but I had no idea exactly what day it was. Was it the morning after the rehearsal dinner or the morning of the wedding? No, it couldn't be the wedding day because there would have been werewolves among the rescue party. The pack had to be in the mountains doing the tribal alpha-mating ceremony.

Still blinking from the sun, I stumbled on the curb and looked at the two long black cars. Gratefully, I slipped into the dark interior of a waiting car while Peter signaled the vampires surrounding Luke and Betsy to take them to the other. He nodded before closing the door. The car shifted as he got into the front and the muffled sound of the door slamming was the only warning I had before the car pulled away.

I didn't have time to settle into my seat before Marcus pulled me into his arms. His mouth was hungry as it met mine. He growled at the taste of blood on my tongue or perhaps it was the sheer desperation that I met him with. The leather of the seat wasn't enough cushion for my back as he lay me down, covering my body with his. The position left my hands free to fall to his belt and my fingers were clumsy with haste.

His mouth was eager as he broke the kiss to work his way down my chin and around my jaw to settle on my neck. I stretched it and whimpered in frustration because his belt buckle wouldn't release. He planted his mouth over my neck and the feeling of his tongue teasing that vein made my hands still in anticipation. I strained against him, begging him with my body. The sharp tips of his teeth against my skin made me whimper.

As suddenly as he'd grabbed me, he was gone. I opened eyes I hadn't consciously closed to find him pushed into the corner of the opposite seat as far from me as he could get.

"What? Why did you stop?" I meant it as a demand, but it came out breathy and packed with far too much emotion. Marcus's chest rose and fell as he panted. His eyes were narrowed and icy. That look was all that kept me on my own seat as I sat up.

"He *fed* on you." Marcus spat the words at me.

"Yeah. It hurt like hell, too." I stared at him in confusion. His gaze dropped and he closed his eyes before dropping his head into his hands.

"It doesn't matter. You were at his mercy. You couldn't say no. It never happened." His pained tone didn't help my confusion.

"It'll heal, Marcus. It's just a little blood." His tortured gaze rose to mine and I cursed myself for being an idiot. "It *was* only blood. Prisoner or not, I'm entirely too picky about my partners to welcome anything else. Rape was off the table unless he wanted to die in the attempt. I might have been chained to the bed, but I've still got teeth and claws."

Hope flickered and caught. He had honestly thought... Shaking my head, I did the only thing I could think of to break the mood. I gripped the shirttail and pulled it over my head to toss it to the floor. Dropping down beside it, I crawled as sensually as the confines of the car would let me to kneel between his knees. My hands reached for his belt buckle.

“Now, this is a better angle to get this undone. Where were we?”

The belt buckle easily slipped free and I looked up at him across the long line of exposed flesh, letting all my intentions and determination show. He didn't stop me as I lowered his zipper and reached around the waistband of the pants to slide my hands beneath them at his hips.

“You're overdressed for what I have in mind.” My words were eager, breathy, and filled with an elemental desperation that could only be reached by watching him battle for his life.

He didn't question, just reached down to take my hands in his and lifted up so that we pushed his pants off together. I wanted to look at him, but his gaze held me captive as he released my hands, silently urging me to take the lead. I gave him what he wanted because in that moment, it was exactly what I wanted too.

Planting a knee on either side of him, I settled against him, whimpering at the way he felt hot and hard against me. This position put us eye to eye, and I'd forgotten how intimate that could be with him. He reached up to smooth my hair back from my face and I let my gaze drop to his mouth. Leaning in, I pressed our lips together in a painfully tentative kiss.

We were both being so very, very careful. Part of me wanted the white-hot sex we'd started with, but the rest of me acknowledged that this time was too important to waste on instinctive mating.

So many things remained unsaid between us. His words before the fight echoed in my mind, but it was my unspoken feelings for him that made my body burn. I wanted, no needed, to show him exactly what he meant to me.

The kiss grew while his hands fell to my hips, and he pulled me closer as his tongue invaded my mouth. My own met his and we dueled before coming up for air. My hands moved up his chest and slid through the slick path of blood across it. I started to pull my hands away, but he changed the angle so I had to hang on to his shoulders for balance.

Rubbing against him, I moaned at the way he felt and knew that he was only inches away. Riding higher on his thighs, I kissed him as the pieces lined up and broke it with a gasp as I impaled myself upon him. Months of abstinence made it a tight fit, but all the emotion and fear from the last half hour meant I was more than ready for him.

Words were beyond me as I rode him with a single-minded determination to wring every drop from this encounter that I could. He was not idle. His hands circled my back, anchoring me and encouraging me as his mouth nipped along my chin and down to my neck. He shifted us to another angle so he could go even lower, and the feel of his mouth on my breast made my lower body jerk and tighten on him.

His hands urged me to pick up the pace and I was more than happy to. Every nerve, every emotion hinged on that point where we were joined. Each thrust took me closer to that precipice until I sobbed with need.

And then, between heartbeats, I found my release. The sudden rush of pleasure made me shout and the only thing that kept me riding the waves was Marcus's arms around me as he followed me into ecstasy.

While the aftershocks were still shaking my body, he straightened in the seat so I could lay my head on his shoulder comfortably. He rubbed my back like he was soothing a small child and I smiled against his neck. Leaning forward, I nipped him lightly.

"Hey, what was that for?"

"For thinking I rolled over like that trollop in the car behind us."

"Trollop? Betsy Vincent is hardly that. Maybe, with Alexander dead, the mind traps he wove will dissipate."

That brought me to a question that wasn't important fifteen minutes ago. "How did you know? Where I was?"

"Your lion turned his coat. Apparently, Alexander refused to honor their agreement so he came to me."

Luke. So I was right about his motives. We were going to address that issue, but it was going to have to wait until I had clothes and a meal. My stomach rumbled at the thought and I felt the flush rising from my breasts.

Marcus smiled and pulled me forward for a tender kiss.

"There are clothes in a bag underneath the seat. Unless you've gained weight since you last spent the night at the Vantage, they should fit. They'll hold you until we can get business taken care of. Then you can get cleaned up in time to rest before your slumber party with Yasmine this evening."

Chapter Eighteen

Whoever had packed the bag had been considerate enough to provide a full change of clothes, including a pair of new sandals in my size, as well as a toiletry bag and towel. Of course, they probably hadn't meant for it to be used this way, but what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

The jeans did fit, if a little snugly, and the shirt was one I'd looked for and finally reached the conclusion I'd lost at the laundry. It was a shimmery blue cotton-blend golf shirt that was soft and sexy against my skin. Wearing it, I felt ready to face anything that could be thrown at me.

Marcus had watched me clean up and dress after pulling his pants up with a proprietary air that should have offended me. It hadn't and he noticed. The smile he wore as he took his shirt when I offered it told me that much.

"Aren't you going to put it on?"

"I don't want to ruin it with blood. It carries your scent."

It was a sappy thing to say and I rolled my eyes. Taking the toiletry bag in hand, I hopped back beside him on the seat and pulled out a wet wipe. He hissed when I began carefully removing the drying blood.

"Stop being a baby. I'm not anywhere near the actual gashes."

"There are more pleasant ways to clean the blood off, Destiny."

I grinned at him impishly before giving him the rejection that comment deserved. "We've already done that. Besides, I don't think Peter wants to take an extra spin around the parking lot to give us a chance to get dressed."

His smile faded into an expression that made him look like his old self. "That wasn't what I meant. I may not be my father, Destiny, but my blood still holds power. Just because you're not a vampire doesn't mean you can't benefit since it's already spilled."

Spilled in defense of me. Looking down at the bloody wipe, I started cleaning the blood away, getting another towelette when it was past the point.

"Speaking of your father, are you okay?"

Marcus stopped flinching. "Yes," he finally answered. "I've known it would come to this since he allowed me to walk away. In a lot of ways, I am relieved."

"Why?" I shouldn't have asked the question, but it slipped out.

"I have no fond memories of him. Alexander was the type of king that ruled by might. He didn't understand the value of respect, especially toward women. When I became old enough to begin my

progression into manhood, he felt my mother had served her purpose and banished her. I think that's when I began to hate him. When he killed Xavier, he broke the final straw."

He lapsed in his story. I wanted to push. Instead, I whispered the only thing I could. "I'm sorry."

Marcus's hand took mine and pressed it against his chest. "Don't be. The last thing she said to me was to grow into a man worthy of her lineage, not Alexander's. I think it bothered him that her line was more prestigious than his and that's why he treated her as he did."

"I'm sure she would be proud of you. What happened to her?"

"I don't know. Someday, maybe she'll appear to harass you as Kale's mother does Yasmine." He leaned forward and kissed me lightly. It was an effective way to put an end to the conversation.

I broke away from him and picked up another wet wipe. He didn't push me away when I returned to cleaning his wound. I was nearly finished when the car turned and began to slow. We must have arrived at the Vantage.

Marcus's hand reached for mine and I didn't hesitate as I laced our fingers together. In the heat of the moment, everything had seemed like such a great idea. Now, we were going to step out of our love nest and back into the roles we were locked into. Neither of us had professed undying love, but maybe that was just as well. A quickie in the car after a near-death incident was hardly the place to examine such things.

My assumption that we were going to the Vantage was wrong. I stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of my office. My two watchers were standing on either side of my open front door looking very official. I couldn't help but wonder where they had been when Luke had carted me off. Unwilling to dwell on it, I held on to Marcus's hand and led the way in. It was time to have some questions answered.

The first thing I did while Peter and the cadre of guards were herding Luke and Betsy in after us was pick up the phone. I thought allowing all five vampires in the room to watch over Luke and Betsy was overkill, but it beat having them loitering on the sidewalk with the two watchers.

I left a brief message on Dr. Vincent's service to meet us here before we let his wife leave. I'd honored my obligation to him as far as I was concerned. Hanging the phone up, I ignored the blinking message light on the machine and leaned against the desk facing the room.

Marcus moved around me to sit in my chair to leave the seats for Luke and Betsy. I didn't mind. I wanted to be on my feet for this little chat.

Betsy's face was tearstained as she sat down. Luke's was impassive. His nose had stopped bleeding and there was no indication I'd broken it. I pushed down the disappointment at that. It would have served him right to have a lifelong reminder of the cost of betrayal.

"Tell me why I shouldn't kill you and be done with it, Luke?"

It was a little more abrupt than I should have been, but I was tired and riding adrenaline. I wanted to be showered and tucked into my own bed before it wore off.

“I told Marcus the whole story. I don’t really feel like repeating it.” His tone was resigned, but there was a measure of determined pride hanging in his expression to his face. I didn’t take pity on him for it.

“Well, I was a little tied up at the time. Give me the short version.”

“Or what?” This time, Luke’s voice held the heat of anger.

“Do as the lady asks,” Marcus advised. “Or I will withdraw my protection. Being the unwilling dupe only carries so much wiggle room, after all.”

At that, every vampire’s attention in the room sharpened. They wanted a shot at him for what he had done to put Marcus in danger.

“Alexander came into a blood marker against my twin brother. He agreed to give it to me in trade if I could deliver him a certain lioness that happened to be closely connected to an exclusive wedding I had an invitation to. Kale and I went to Stanford and had classes together while you and Yasmine were still at Berkley. Yasmine was the topic of more than one night of alcohol and mooning on his part. We’ve stayed in touch over the years.”

“You’re an accountant?” I couldn’t help but gape at him. He certainly didn’t look like the geeky man Kale sent to help me with my taxes every year. So much for stereotypes.

“It’s an honest living.”

“So, why now? If you’ve been their lion in the hole, so to speak, why drag you to town and dump you off on me now?”

“Until six weeks ago, I had a territory all my own. Since I doubted you were interested in moving to Arizona, the point was moot.”

“So what happened six weeks ago?”

“The Rex was killed in a car accident. My brother and I were the strongest contenders for the position. It was either defeat him in honest combat or step aside. I never really wanted the pride, just to live in it. It wasn’t much of a choice.”

Coincidence or vampire mechanisms? It seemed entirely too neat and tidy for my comfort. When he paused, I prompted, “And then?”

“My brother ran off to celebrate his new position with a weekend in Vegas. He came home in debt to a bookie and married to a stripper. The marriage was easy enough to make go away, but the debt? Not so much. He ran to the local vampire queen to borrow the money. Thus, the blood marker. I was moving funds around to liquidate enough to buy it back when I received a phone call from Alexander. The rest you know.”

The pieces fell together.

“Except Alexander liked having you in his pocket and wouldn’t make good on the promise.”

“Pretty much. Now, I assume that marker passes to Marcus.”

Luke’s gaze slid past me to Marcus. Both men sat there weighing the other until Luke spoke again.

“I offered myself in his stead. If it’s a life you want, take mine. Paulette was interested in blood and sex to work the marker off, but her interest would have seen one of us dead before she was done with us. Alexander wanted a life. I aided him in his plan, which means I’ve already forfeited mine since I backed the wrong horse. I ask that you be satisfied with me and not take down my entire pride for what I’ve done.”

“Oh my God, you’re going to kill me too.”

Both men turned to look at Betsy as if they had forgotten she was there. Perhaps they had. Peter materialized at her chair before the wail was out of the air.

“Ms. Vincent.” Marcus’s voice held compassion as he tried to reassure her. “You were misled and taken advantage of. We hold no blame against you. When your husband arrives, we will turn you over to him and you can set about making what you can of what remains of your life. In fact, there’s a powder room down the hall. Peter will take you there and you can freshen your appearance.”

She leaped at the opportunity to get away from them. Mumbling her gratitude, she bolted with Peter’s hand on her arm to guide her. Marcus waited until she was out of the room before turning back to Luke.

“You helped us get into the hotel in time to save Destiny. That earns you the right to ask for concessions. I have an offer for you. You agree, in writing, to leave our territory and never return without formal petition approval, and I’ll let you go.”

He didn’t say what he would do if Luke didn’t honor the terms. Luke understood it from the way he drew himself up in his chair.

“I’ll leave after the wedding tomorrow. I would like to come back for the christening if Kale doesn’t kill me when he finds out about this.”

“I see no reason for the werewolves to learn of your involvement in anything but the rescue. Of course, that will also mean that you make it clear to them that Destiny is not your idea of mate material.”

Luke’s gaze cut over to me and he gave a ghost of a smile. “I doubt she’d have me, anyway. I never really thought I had a chance. The only attraction I had was instinctive.”

Standing between them, I could only roll my eyes and shake my head. The problem with dealing with alpha leaders was that sometimes a lady had to let them beat their chests and yell.

They both stood and Luke offered his hand first. Marcus accepted it with a nod of acknowledgement. As far as they were both concerned, the deal was signed and sealed. Of course, I knew Marcus well enough to suppose he really would expect a written promise to put in his vault before Luke caught his flight out of town.

Luke turned to me and offered his hand. His touch was firm, but gentle as he met my gaze squarely.

“Be happy, Destiny. I can’t tell you how sorry I am that I met you under these circumstances. I think, if things had been different, we could have been very good friends.”

With that, he nodded to Marcus, turned on his heel and strode for the door. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I called after him.

“I’m counting on you to keep Kale from doing anything that will make Yas angry at the bachelor party. He needs to be at the church at noon. Get that done and you don’t owe me an apology.”

He looked back with a jaunty salute as he opened the door. Because he wasn’t watching where he was going, he had no chance to avoid the man hurrying in. Dr. Vincent ran into him with a stumbling stride, knocking him off his feet.

“So much for the graceful exit,” he muttered as he scrambled up without taking the hand Dr. Vincent offered.

“I’m so sorry, sir. Please forgive me. I’m looking for Ms. St. George? My service relayed a message from her?”

The man in the thousand-dollar suit was very much like I remembered him except his immaculate appearance was somewhat ruffled. His suit was still pressed and expensively tailored, but his collar was crushed where he had pulled his tie loose and his hair looked as if he’d spent the entire drive over running his hands through it.

Luke waved him toward me. Dr. Vincent’s stride emphasized the anxiety written all over his face. His gaze locked on me as if I was a lifeline.

“I was on my way in to the hospital to meet a colleague. I hope it’s all right that I came right over? I confess I didn’t think of calling until I turned the corner.”

Stepping forward, I offered my hand and gripped the one he extended with both hands. Poor man was shaking like a leaf. It must be love.

“I was hoping you would, Dr. Vincent. Betsy is freshening up before she comes out. It’s been a trying morning for her. Please, have a seat. Can I get you a drink? Soda, water?”

“Something stronger, perhaps?” Marcus offered from behind me.

Dr. Vincent’s gaze snapped from my face to the vampire and he hesitated. It surprised me that he recognized what Marcus was. Or maybe it was the fact there was a man behind my desk that gave him pause. Either way, his composure reconstructed right before my eyes.

“Something stronger, please.” Dr. Vincent addressed his request to Marcus who inclined his head before moving to the credenza against the wall. The bottle of single-malt scotch was still where he had left it.

“Neat or on the rocks?”

“Neat, please.”

It was all so very civilized. Marcus poured the whiskey into two tumblers. He didn’t offer me one I noticed but decided not to make an issue of it. Instead, I moved around my desk to take my seat, leaving Marcus to lean against the credenza while we waited for Betsy. Both men took a long drink from their glasses.

Dr. Vincent's eyes kept darting between me and the vampire, and I was grateful the extra guards had taken themselves to the back of the house without having to be asked. Our visitor probably hadn't even noticed them. Then again, he was about to have one of the defining moments in his life so I could forgive him.

Footsteps in the hallway were the first indication the silence wouldn't be long enough to become awkward. Betsy's sandals made a strange sound on the carpet runner. We all faced the doorway for her grand entrance. She didn't disappoint.

She had put her compact to good use. Her makeup was flawless, down to the way she had covered the healing scars along her neck. Betsy had pulled her hair into a twist that accentuated the clean lines of her face and made her look classy despite everything I knew about her. The sundress had been smoothed and retied.

In contrast to her husband's obvious anxiety as he rose, she glided across the floor with a grace I couldn't have managed under the circumstances.

"Matthew."

"Betsy."

Dr. Vincent seemed uncertain as to what to do. We all gave him the time to sort it out. He finally set his glass on my desk and stepped toward her. He hugged her awkwardly before waving to the seat next to him. She didn't take it so he didn't sit down, either.

"Please. Sit. Hear me out and I'll go. You can be free if you want to be."

"Let me give you two some privacy." I did not want to listen to their negotiations. My part in this was finished. "In fact, Peter will be waiting outside the door to lock up after you so take all the time you need. I live upstairs. I'm going to relax. It's been a hard night."

Betsy's cool blue eyes shot to my face and she flushed as she dropped her gaze. Matthew's response was much more congenial.

"I'm so sorry. Of course. Thank you, Ms. St. George. Thank you for everything. I confess I had my doubts, but I knew you could find her as soon as you took the case. Mr. LeCroy was right. You are the best."

The mention of Frank LeCroy made me start. I'd totally forgotten about him. A glance at the clock made me wince. He was probably still sitting in the parking lot of the Cosmopolitan waiting for the execution of our original plan. That is, unless someone had already let him know what had happened. Oh well, I'd owe him a favor.

"You're quite welcome, Doctor. Good luck."

I wished I could say something more positive, but there simply wasn't anything. Instead, I gave him a sincere smile, shook his hand once again, and left him to pick up the pieces of his marriage.

Chapter Nineteen

Marcus stopped in the kitchen to dismiss the guards and earned extra brownie points for telling them to take the watchers on the house with them. He would probably read them the riot act later for their obvious lack of diligence. I started up the stairs, thought of something and stuck my head around the door facing.

“Hey, can you call someone we might have left stranded there and have them swing by to pick up my car from Carl’s? I drove to the rehearsal dinner. The key’s in the rear tire well.”

One of them threw up a hand in a wave as he rounded the corner of the kitchen. Marcus scowled after them, but turned to me with a charming smile. I frowned back suspiciously. He wanted something. I could feel it.

“May I come up?”

My stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off and my feet were dragging. He looked so hopeful standing there in his rumpled shirt.

“Marcus, I’m hungry and tired. Yasmine’s coming tonight and if I don’t get some rest, I’m going to be a horrible friend on the night before her big day.”

“I’ll rest with you. It was a long night for me as well.”

He looked so adorable and earnest that I caved.

“If you make me ruin Yasmine’s last night as a single woman, you and I are going to have a serious fight.”

“She’s technically married by culture now. Tomorrow is for legalities.”

“And thank you for the reminder. That’s not going to get you into my bed today, if that’s what you’re aiming for.”

He laughed softly and held up his hands. “Simply an observation, my lady. I’d be honored to hold you while you sleep, provided that was an invitation?”

“Well, come on then. No funny stuff. I’m too tired to fully appreciate it.”

I turned and began to trot up the stairs. My ears were tuned to the bottom of the stairwell as Marcus followed me. The click of the lock was loud. I waited for the sound of his first step on the hardwood before bolting.

Two steps into the upstairs kitchen he caught me. Strong arms wrapped around my waist and he spun me around in a circle. I yelled when he tossed me in the air and set me on the counter. My hands fell instinctively to his shoulders. We stood grinning like fools until he leaned in to kiss me gently.

What started as innocent joy grew hot despite my best intentions. Marcus broke the kiss like a diver coming up for air. I opened my eyes to take him in while I tried to reconnect my scrambled wits. My stomach growled again and we both started laughing.

“Sit right there and I’ll see what’s lurking in your refrigerator.”

“Oh, don’t do that. You spend entirely too much time when you decide to go all gourmet. I don’t want to starve to death before you finish. There’s microwave lasagna in the freezer. Five minutes and I’m fed. In fact, if you’re taking over the kitchen, I’m hitting the shower. The sooner I’m fed and clean, the sooner I can sleep.”

I didn’t hop off the counter, though. I watched as he opened the freezer, made a face and moved to the fridge. He finally glanced over the door and caught me looking.

“Go clean up and I’ll have something edible waiting when you’re done.”

There was a promise of more than food in his face that sent a warm flush through my entire body. Taking the escape while I had it, I headed to the bathroom.

The shower was hot against my skin and stung the raw flesh on my wrist. Shifting hadn’t helped that, but then again, healing between forms was never a guarantee. I remembered every moment with Marcus in the car while I went through the motions of getting clean. When I turned off the shower, the only thing I could smell on my skin was the cherry-blossom scent of the soap.

Standing in my closet, I reached past my everyday clothes for the silk chemise hanging way in the back. The matching robe made me feel decadent. I pulled my hair into a braid and was ready to face the world—or rather, one very sexy vampire.

There was food on my table that had not been in my apartment when I’d gone to the shower. Steaks hadn’t been on the menu since I’d started eating alone. Steamed vegetables and a salad completed the meal. It was a masterpiece.

“How?”

“Staff, dearest. There’s nothing to be done with what you call food so I made a call. You need red meat to help you recover from your poor handling last night. Eat, enjoy, so we can go to bed.”

“To sleep.”

I reminded him more to remind myself. The way he smiled back told me he knew it. He held out the chair for me and patted it invitingly. I took the offer for what it was and slid into the seat. The first bite was heaven and there was no way I was going to finish it all, but I gave it my best effort.

“There’s dessert in the refrigerator.”

“It’ll have to wait. You’re going to have to carry me to bed. I don’t think I can walk that far.”

I meant it as a jest, but he took me at my word. He picked me up from the chair and headed for the bedroom with long strides.

“The food. I’ve got to take care of the food.”

“I’ll do it. You go to bed and let me take care of you.” He hadn’t been idle while he’d been waiting for the food. The bed was turned down and the blinds were closed to cloak the room in shadows. He lay me down on it gently and kissed my forehead.

“I’ll put the food away and join you, if the offer is still open?”

“I’m not sure I actually offered, Marcus. You sort of bullied your way in.”

“Do you want me to go?” His face was serious and there was something fragile between us. He would go if I asked him to.

“No, don’t go. Come to bed when you’re ready, but no funny business. I was serious when I said that I didn’t have the energy for it.”

“Then you should have worn something else.”

His gaze was heated as it traveled over me. It made me glad I’d bought the set. I watched him go and sat up to take off the robe. Tossing it across the end of the bed, I tucked myself into the covers to wait.

I must have dozed because I started when Marcus came to bed.

“Shh,” he whispered against my ear. “I’m going to hold you. Sleep.”

“I need to set the alarm.” Was that my voice? It sounded so far away.

“I’ll make sure you’re up in time to get ready for your night.”

I took him at his word and allowed myself to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I woke to the most delicious sensations. Silk sliding over my skin. The hot press of a mouth nipping and teasing my belly. Callused hands gliding along my ribcage in slow, tantalizing strokes.

Marcus. No one else knew my body to this extent.

He pulled a gasp out of me as his hands cupped my breast beneath the silk. I thrashed under him and he began to use his body to advantage. The naked skin of his chest rubbed against the wet, sensitized trail along my belly.

My hands tangled in his hair as he nibbled on the underside of my breast. Nipping, suckling the flesh, but ignoring the hard peak that demanded his attention. I growled in frustration, but he laughed against my skin. He ignored me when I tried to pull his face toward the goal I had in mind, but he did start in the general direction I wanted him to go.

When he finally reached that peak, I was panting. As he suckled the tip into his mouth, I arched. It was as if my body was waiting on that final spark to ignite and when it did, the fire swept through me in a rush.

Marcus sensed it and all playfulness vanished from his manner. Gathering his knees under him, he scooted forward, parting my legs without distracting his attention away from his task. His hands came around my shoulders and he urged me to a sitting position, breaking free at last, leaving me wanting more.

His gaze locked with mine as he swept the silk chemise off and threw it away. Grabbing his face, I tugged him down for an open-mouthed kiss. I packed all the demand that I felt into it and he carried me back against the warm cotton sheets to cage me with his body. Breaking the kiss, he smiled at me and had the audacity to tease.

“I remember you as a more patient woman than this, Destiny. Have you changed so much?”

Instead of answering, I pulled his face back to mine and locked my legs around his waist to push my body against his. In answer, he lowered himself to rub against my wet center. The kisses grew wilder until he broke away panting.

“*Marcus.*” It came out a groan and he chuckled.

“Never let it be said that I left my lady wanting.”

With the ease of long practice, he took me with one smooth movement. My body arched on its own, pressing every inch of exposed skin against his, and I sucked in the muscle in his shoulder to keep from shouting.

He grunted as my teeth closed over him and my bite upped the passion. Gone was the smooth lover and in his place was a man reclaiming his position. His hands and mouth were still gentle, but his loving was masterful. He knew how to stroke to build the passion into a bonfire.

I nipped and kissed along his shoulder as my hands memorized the lines of his back and buttocks. When my body tightened, the climax just out of reach, I resorted to begging.

“Marcus, please, please, please!”

He changed the angle slightly and I incinerated. As my body jerked, I bit into his shoulder in earnest to muffle the scream. The taste of blood told me I had broken the skin and I relished it as ecstasy washed over me. He reacted to the pain by pistoning into me before freezing in that one suspended moment before he spilled in hot, heavy waves.

Marcus lowered himself against me, but kept his weight on his elbows. I kissed the bloody imprint of my teeth and pushed on his shoulder.

“Off.”

“Demanding wench.”

There was a carefree quality in his voice that I’d never heard before. He swooped down to kiss me softly before rolling to the side. Off didn’t mean that I was free of him. His arm snaked across me to pull me snugly against his side. With a laugh, I rolled onto my side and let him spoon me in the afterglow.

“I don’t remember you being that enthusiastic.”

“Should I be insulted?”

“Of course not. It’s not a complaint, just an observation.”

Marcus sighed and kissed my shoulder. “For the first time, I don’t have to hold myself back. Alexander cannot swoop in to take what I love away from me. I’m finally free. There are options open that I’ve never before considered.”

His voice held wonder and excitement.

“So the way you’ve lived your life is about to change?” It came out fragile. After years of being the one in charge of the boundaries of our relationship, I realized that Marcus’s ideals might have changed with the removal of his father’s threat. And what he wanted might not be me.

“In some ways, I suppose,” he agreed.

Did I dare ask for specifics? Lying there in the afterglow, I battled fear. My heart pounded. “What do you think the biggest change will be?”

“Children,” he answered promptly and pulled me tighter. “In the past, the need to ensure the line died with me was obsessive. I couldn’t risk a child of mine falling victim to his revenge. Whether he took the child to raise or eliminated it to cause me pain, the end result of pain would be met. Now, the world has opened to dreams I’ve not allowed myself.”

“In a hurry for that, are you?” I was proud of myself for not letting the crushing weight of the disappointment pressing into my heart show in my tone.

“Hurry? Not really, but if we were so blessed, how would you feel?” A hint of anxiety crept into his voice.

“You’re planning for me to be the theoretical mother of these miraculous offspring?” Hope kindled and burned away the distress.

Marcus wasn’t planning to replace me. At least, not in the immediate future. Who knew what our long-term future held, but we had each other for now.

“I would like to see if we couldn’t reach a mutually beneficial agreement, if you’re open to it. Someday.”

Instead of answering, I nestled against him. I felt boneless, sated and, dare I say it, happy. I wanted nothing more than to curl up and go back to sleep in the warmth of his body, but other commitments called.

“What time is it?”

“Not quite five.”

Five? I was late. I tried to jump out of the bed, but he held me fast.

“Your dinner reservations have been moved to seven thirty. I arranged to have a car at your disposal for the entire evening. Evan will drive and will be happy take you anywhere you would like to go in style. He’ll be here to pick you up at seven.”

“I’ve got to call Yasmine.”

“I spoke to Kale an hour ago. Everything’s arranged.”

I didn't know if I should be grateful or angry that he had been so managing. The stirrings of anger washed away when he pulled me close again and kissed the side of my neck.

"You needed the rest so you could enjoy the evening. An hour or two in the grand scheme of things doesn't mean disaster."

Relaxing against him, I decided that it was nice to have someone want to take care of me instead of the other way around.

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome. Will I see you tomorrow night?"

Rolling onto my back, I stared up at his face and tried to wrap my mind around the idea that he might be insecure. Of course, our relationship had never been typical so maybe he had the right to the feeling.

"Do you want to?"

The carefree smile was back. "Your bed or mine?"

"Mine."

He leaned down and kissed me tenderly. When we came up for air, the look on his face was no longer carefree. Reaching down, he tugged up the sheet to tuck it over my breasts.

"Then I will leave you to get ready for your evening with Yasmine."

"You don't have to leave..."

He cut me off by rolling out of the bed.

"If I don't go, you really will be late and that will not earn me any points with Yasmine."

"Does it matter?" I was smiling and feeling like a loon.

"My new goal in life is to convince your sister that I'm good for you."

We both laughed at that. I watched him gather his clothes and disappear into the bathroom. The sound of the shower running was a pleasant backdrop to my thoughts. Marcus didn't take long to change and leave me to my own devices.

We said goodbye at the bathroom door. I could trust him to let himself out while I took another shower. I did my best not to think about what today meant as I dried my hair without bothering to style it. Standing in my closet, I finally settled on a pair of slacks and a crisp cotton shirt. Yasmine had vetoed the wild night I had proposed and we'd finally compromised on a quiet dinner and coming back here for a night of conversation and sharing. On a whim, I strolled to my living room and picked up the phone. Dialing the number by heart, I jumped when Milo picked up on the second ring.

"You live."

"Barely." Somehow, I'd known he would have at least a version of the story.

"Good to know. You had me worried."

"Yeah, right. I couldn't help but notice you weren't riding to the rescue."

"Hey, I did my part behind the scenes. We're lovers, not fighters, remember?"

Laughing with him, I settled on the couch and shot from the hip. “Well, I’m calling to beg a favor if you’re feeling generous. Are you using your table in about an hour?”

“You want something as boring as a table at my restaurant on a Friday night in less than an hour’s notice? Challenge me.”

“I take that as a no and we can use it? It’s Yasmine’s bachelorette party.”

“Do I need to supply strippers? I could arrange for the party room to be available so as not to disrupt the dining room. I might even volunteer for the job.”

“Somehow, I don’t think Kale or Marcus would appreciate the gesture. I like you, Milo. I don’t want to get you killed.”

“You wound me.”

“Lovers not fighters, remember?”

“Fine. No strippers. And yes, the table is yours as my gift to the bride. Tell her I want a kiss for it, though.”

“If you’re bold enough to stroll up and ask for it, go right ahead. I’m not going to chance it.”

“Oh, a challenge. See you tonight.”

He left me laughing at the dial tone. He probably would show up, if only to be a flirt. I cancelled our original reservations much to the relief of the hostess. I had a feeling Marcus had been none too gentle in his rescheduling efforts and someone else had been shafted to “will call” so we could have their table. Strolling into the kitchen, I smiled at the huge vase of tiger lilies adorning the table. No note, just my favorite flower. Strange how I’d not realized how much I’d missed his little gestures of affection until he was doing them again.

My car was back in its parking spot and the long black car was waiting with the promised chauffeur. Evan smiled at me as he opened the door.

“Good to see you, Evan. It’s been a long time. Change of plans. We’re eating at Carvelli’s and the table is waiting on us, so there’s no agenda.”

“Life hasn’t been very interesting since I stopped driving you around, Destiny. Welcome home.”

I slid in the seat to find my purse waiting on it. I’d left it at the rehearsal dinner. Apparently, my car wasn’t the only thing that had been brought home. Fishing out my cell phone, I cleaned out the missed calls and voicemails while the car maneuvered through traffic, cringing when Frank LeCroy’s voice came on the line. Our vampires had intercepted him before he was actually in danger.

“No fair,” he said. “You had all the excitement without me. You still owe me the favor for my help and I intend to collect. Oh, one more thing. I’m glad you’re okay.”

Chapter Twenty

It was still intimidating to come up the driveway to Kale's family home. Maybe that was the reason I'd stopped visiting Yasmine here. No, it might have been a contributing factor, but the real reason I'd stopped was because she was forming the family bonds we had both whispered and longed for as children. It was a sobering realization. I vowed to do better.

Yasmine was running down the steps when Evan opened the door for me. Her hug was fierce and I knew someone had told her more than they should have. Pushing her back, the tears in her eyes brought tears to my own.

"None of that. I'm fine. And it's a night of celebration. Tomorrow, I get to hold the flowers and watch you throw your life away on some mangy mutt."

"I heard that."

I turned to find Kale coming down the steps much more decorously than his bride had. I blinked and took a good, honest look at him without the prejudice of the threat he'd always meant to me. The colors he wore advertised bold and dangerous. He certainly was both. A deep dimple in his left cheek gave him a boyish quality that spoiled his rugged looks, but it didn't detract from the cloud of power that moved with him.

"I meant it too. Just so you know. But if she had to run out and find a werewolf, at least she found a good one. And don't worry. I cancelled the strippers. It's dinner and then back to my place." My teasing tones made both of them look at me sharply. I was normally much more acerbic to him. I had a lot to make up for.

"Then I leave her in your hands. I know you'll keep her safe."

He stepped up behind Yasmine and rubbed her arm until his hand rested on her shoulder. She reached to take it as she leaned back against him. She looked so happy.

Kale's sharp inhalation of breath followed by the narrowing of his eyes told me he smelled Marcus on my skin despite the second shower and perfume. I started to say something, but movement at the top of the stairs attracted my eye.

Luke stood there with his hands shoved in the pockets of his new jeans. His gaze was wary and he was sporting a black eye he had been missing when he'd left my place. The pieces fell together and I knew where Yas had gotten her information. I nodded in acknowledgement. He responded in kind. Neither of us

made any effort to get close enough for a conversation. It was time for Yas and I to go, anyway. At least that's what I told myself as I put on the happy face and turned back to the werewolves.

"Now, we're off to dinner. You boys have fun and don't call us if you get thrown in jail for it."

Yasmine laughed, but Kale scowled as he let go of her hand so she could step away from him. Evan handed her into the car and I followed. From the one-way privacy glass, Kale watched the car pull away through the back glass. Yasmine was looking over her shoulder too. For better or worse, there was love here. When the gates fell away from our gazes, she turned back to me with a penetrating stare.

"The vampire."

It wasn't a question.

"The vampire," I confirmed.

"Do you love him?"

"Yes." No hedging. No qualifiers. A simple one-word answer. It was an improvement.

I met her gaze levelly and waited.

"He risked his life for you so I suppose he loves you too. I'll make you a deal. You start cutting Kale some slack and I'll do the same for Marcus. I know he's a good man, but it takes more than a good man to be worthy of my sister."

Her fierce declaration made me smile and tears sprang to my eyes. Too many things had happened over the last twenty-four hours to keep the emotions at bay. Trying to laugh it off, I waved my hand over my face and resorted to teasing.

"Stop. I'm actually wearing eye makeup. Don't make me cry even if I did skip the mascara."

She jumped from her seat to mine and pulled me into her arms. Everything that had happened washed over me and her arms gave me the one haven I could break down in. I couldn't have stopped the tears if I had tried. By the time we reached Carvelli's, my makeup was washed away and Yasmine's royal blue shirt had tearstains on the shoulder. She refused to get out of the car until she fixed her makeup, so we waited on the bride, blocking Carvelli's covered entrance.

When we emerged, people were staring, obviously expecting a celebrity. The disappointment on their faces made us both grin and toss our hair back. The staff greeting at the reception desk had people whispering behind their hands trying to figure out who we really were. The host sprang from his perch with delighted greetings and well wishes for the bride, taking us back to our table himself. At the table, two waitresses brought extravagant bouquets of flowers and two long velvet cases.

Confused, we opened them and gasped in tandem. A double strand of gold pearls nestled in silk was held in place by a handwritten note in hard card stock.

Just a little something I picked up for you.—M

"Wow." Yasmine set her case gingerly on the table. "They're beautiful. But it's too much, Destiny. I know you had that big case, but I can't accept this."

I blinked and turned her case to read the note holding the alabaster strands in place.

Every bride should have pearls on her wedding day. It's Destiny.

I laughed and pushed my case across the table for her to read. Her confused gaze only made me laugh harder. It struck me as I wiped the tears from my eyes that I had laughed more in the course of this afternoon than I had in the last year. It made my face hurt, but my heart sang.

"I'll fill you in later, Yas. Trust me, take them. There is probably a chest full of them in the vault around here."

Milo didn't put in an appearance through dinner, but our glasses were never empty, our plates full of delicious tidbits. Dessert was a special white chocolate torte with raspberry sauce and chocolate doves flying over it on little wire stands.

It was almost too beautiful to eat, but we looked at one another before digging in. By the time our tongues were tired and our bellies beyond full, the restaurant was beginning to look empty. Reluctantly, I signaled the waiter who had been serving us.

"Check, please."

"Compliments of the house, Ms. St. George. Mr. Carvelli insists."

With a flirtatious wink, he went back to the shadowed corner he had loitered in.

"Well, you've made all sorts of interesting friends, haven't you?"

Yasmine grinned at me over her glass of sparkling cider. I shook my head and told her the story. By the end of it, her eyes were wide as she stared at the box holding the strand of pearls.

"How did we not know they were here?"

"You tell me. You're supposed to have the nose for it."

She grimaced and shook her head. "Pregnancy hormones have finally blunted the nose. I suppose I should be grateful. I don't get as sick this way."

I cringed and patted her hand in sympathy. Gathering up my purse, I dug out a fifty and tossed it on the table with a grin over to our server. Yasmine sighed as she drank the last of her cider and rose to go.

"Kale's going to be mad we ate here before he did. He's always trying to get a table and never quite manages it. Now I know why."

Compliments and farewells to the staff made leaving a drawn-out affair. By the time the car was sliding toward home, I was tired. Yasmine was too, but she had one parting point to make about my relationship choices before she was willing to give it up.

"Marcus won't give you babies, you know."

I was too tired to go through all the revelations about the difference between born vampires and created ones, so I let it go. Instead, I reassured her as best I could.

"He makes me happy. I want what you've found. There's no guarantee we will have that, but I have to try."

She looked at me and nodded. Thankfully, she let it drop.

Evan delivered us to my door with the promise to be there when we were ready to go to the ceremony. Yasmine walked into the apartment ahead of me and flopped on the couch.

“Forgive me, but I’m not up for a long conversation night. I seem to be tired all the time. The doctor says that it’s the baby.”

I smiled at her. Truth be told, I was exhausted, even though I’d gotten my nap. I tipped my head to the bedroom door.

“Go on to bed. There are clean sheets on it. I’m going to make a call before I turn in.”

Yasmine stood up and stared at me for a moment. “Invite him to the wedding. We’ll be glad to have him.”

I gaped after her for a moment. Her voice drifted back through the door and I knew she was talking to Kale on her cell phone. Before I had a chance to pick up my phone to call my own lover, it rang.

“Hello, beautiful. Am I interrupting?”

“I was about to call you. We’re turning in early. We talked ourselves out over dinner.”

“Evan called in to report you were safely delivered at home. Did you have a good time?”

“Yes. It’s been too long since we’ve done this.”

I sat on the couch, curling up against the soft leather. It was nice to simply listen to him breathe over the phone.

“I’m glad. Do you need anything to prepare for tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” I grinned as I waited a heartbeat before continuing. “A date. Yasmine has issued a last-minute invitation for you to come to the wedding. Want to be seen with me in public?”

“I would love to be seen with you. Pick you up at eleven?”

“Perfect. Wear comfortable shoes. There’s dancing involved.”

We said our goodnights with the ring of his laughter in my ears. Yasmine and Kale were still talking when I went into the bedroom to get a pillow and blanket to bed down on the couch. Luke must have done his job well if they were already home from their own party. Of course, for all I knew, the party was at the house in another room. It was certainly big enough for it.

Sleep came easily and my dreams were pleasant though I didn’t remember them at dawn.

Yasmine made a beautiful bride. I managed to do my part and not drop her obscenely large bouquet of calla lilies while handing her the platinum ring she had picked out for Kale. I even managed to walk down the aisle on Luke’s arm and refrained from stomping on his foot in the receiving line.

It was a fairy-tale day. Everyone laughed at my toast to the happy couple like I was actually funny, which I know is a lie. Marcus was there to take me from Luke as soon as the members of the wedding party were free to dance with someone other than the person paired with them by the bride.

A nod from Kale's security manager told me Yasmine's things had been put in the car, which totally relieved me of all the obligations of the maid of honor except one. When she changed, she would leave the dress for me to have cleaned and that was it. It was almost too simple. Her mother-in-law and married pack females were waiting to take her upstairs to see her off on her honeymoon. As an unmarried woman, I'd been politely told it was pack tradition for the married women to impart advice before the newlyweds escaped.

"You're beautiful."

Marcus's whisper was hot against my neck as he held a champagne flute for me to take. Taking it without turning to look at him, I leaned against him and whispered back, "You're just trying to get lucky."

"Is it working?"

"Guaranteed."

He laughed and slid his hand around my middle. Together, we watched the wedding guests in companionable silence. Across the room, Yasmine was being hustled up the back stairs. Her gaze searched and found mine imploringly. Grinning, I raised my glass in salute and stayed right where I was. It was her pack now. Their traditions were hers. Time she and I both began to respect them.

"Dance with me?"

I put my empty glass on a passing tray and turned in his arms. "I'd love to."

His eyes were very blue above the tuxedo. Staring into them, I wondered if the wedding was making me see rainbows and kittens or if I honestly thought we'd have a chance at our own happily-ever-after.

One dance bled into another until I heard my name being called.

"Destiny. Stop mooning over the man and get over here!"

I blushed as I turned to find Yasmine standing on the raised platform. She held the small bouquet we'd had made for the toss. The hoard of single females jockeyed for position in front of it at the other end of the floor. I'd been too wrapped up in my dance to realize the other couples had fallen away to the sidelines. Rolling my eyes, I let go of my date without saying a single catty thing and took my place at the back of the crowd.

"I'm here. I'm here."

She gave me an impish grin and turned her back. The band stopped playing and watched with wide smiles as she put herself in position. The drummer began the drumroll. With a delighted laugh, she threw the bouquet over her shoulder and right at me. I took three steps back before turning and running away as fast as my three-inch heels would let me. The crowd burst into laughter, but the only one I was concerned with caught me in my flight and spun me around in his arms.

Marcus laughed with me before dropping his mouth inches above my ear.

“Superstition isn’t what you should be afraid of, darling. It’s destiny.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Let’s not hedge our bets.”

Instead of answering me, he tipped my face up and kissed me hungrily, much to the noisy delight of the onlookers.

Epilogue

I paced the hospital corridor, muttering under my breath. The doors to the maternity ward opened behind me. I whirled to find Marcus strolling in with a stuffed lioness decorated with a yellow ribbon in his arms and a monstrous bouquet of balloons trailing after him.

“What are you doing here?”

It came out surly, but I couldn't help it. Kale's call had said to meet them at the hospital as if it was an emergency. That had been four hours ago. Now, without coffee, I was bristling at everything.

“It's a baby, Destiny. It's customary for the close kin to gather to celebrate such things. I even brought gifts. You, on the other hand, ran out as if the hounds of hell were chasing you. But that's okay. I've got you covered.”

He patted the head of the lioness with a smile full of excitement. Kale had asked him to stand as godfather to the tyke. When both Yasmine and I had been surprised, his answer was perfectly logical. Who better to ensure their children would have a safe haven away from the backbiting within the pack than someone who would still be considered young and hip when they were grown? The fact Marcus was powerful enough to make even the most ambitious werewolf pause certainly helped the case.

Marcus was thrilled and determined to live up to their faith in him.

“Honey, I *am* the gift. Any minute now, Mr. Alpha Werewolf is going to see blood and pass out. When that happens, the second-string coach comes into play to make sure Yasmine doesn't resort to murder later. That is me. Ms. Back-Up Coach. Waiting for the mighty to fall over.”

I started pacing again at Marcus's burst of laughter. It did make me feel better to have him there for moral support.

“I don't think you're giving Kale enough credit, Destiny. He's a man, yes, but he's been through the classes...”

A crash in the birthing room drowned out whatever he was going to say.

“Destiny!” Yasmine screamed.

“Told you so.”

I left Marcus in the corridor as I bolted into the room and over the fallen werewolf to take her hand and help her bring my niece into the world.

An hour later, I stood with my nose pressed to the nursery glass in awe. Destiny Georgianna Henderson was perfect and had me wrapped around her finger from the very first yell. I felt the man behind me before he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back from the glass.

“She’s beautiful,” I whispered, even though I knew talking wouldn’t bother the babies in the nursery. Marcus’s voice was equally low and full of awe.

“She’s going to be a hellion like her namesake.”

“Flatterer. Is that a bad thing?”

“Certainly not. I happen to love that about her. She’s going to drive us all to drink before she’s grown.”

“And we’re going to love every minute of it.”

About the Author

To learn more about Kaye Chambers, please visit www.kayechambers.com. Send an email to Kaye at chamberskaye@gmail.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Kaye <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/paranormalsociety>.

Kaye lives with her husband and three children wherever the seas of the United States Navy take them. A Boxer and a cat grudgingly share her. She loves to hear feedback from readers.

Look for these titles by Kaye Chambers

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Tiger by the Tail
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He's the last man she should ever want. She's the last woman he can ever have.

Crossroads

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Southern Arcana, Book 2

Coming from a family with psychic gifts, Derek Gabriel was aware of but separate from the dangers of the supernatural world, until a rogue wolf shifter stripped away his humanity. The change he barely survived didn't drive him insane, but the cultural bias against him as an inferior transformed wolf might. And it doesn't help that he's fallen for the daughter of the most powerful wolf in the country.

Almost from the moment she was born, Nicole Peyton started planning her escape from the strict confines of elite shapeshifter society, an old-fashioned world where women are valued only for their bloodlines and bank accounts. In New Orleans she has a bar she loves, friends in decidedly low places, and a smoldering sensual tension with an incredibly attractive and deliciously unsuitable man.

Their forbidden longing erupts into unbridled need—until Nick's sister burns into town with a strike team hard on her heels. Saving her means Nick has to play by the Conclave's rules...and give up the man she is growing to love.

Unless Derek does something completely crazy—issue a challenge that could shake the foundations of their world.

Warning: This book contains forbidden lust, strip poker, instinct-driven sex in odd places, devious shapeshifters, and love and loss in a world of paranormal politics and supernatural schemes.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Crossroads:

Color flamed high in her cheeks as she growled and covered the space between them with quick steps. "I'm angry. I'm angry because it's easier."

He reached out and caught her shoulders in a gentle grip. "Easier than what?"

She looked up at him and laughed almost hysterically. "Easier than completely and utterly losing my shit."

"Oh, Nicky." She felt so tiny as he slid his arms around her, delicate and fragile. Even knowing that seeming weakness was deceptive, every urge in his body clamored to find someplace safe to hide her away from the world and the misery in it.

But it was her world. He didn't know the first damn thing about protecting her from it.

Her teeth scraped his arm through his sleeve, and she stumbled out of the circle of his arms. "I'm sorry. I just—I'm losing it." Her eyes had gone wild, and she dragged her shirt over her head as she kicked off her sandals.

Too late he realized what the power gathering around her meant. "Are you going to run?"

“I have to, Derek.” Her skirt billowed to the ground, and she tore at her underwear. “Come with me. Please.”

“Of course.” His instincts wouldn’t let him stay there while she ran off by herself. Derek tugged his T-shirt over his head, anticipation prickling along his skin. The heat that preceded a change stole through him, something hot and heavy and tinged with a lust fueled by Nick’s naked body.

Her wolf must have been close the surface, because she’d barely hit the ground when the air around her shimmered and then pulsed with energy that washed over him in a hot wave. She stood before him, a small gray wolf who shook and pawed impatiently at the grass under them. Derek yanked at his belt and kicked off his boots, itching with the need to join her.

The change was usually easy, but he’d never done it in front of Nick before. He was far too aware of his body’s reaction, of the fact that he was hard and aroused and shaking under the force of the magic. Closing his eyes, he sucked in a breath and reached for that flickering bit of power inside him, the animal waiting just below the surface.

It felt like magic because it was. Pleasure pounded through him and his skin tingled, and he crouched down and gave in to it. The most natural feeling in the world, because now he was *free*...

Instinct lifted his face, and the wolf howled pleasure at being let loose. When his exultant howl faded, he found Nick watching him. After a moment, she yipped and took off toward the woods.

Her scent enflamed him. Her challenge entranced him. Human concerns bled away as he launched himself after her, wanting nothing more in the world than to run at her side.

Nick’s muscles burned. She had to focus on breathing, on drawing in one gulp of muggy night air after another. That was exactly what she wanted, to occupy her mind with something other than the fact that, one way or another, her sister might die.

Even if she hadn’t heard him, she would have sensed Derek behind her, a warm zing of magic that dovetailed perfectly with her own. He felt solid, *right*, with his trampling steps echoing hers.

She knew he’d follow her until exhaustion claimed him, if it didn’t take her first. But it was too hot to run for long, and Nick stumbled over a fallen log and tumbled to the ground under an ancient oak tree.

Letting go of the wolf was easier with fatigue quelling her nervousness. Twigs snapped under hands and feet instead of paws, and she collapsed onto a bed of moss, her chest heaving.

Fire. If it had only been the pull of exertion, she could have ignored it. But the change burned through her and scraped her nerve endings into a vicious flurry of arousal. “Derek,” she rasped.

It took him longer to regain human form, but soon enough he crouched at her feet, his muscular chest straining under his panting breaths. He looked massive in the moonlight filtering through the trees, a hulking giant of tanned skin stretched over hard muscles. When he lifted his head, she caught a glimpse of eyes still glinting yellow.

His gaze caught hers and drifted down her body, the stare so blatantly sexual it stole her breath. One hand dropped to her ankle, and his large fingers encircled it easily. "Tell me to stop."

She couldn't. She *wouldn't*. "No."

Derek dragged her ankles apart and dropped to his knees between her legs. He tickled his fingers up her calves as he jerked his gaze to hers again. "Put your hands over your head."

Sheer primal instinct drove her to obey. She licked her lips and exhaled a shuddering breath. "I need you."

"Not as much as I need you." His thumb traced along the inside of her knee, a small teasing caress that vanished when he moved his hands to the ground on either side of her hips. He loomed over her, his wide shoulders blocking out the light filtering through the trees.

His expression was wild. Feral. His gaze locked with hers, and he shuddered. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." The answer would have been the same even if she hadn't been aching to feel his skin against hers, even if they hadn't spent the last few days learning about each other. "With my life."

A rumbling noise of approval started deep in his chest and escaped his lips as he lowered them to her breast. His tongue circled the tip in a teasing flick, and he drew her nipple into his mouth with another low noise.

Nick tried to stifle the cry that accompanied the sharp rush of pleasure, but it rolled out of her between clenched teeth. Her back arched off the ground, toward his mouth, and she barely remembered not to move her hands.

She felt the scrape of teeth, then the heat of his mouth disappeared. A low, masculine laugh rose as he nuzzled her stomach and dropped tiny kisses on her damp skin. "I can smell how hot you are for me."

Something witty should have popped to mind, the perfect rejoinder to his soft, sexy words. "I want you so bad it hurts. I always have."

He dragged his tongue up the center of her chest before veering off to nip at her shoulder. "And now you have me."

Do I? The words hung in her throat as the throbbing need in her body grew worse. Her skin flamed wherever he touched her, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. "Derek, please." Her fingers curled into the mossy earth above her head. "Let me have you."

His teeth closed on her neck, hard and possessive, and he groaned against her skin and shifted his weight above her. One hand skated over her hip and slipped between her legs, and his fingers stroked through slick folds. He lifted his head and watched her, his face tight. "I want to see you come," he growled a moment before his fingers centered on her clit.

She thrust her hips up with a whimper. He touched her as if he'd been doing it forever, as if he knew every inch of her already. Desire took over, and she felt him watching as she bit her lip and arched her head back. "Don't stop."

He *did*, but only long enough for his thumb to replace his fingers. Then his fingers shifted lower, easing into her as he groaned. “God damn it, Nicky. *Come*. Come so I can be inside you.”

“I need—” Her words melted into another desperate cry as the pinpoints of heat and pleasure scattered through her began to gather and tighten. “Kiss me.”

True love's path never did run smooth.

Wolf Games

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Granite Lake Wolves, Book 3

After seven years of total denial, Maggie Raynor's body—and her inner wolf—are in full revolt. Weak and shaky, she literally falls into the very large and capable arms of the Granite Lake Beta, Erik Costanov. The last thing she wants is a mate, particularly when just looking at another wolf scares her to death. And one as big and sexy as Erik? Really bad idea, no matter what her libido says.

Erik expected to meet Maggie in Whitehorse to escort her to the home of her sister, his pack's Omega. Sheer chance puts him in the right place at the right time to catch her, but the realization that hits him with the force of a full body shot is no accident. She's his mate. An even bigger shock? She wants no part of him—not until she resolves her issues.

She'll have to work fast, because they're both selected to represent the pack during the premier sporting event for wolves in the north. Not only will she have to work as a team with Erik, she'll have to face down her fear of wolves. Let the Games begin.

Warning: Contains uber-sexy werewolves of Russian descent, reluctant mates and exotic travels through the Yukon wilderness. Includes sarcasm and hot nookie under the Midnight Sun.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Games:

Her bright eyes examined his face closely, as if she was trying to see if this was some kind of trick to impress her. "You're a very complicated man, Erik Costanov."

He shook his head. "I'm as simple as they come. I believe in the golden rule, and I try to live by it."

She knocked him off balance by crawling across his legs and straddling him, her butt resting on his thighs. He lay very still, afraid to scare her, but savouring the sensation of her weight on top of him.

"What are you doing?" There, that managed to come out sounding reasonably intelligible. Damn, he spoke seven languages and right now English didn't seem to be one of them. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth.

She wiggled a little closer and he bit back a groan. Her hot core now rested against his groin and his cock rose like new bread in an oven. "I want to kiss you."

Hallelujahs rang in his brain. Holy freaking exclamations of jubilation, rejoicing and unending glee broke out in a full chorus. But when he spoke, he delivered a measured, "Okay."

She leaned forward and brushed her lips over his, and the electric sensation he'd felt before when they kissed buzzed through his torso and up his spine to his brain. Before he knew it, he'd buried the fingers of one hand in her hair, moving her the way he wanted her, while the other wrapped around her body to pull

their torsos together. Her sweetness filled his senses, tantalizing his taste buds with the desire for more. Eager noises rose from her as their tongues brushed.

The night remained warm, and they both wore only shorts and T-shirts. Having a barrier between them was torture. He broke off their kiss, sat with her still straddling him, and whipped off his shirt. Her eyes bulged for a second before she reached down to caress his abdomen, the fleeting strokes tormenting him even as he savoured his mate finally, finally touching his skin again.

“Please take off your shirt.” His voice cracked, he needed this so much. He closed his eyes against the disappointment of her saying no, then the rustle of fabric hit his ears. When he looked again, she still wore her bra, but the creamy smoothness of the rest of her skin more than made up for that small disappointment. He touched her reverently, stroking from her hips up the gentle indent of her waist until he covered the swells of her lace-covered breasts. She sucked in a gasp as he rubbed his thumbs in small circles over her nipples, the tips beading to tight points that stabbed his flesh through the fabric. “You’re beautiful.”

He ignored the driving urge to roll her over and take her, and instead slipped his hands back around her torso so their lips met again.

They kissed leisurely, exploring each other’s mouths and necks, tongues stroking, teeth nibbling. Erik wasn’t sure how long they sat there and frankly, he didn’t give a damn. He’d waited his whole life for her, and they were finally doing what his wolf had been howling at him to do for days. Although the beast was going to be sorely disappointed when they didn’t go all the way.

Maggie’s breathing grew more rapid and she squirmed against him, her mound rubbing his groin like a firebrand. When he finally couldn’t take it anymore, he grabbed her by the ass and adjusted her until he was happy. He ground them together again and again, and she moaned in his ear. Damn, he was going to come right like this if he didn’t watch it.

So he lifted her and undid her belt.

She slapped at his hands. “What are you doing?”

“Take off your pants.”

“Erik, we can’t—”

He was on fire with a desperate need. “We’re not having sex but I need to touch you. Take them off, now.” She hesitated for just a second, then unzipped and dropped both her panties and her shorts, stepping out of the legs where they bunched around her ankles. She stood there, bare-naked except for her bra, with her pussy right in front of him and he had no power to resist.

He clutched her ass and buried his face between her legs. She cried out softly but he was too busy to warn her to stay quiet. Her sweet scent drew him, and he separated the curls covering her with his tongue and licked the length of her slit. Oh Lord, she tasted good. Her flavour raced through him and drugged his senses. He pressed his tongue into her pussy as far as it would go, lapping at the cream coating her passage.

She rocked against his mouth, opening her legs wider, her fingers clutching his head. The arm he’d

wrapped around her ensured she stayed right where he could reach and delve into her body. She made the most delicious noises, and he stopped to take a deep breath and enjoy the sensation of holding her intimately.

“More,” she demanded.

“Yes.” He slipped a finger into her depths and suckled her clit with his mouth.

“Yessss...” Her hiss of agreement trailed off into the contented rumble of a wolf being petted and he smiled.

The road to hell is paved with heavenly desire...

Angelic Avenger

© 2009 Kaye Chambers

Angelic Avengers, Book 1

Fetch a soul? No problem. Quell a little shape shifter rebellion? She can do that, too. Just an average day in the afterlife of Arabella “Bella” Morrison. Or, what she hopes will become an afterlife after restoring the cosmic imbalance caused by her suicide over a love affair gone bad.

Protect a willful fallen angel? That takes a little more teamwork than she’s accustomed to. Especially when the team includes Gray Devereau, a sexy, half-breed angel who’s got an eye on her—in more ways than one. Their attraction could set fire to Heaven itself. Normally not a problem for Bella, but Gray’s sights are set on something more than a fly-by-night affair.

Save mankind from chaos? Bring it on. Let her heart trust a man enough to love again? It’ll be a cold day in hell...

Warning: Sexy angels running amok. Heroine hell-bent on saving the world, the rules be damned. Hero bent on making her his, come hell or high water.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Angelic Avenger:

The drive to Kennesaw Nursery took a little over half an hour. Not because the distance was all that great, but because the DOT never seemed to get over the whole “let’s rip up another section of I-75” mentality. It gave me a chance to catch up on Orifiel’s songbird’s drama. It was the standard, I suppose, and I found myself wondering when women were going to wise up and realize men weren’t worth it.

Wait, this is me talking. Never mind.

I will say one thing about modern technology, not a single person blinked at watching me talk to myself as I drove. In the days of hands-free headsets and cars wired with cell phones, it wasn’t anything unusual. Sometimes, it’s good to remember things that are normal for some are extraordinary for others. The tiny innovations I discovered always managed to surprise me. I was smiling over that little quirk as I parked my second-hand sedan.

Granted, my bank account was paid whenever I needed it, but I saw no reason to squander the funds on flashy things. My Toyota was perfectly acceptable for what little toying around I needed to do. It wasn’t as if my commute to work was fuel driven, after all.

I was still smiling when I headed to the main building, only to hesitate as I heard a sultry voice coming from one of the greenhouses.

“She likes to sing to the trees.”

My invisible companion smiled widely, knowing I couldn't answer him out in the open like this. Since I wasn't looking forward to the odd looks I got when I talked to myself, I strolled off in the direction of the voice. I had to admit she did sing with an undercurrent of joy that would attract people to her like moths to flame. She was the first person I'd ever heard who could claim a voice like an angel and be honest about it. Glancing around quickly and seeing no one, I decided to take the risk, anyway, as I headed toward the doors of the greenhouse.

"Laugh it up, big guy, and we'll see how much further I take this beyond the letter of the promise. Oumph."

I blinked as I staggered backwards and looked up at the chest I'd bounced off. My gaze wandered over the man, taking in his conservative suit complete with a silk tie in a double Windsor knot, and moved on up to the sharp cleft in the perfect chin and the dimple winking out of an extremely kissable face.

Hubba hubba didn't even begin to cover it.

Now, it takes a guy who tops over ten on the scale to set me back, so that should tell you where this one ranked. What knocked me over, though, wasn't his debonair persona, but the magic aura fairly oozing off him. It was very nearly a tangible thing. There are few things the soulless can count as a weakness, but for me, it was the force of that magic as it shimmered with all the force of his life essence. He had to be at least a half-breed, if not more. The shock of touching all that force told me that.

Blue eyes stared into mine and I fought back all sorts of embarrassingly stupid comments. I was opening my mouth to spout one, without a doubt, when he spoke first, thus saving me from myself.

Oh yeah, Bella, impress the man by gawking like a schoolgirl. Good job.

"You know, they lock up people who talk back to the little voices in their heads."

I blinked and snapped my mouth shut. Stepping back from him, I frowned as I pulled my self-respect back around me.

"Yeah, well, sometimes it's nice to talk to someone who'll listen."

A smile tugged at his lips and I found myself smiling back. It had been a long time since I'd had a man tease me. Well, a man that I could do something about, anyway.

"Maybe you need better friends, then."

He winked as he leaned forward. I had a brief moment of insanity where I thought he was going to step into me. The thought made me freak a little and I jumped backwards. He froze and frowned at me. The sight of his hand reaching down to pick up a large document-sized envelope made me blush crimson. He wasn't leaning in to steal a kiss; he was reaching down to pick up the envelope I'd been too distracted to even notice he'd dropped. Two inches had never felt so tall.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I do that?"

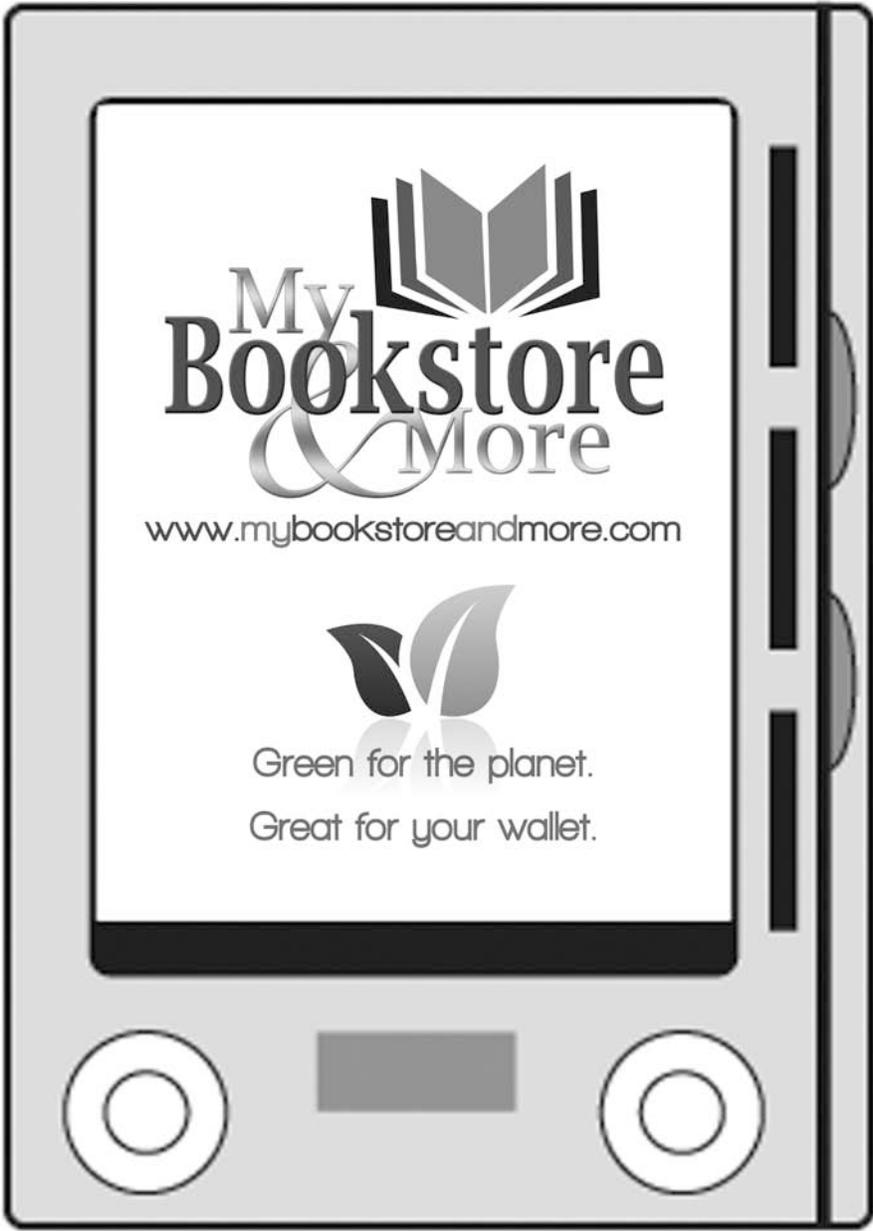
I closed my eyes and prayed real hard. Somewhere, up there, the entire angelic world was watching me turn into a twit right before their eyes. I hoped to hell they were enjoying the show. I opened them to see the man smiling brightly back at me with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“Nope. I did it all by myself. It’s not every day I get run over by a beautiful woman talking to herself.”

I glared over his shoulder to where the hidden angel was laughing at me. Oh, whoever said revenge is sweet hadn’t reckoned on me. It wasn’t going to be sweet; it was going a candy store. I wasn’t able to pull back the grin to Mr. Flirtatious, though. Something about this man made me feel giddy and a little bit as crazy as he thought I was. Too bad I was on a mission today.

“Yeah, well, sorry I wasn’t looking where I was going, sir. Have a great day.”

With my head held high, I swept past him and through the doors preparing my lines as I went.



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