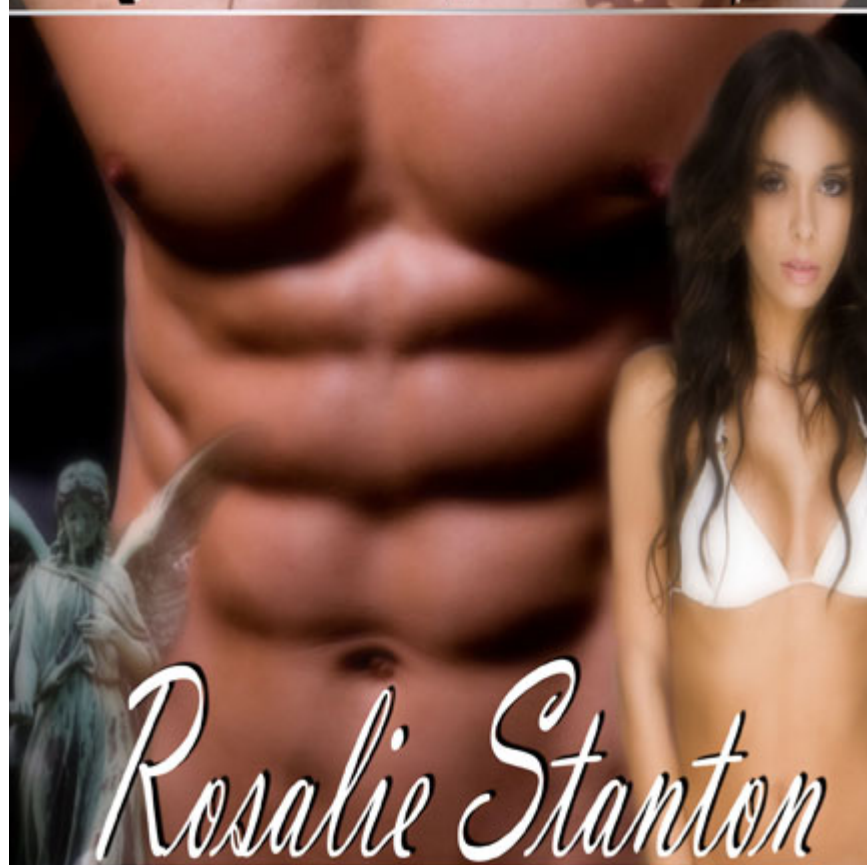


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# RIPPLES THROUGH TIME



# **RIPPLES THROUGH TIME**

**Rosalie Stanton**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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society doesn't mean it's OK to steal someone else's intellectual property. Stealing is stealing, whether it's slipping an unpaid book into your bag in a bookstore or downloading an unpaid copy over the Internet. A writer's work is copyrighted intellectual property that belongs to the writer. Many authors who are victimized by Internet theft aren't wealthy; many writers have a day job, one that actually pays the bills and puts food on the table. Many authors struggle in a harsh economy and turn to writing as a much needed escape. After investing so much into a story, after pouring so much of oneself into an expression of creativity, the least authors expect is for readers to be respectful of the process.

I apologize to my honest readers who have to read through this letter. Thank you sincerely to all the wonderful readers who honor authors by purchasing our work. We appreciate you.

With deep gratitude,  
Rosalie Stanton

# **DEDICATION**

For Kimmie.

Thank you.

# RIPPLES THROUGH TIME

ROSALIE STANTON

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## Prologue

*Home Office of the High Council, 2005*

He wouldn't stop pacing. Up and down the stretch of carpet he went, back and forth, countless times, stopping every few steps to toss a furtive glance to the closed doors. It wasn't often she saw him so unglued.

"I want to go over it again," he said.

Raven Rayne tried and failed to keep from rolling her eyes. The past few days had consisted of nothing but her surrogate brother worrying over a big fuss of nothing. Sure, she understood what a big day it was for him. No one had ever been appointed a Guardian of One of the Few at his age. Youth carried with it the burden of perceived irresponsibility, and though Dexter Bartlett was one of the most responsible, if not *the* most responsible person she'd ever met, his boyish charm served as an Achilles heel. Guardians were the link between the Few and death. They protected them, trained them, and for all intents and purposes, existed as the only family they had. Inexperienced Guardians made for unprepared warriors, and though the Few weren't in short supply, there were still a whole lot more baddies than good guys. At any rate, it was the Guardian who kept his or her ward from meeting the business end of death, and entrusting the life of a warrior into someone so young was commonly perceived as a huge mistake.

Dexter only had a four year advantage on her, and though at twenty he'd more than exceeded the expectations of the High Council, he still had to

prove himself as an effective teacher. He had to prove himself worthy of the Council, and of the Few.

So, naturally, he wanted to go over the highlights of what the High Council would ask her. Just as naturally, Raven thought he needed to take a chill pill.

“There’s no need to go over it again,” she replied, swinging her legs under her chair. The hallway outside the High Council chambers was long and drafty, coated with crimson red carpet and adorned with paintings and artifacts valuable enough to pay for an Ivy League education for all of lower Manhattan. The entryway to the chambers themselves had a gothic revival feel, ornately decorated and well-maintained. It seemed impossible to fathom that anyone actually worked within these walls day after day.

Raven supposed she should be more nervous than she felt, but in all honesty, she didn’t think they had anything to worry about. Dexter had been her teacher since she was ten in some capacity or another. Guardianship was something of a family tradition in the Bartlett household, a duty passed on from father to son and so forth. Initially, the High Council had assigned Dexter’s father as Raven’s Guardian, but it quickly became apparent that as his father’s protégé, a chip off the old block, Dexter was better suited to meet Raven’s academic needs. They were closer in age, had a better rapport, and it was easier for her to take orders from someone she got along with. Authority figures and the Few had a shaky relationship as it was, and Raven hadn’t been the easiest child to manage.

Dexter’s assignment to Raven had initially stood on the grounds that his father would monitor their progress until such a time when he felt the position could be finalized. The High Council had resisted, of course. Change came slowly for most aged establishments. Yet here they stood. In a few crucial minutes, those ornate doors would open, and the High Council would determine whether or not Dexter’s stead as Raven’s Guardian was permanent.

It didn’t matter what they decided. Raven would work for Dexter or no one at all. End of story.

Dexter tossed another glance to the door. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, we’re going over it again.”

Raven sighed dramatically, her shoulders slumping. “You don’t know how to relax, do you?”

"I balance my checkbook for fun sometimes."

"That's not relaxing."

"You say tomato." When it seemed he was convinced the door wouldn't open the second he tore his eyes away, he turned to face her fully. "From the top."

"No way."

"Raven—"

"Not the numbers, Dex. I know those numbers backwards and forwards. Dates, times, the full shebang. I'm not going over it *again*." Raven crossed her arms. "You know I got this in the bag."

He studied her for a minute before nodding. "All right. You're right. We skip the numbers."

"That's not what I said."

"You memorize dates and times, that's fine. They expect that. But in there's not the same as out here. Something you know right now might not be something you know in a few minutes. You have no idea how intimidating they are." Dexter shuddered, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I know you know the numbers, so we'll go over the stuff it's easy to stumble over. Who are The Few?"

Raven blinked at him. "I'd really hope I wouldn't stumble over *that*."

"So would I, but we're going over it anyway. Textbook answers are fine as long as you *know them*."

She stared at him a minute longer before exhaling deeply and shaking her head. "We're really doing this?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

No, he looked like a schoolmaster with no sense of fun. She hated that look.

"The Few are warriors selected from birth to protect this world from evil uglies that go bump in the night."

Dexter's eyes narrowed. "Maybe a *little* more textbook."

"They also have these lame things called Guardians."

"Raven..."

She rolled her eyes again. "I'm cooperating."

He looked doubtful. "Selected how?"

"Lottery ticket?"

Dexter scowled, and her hands came up.

“Usually by blood, passed down paternally.” Raven turned her eyes heavenward and waved at the ceiling. “Thanks so much for that, Dad.”

This time, he ignored her. It seemed the wisest decision. “Why can’t The Few interact with each other?”

“Energy drain. Big time. We become weak and cranky, and way easy to kill.”

“Why?”

“Because our energy is connected. What I have is what he has is what she has is what he has. That much concentration in one area leads to a power outage, and not one we recover from easily.”

He nodded. “Right.”

“It’s also the reason we can’t be with our folks.” The reason she couldn’t remember hers. As an infant, the power of the Few was barely detectable, but once matured it would have rendered her father damn near immobile. Her parents had held onto her as long as they could, but eventually they’d handed her over to the High Council. In the long run, Raven figured it didn’t matter. She couldn’t miss people she’d never known.

As it was, her father still had a duty to fulfill. He couldn’t be bothered to raise a child.

“Talk to me about vampires.”

Raven met Dexter’s eyes and shrugged a shoulder. “Dead things,” she said. “With fangs.”

“The rules?”

“Aside from don’t feed them after midnight?” She grinned when he made a face. “You’re funny when you’re grumpy.”

“Don’t test me. Let’s just go over it. How do you kill them?”

She nodded and wiggled a bit in her seat. “Stake and sunlight.”

“And the bodies?”

“Sunlight incinerates, so just make sure they get left where the sun can reach them. Also, if you get them with holy water, they go poof.” Raven’s brow furrowed. “Never figured out why, though.”

“It’s not really known why, but some in the High Council think it has to do with demons being from Hell and holy water being, well, holy.” He frowned. “What about the other rules? Reflection?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Can they enter a place uninvited?”

“Demons aren’t exactly polite in terms of personal space, so they’re not going to wait for permission before barging in.”

Dexter nodded. “And coffins?”

“Not used unless the vamp in question is really old fashioned.”

“All right. One more question.”

Raven threw her head back. “Thank God.”

“What is the single most important blood bond a vampire can form with another?”

No hesitation. “A claim.”

A soft, companionable silence settled between them. Dexter looked at her, then turned to look at the door again. His body remained tight with tension, but Raven sensed his immediate concerns were appeased.

“All right,” he said softly.

“All right?”

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about.” He said it as though trying to convince himself, though she knew he meant it.

It was a big day for both of them.

“I could’ve told you that, doofus.”

Dexter met her eyes again and allowed a soft grin, but whatever retort lay waiting on his tongue was stolen by the sound of a door opening behind him.

Mirth vanished in that second. Raven rose somberly to her feet.

It was time.

## Chapter 1

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

She knew not to do anything without salt. Salt was invaluable. Salt bade witches away. Salt shielded hallowed grounds. Salt stood as the only mineral of the earth that offered pure, unadulterated protection. She knew, then, to encircle herself in salt before conjuring a demon.

Even with the High Council in her corner, salt might well be the only thing that could hope to keep her alive.

The circle of salt would not protect her if she had just any weapon in hand. Salt required a tacit contract of pacifism. She could leave the book open and on the table beside her sacred circle, but she could not bring it into the circle itself. No, save for the clothing on her back and the ritualistic dagger needed for the sacrifice, nothing synthetic could enter the circle.

Ravenna Mal felt so alone here—in her Guardian’s abandoned cottage, surrounded by the very symbols that had betrayed her. She’d stopped weeping if only out of exhaustion, her tears rubbing skin raw. Her eyes ached from crying. If she paused, if she allowed reality to catch up with her, she was certain the rest of her would break.

He was gone. He was *gone*.

Resolution hardened her veins.

*Nothing is ever set in stone.*

The thought only offered a blink of peace. No matter how many dimensions she battled, no matter what sacred part of herself she had to forfeit, she knew nothing in the world could eradicate the sensation of the ghost of his hand against her cheek.

*Don’t cry, sweet girl. Don’t cry.*

Ravenna shook hard, her trembling hands struggling to light the first of her three candles. Her vision blurred with tears, a storm of sobs crashing

against her chest without hint of warning. The air around her thickened, humid after the recent rainfall. She felt flogged with the weight of premonition and bereft with the pain of loss.

If she stopped—if her thoughts caught up with her—she wouldn't function. She would dissolve completely.

"I c-call thee," she muttered softly, her voice trembling against the still breath of night, "oh spirit of shadows, giver of darkness. I beseech you to heed my prayer." She expelled a deep breath and raised her left hand to her eyes, swallowing hard before applying the blade in her other hand to her wrist. "I offer blood for your mercy." It didn't hurt too badly. One little flick of the knife and a dark crimson line stretched across her skin. She blinked hard and twisted her arm until the cut faced the floor, then pressed her thumb against the incision to encourage drops of blood to spill onto the wooden planks below.

Physical pain was secondary. She was no stranger to bleeding.

"I swear upon the fates," she continued, turning her wounded wrist back toward her eyes so that she gazed at her open hand. She inhaled sharply and pressed the tip of the blade against her roughened palm, and carved an upside-down crucifix into her flesh. "To honor my vow. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

She shivered and turned to face northwest. "Paimon, King of Hell, servant of the Legion, I beckon you. Appear before me."

There was nothing for a long minute aside from the chirping of crickets outside the cottage doors. She didn't know what to expect. This was, of course, her first demon summoning, the only one she had or suspected she would ever attempt. A hysterical scream in her head forewarned that she would regret her actions, but the part of her that cared had died alongside her lover. The part of her that cared had abandoned her, along with every other human comfort.

Kenneth Mal, her Guardian, had betrayed her. The townspeople would have her head if they knew she had returned to her Guardian's home. Kenneth had betrayed her. He was dead now, a victim of his own deceit.

But he'd taken Nicolai with him.

*Nicolai.*

Losing her soul mattered little against these odds. It was the only thing of value she had left.

A great, thunderous roar pierced the air, reverberating through the walls and sending shock waves under her feet. Ravenna cried out in surprise and stumbled back, her legs nearly tripping over the protective circle of salt. Blind panic speared her veins, and she seized control of herself before her emotions spilled into pure terror. A blink of nothing passed before the entry to the Mal home burst open with a great gale of wind, a tall, solitary figure silhouetting the doorway.

The air around her crackled and the hair on her arms stood at attention.

Ravenna Mal was accustomed to facing demons, battling vampires, washing inhuman blood from her clothing and learning new techniques by which to banish the unholyest of creatures back to the bowels of Hell. Her Guardian had taught her everything, had adopted her, raised her as his own, and instructed her in the old ways of the world.

She was the One of the Few, and she lived for her cause.

Only Kenneth was dead, and he'd taken Nicolai with him. He'd murdered the only man in her life she'd ever truly loved, and he'd tried to end her life in the process. Her surrogate father had betrayed her, and thus everything he'd ever taught her hung in question.

Nicolai was dead. Nothing else mattered.

Nothing but the circle of salt in which she stood, and the demon crowding the doorway.

"Do you know who I am?" the demon asked.

Ravenna had imagined several incarnations of a Hell Demon's voice, but whatever expectations she had quickly fled in a fit of surprise. Despite the booming roar of his entrance, the demon's words rode out in a cool, elegant timbre. A sliver of malice, deadly but deceptively calm, edged in the underlying rhythm of his greeting, fashioned to send shivers down her spine, to keep her perfectly aware with whom she dealt. This was a demon who cared not that she was One of the Few, a demon who cared not that her career consisted of sending his friends back to Hell. This was a demon molded of a caliber she had never before encountered, a demon old as time itself. He could blink her out of existence without actually blinking if he so willed. No amount of salt would protect her.

Yet, even knowing this, she refused to tremble.

"You are Paimon," Ravenna replied, her voice strangely composed. "King of Hell. Servant of the Legion."

Paimon inclined his head politely. He stood tall, nearly seven feet in height. It surprised her that he didn't have to crouch inside the cottage, but then, demons could likely bend the laws of physics to their particular whim. He was dressed extravagantly, complete with a great jeweled crown atop his head. Ravenna sensed the movement of others outside the lodge walls. He had not arrived alone, and she was not surprised. The books Mal had left behind had indicated that no figurehead of Hell traveled alone, at least not those of truly noteworthy significance.

"You accept the consequences of my summons?"

She nodded solemnly. "I do."

"You understand it is my right to ask whatever I desire?"

"I do."

"You understand it is my right to demand whatever I desire as payment for services rendered?"

"I do."

"You understand that failing to adhere to any request will result in the immediate acquisition of your soul?"

Ravenna swallowed hard and thought of Nicolai. "I do."

Paimon gestured elegantly as if to give her the floor, a curious smile playing across his lipless mouth. "By all means," he offered softly. "Make your case."

"I seek the release of a demon."

"Ah," he replied, his red eyes flaring with immediate recognition. Of course he'd know immediately the reason of his summons. She had expected no less. "A certain vampire, if I am not mistaken."

"Nicolai," she agreed with a nod.

Paimon arched a brow, or what would have been a brow had he possessed one. His strikingly feminine facial features bore no emotion. The only indication as to the nature of his reaction came in the unnerving tone of his voice. "Does your vampire not possess a surname?"

"Surnames hold no value to vampires."

"Ah, young Ravenna. Try again."

She swallowed hard and nodded, a chill poisoning her veins. Her wounded wrist ached. Her head felt light. Muted splatters of blood struck the wooden floor, but she made no move to hide or tend to the cut. "Nicolai

had no use of his surname,” she replied. “At least none that he shared with me.”

“Mmm, yes,” Paimon cooed. “Nicolai was a rare breed. He left his past in his past. Didn’t even bother to slaughter his family, as so many vampires do.”

“He was unique.”

“Others might call him weak.”

Ravenna’s eyes narrowed dangerously and fight strengthened her tired body. “They would be wrong.”

Paimon smiled indulgently. “A woman prepared to fight for her man,” he said appraisingly. His eyes trailed down the length of her body and focused on her bleeding wrist. “And sacrifice anything to acquire what she wants.”

She flexed her hand demonstrably. “It’s only blood.”

“Of course,” he replied politely. “And you’ve sacrificed your fair share of blood for dear Nicolai before, haven’t you?”

“I love him.”

“A warrior in love with a vampire.” The devil’s eyes twinkled. “I must admit, I am fascinated. What did you find so...how do you say...appealing about this particular species? I’ve known many vampires, as you might imagine, and they are quite a sloppy race. All fang, no courtesy. Many won’t pause long enough from ripping one’s throat out to ask civilized questions.”

“Nicolai was different.”

“Ah. *Amore*. It affects all, yes?”

Ravenna couldn’t imagine the Hell Demon being at all affected by love, but wisely bit her tongue, fighting the urge to glance down. She didn’t feel afraid. She truly didn’t. In honesty, her lack of alarm truly terrified her. She stood before a minion of the Legion without fear. Losing Nicolai had stripped her of concern for herself. She just wanted him back, and if dark magic and bartering with the Devil proved the way to do it, she would navigate the necessary channels and sell what she needed to sell, no matter the cost.

Nicolai might have been a vampire, but he was a good man. She couldn’t abandon him. She *wouldn’t*.

“You do know that what you ask is highly unorthodox,” Paimon continued thoughtfully. “It has never been done before.”

"I know."

"Resurrecting the spirit of a demon... would you like him just as you remember him?"

She would give anything to see her love's eyes again, but would similarly accept Nicolai in any form. "Yes," she replied hastily. "Yes, please."

"Yes, you *would* want it all. Right down to the sneer on his lips, unless I'm mistaken." Paimon nodded, his blood-red eyes narrowing into two thin slits of contemplation. "And I am not mistaken. You truly would sell your soul for a vampire. A demon."

Ravenna swallowed hard. She hoped to whatever deity existed that it would not come to that, for she knew she would. If she came to regret it, she would find solace in the knowledge that anything was worth saving her Nicolai. Anything. Even at the cost of herself.

"I would," she replied.

Paimon studied her for a long minute.

She knew without question that he believed her.

"Foolish," he decided after a long, quiet beat, "but noble. It is a worthy man who earns such devotion, or in this case, a sublimely fortunate vampire." He paused. "And perhaps you are fortunate as well. You see, I have no interest in your soul."

Ravenna blinked disbelievingly, but she did not question him.

"You are surprised?" Paimon chuckled and waved dismissively. "Yes, I'd imagine you are. I *was* a little misleading. Believe it or not, child, your warrior's soul holds little value in the underground. Certainly, there are demons that would shred each other to tiny bits to get a taste of you down there. As it is, the High Council set you loose in this world with a handy clause which makes you utterly useless. You, my dear girl, are untouchable. Even if I dragged you kicking and screaming to the gates of Hell itself, Lucifer could not so much as blow you over."

A potent rush of panicked relief flooded her veins. If her soul could not be touched, she stood in no danger of losing it and committing that ultimate act of self-betrayal. Yet, if her soul could not be touched, Nicolai might be lost to her forever.

She might have summoned a demon to her doorstep for nothing at all.

Her bones froze. *No*. She would make it work. Somehow, someday, she would make it work.

Better now before she bled to death.

"There is something, though," Paimon continued, "that you have. Something I want."

"It's yours."

"Don't you want to hear what it is?"

"It can't be anything of consequence. Not if my soul is off the table." Ravenna shuddered, her arm going numb. "I will give you whatever you want. Just return Nicolai to this earth."

He fell silent again, considering her thoughtfully. "You truly desire this?"

"Yes."

"No matter the cost to you?"

"Yes."

"It could be years before I could reconfigure his existence into this realm. A vampire cannot simply disappear and reappear without throwing the whole of the universe out of order." He shook his head gravely. "No, it must be planned. He must be born again. Right into the blessed womb of his mother, grown up and shaped into the man he was before he was sired. And ultimately, yes, sired again. There will be remnants of this life, of course. One cannot simply exist, not exist, and exist again without some... mark carrying over. He might hate you." Paimon chuckled. "He might hate what you've done, what you've made him relive. He might wish you dead."

"Nicolai would never."

"He loves you so?"

Ravenna nodded fiercely, her heart full. "Yes."

"And you trust the word of a demon?"

"I trust Nicolai. There is nothing else but that."

"Mmmm." A few beats of quiet settled between them. "And I suppose, in this perfect universe, you would be reborn as well."

"Yes."

"As I said, it might take some time."

"Time does not concern me."

He arched a brow. "Oh?"

"I will find him. He will find me. Of this I am certain."

Paimon fell silent again, considering. It seemed an eternity passed in those few endless minutes as he watched her, debated her, as though tossing stones into a murky sea of knowledge beyond her understanding.

It ultimately served as a battle of wills. When she thought she might lose her mind for the silence, he offered a solemn nod.

"I accept your bargain. What you ask shall be done."

Euphoria raced relief as her balance wavered. The blood-stained planks beneath her feet heaved as the air around her head grew even heavier, her eyesight beginning to dim. Nothing existed but understanding, a golden promise for the cosmos to grasp and make into reality.

*Nicolai.*

She would not have to live without him. He would be coming home.

She sighed a long sigh that matured into a relieved sob. Ravenna lurched forward, her feet coming dangerously close to the barrier of salt, her voice crackling with liberation.

"Name your price."

The demon's eyes crackled and the air around her grew inexplicably cold. Then he said a word. One word. One word that would change everything.

"You."

Her heart thundered. "Me?"

"Yes." Paimon smiled a frightening smile, though Ravenna didn't know what was worse: the fire in his gaze or the knowledge that whatever price he mentioned would be given in a blink. "When the time comes, I will collect."

"You said my soul was useless."

"My dear, it's not your soul I want." He drank her in eagerly. "It's the power."

\* \* \* \*

*Present Day. Dover, New Hampshire. Seven days before Raven's twenty-first birthday.*

He'd had his eyes on her all night. She knew. She felt him watching.

Club Intensity was, well, as *intense* as ever, but she hadn't scoped out anything dangerous to slay. Aside from Mr. Stares-A-Lot, a few harmless

demons chattered in the corner about an upcoming marriage, and the only slightly frightening demon in the joint had passed out at the bar. Raven knew she shouldn't be here. Dexter would kill her if he found out, especially since she'd forgotten her cell phone and hadn't told him where she planned to go on the evening's watch, but the streets lay dead and the club buzzed with life. Just once... *just once*, she wanted to look and feel and take in what everyone else experienced every day.

Just once she wanted not to be One of the Few.

Which was all fine and dandy, except a vampire had spent the night eyeballing her, and that was never a good sign. Vampires were unpredictable. Some lived by a code of protecting humans, while others loathed the human race and wanted nothing but the world to return to the way they thought things had once stood. Judging by the malice in Fangy's eyes, he fell into the latter category. It was just as well, Raven supposed. She hadn't had a good fight in ages.

It looked like she didn't have to wait any longer. Blood Breath had started her way, worming a path through the club's rowdier patrons, eyes never wavering.

Something about those eyes...

"You know what I am," he said by means of introduction.

Raven licked her lips and nodded, trying and failing to shake off the feeling that she'd seen him before. She hadn't. She'd certainly remember a vampire like him. Most anti-human vampires were fangs out, ask questions later. This one didn't come bearing fangs. His short brown hair fit his face nicely, accentuating high cheekbones and those killer blue eyes which seemed to hypnotize. His well-muscled body stood clad in a pair of dark jeans and a black t-shirt, and though he didn't tower over her, he did top her off by a few inches. It was... nice, in a weird way. Raven wasn't exactly known for her height. She figured she appeared well proportioned with the hour-glass shape, and everything looked like it belonged where it belonged. She wore her chestnut hair at her shoulders and she definitely wasn't tall, making most men feel like skyscrapers in comparison.

The vampire was different. He didn't overwhelm her with his size. He complemented her.

A very dangerous thing for a vampire to do.

He was so...*pretty*.

"I know what you are," Raven said, pressing her thighs together. All at once, she was aware of a thousand things. Her skin was hot and flushed, and strange tinglies were spreading through her veins and making her panties moisten. Lust seemed a foreign sensation, one she'd felt in spurts during her teens but she'd never been given the opportunity to explore it as it served as a danger and could cost One of the Few his or her life.

Right now, she just wanted the vampire to touch her.

Another very dangerous thing for a vampire to do.

"Then you should know my name," he said, head dipping. His voice fanned her ear, igniting a flame she hadn't known there was to ignite. Her nipples tightened inexplicably, and she felt damp between her legs. Hot and... wet.

*Oh God, so dangerous.*

He whispered his name. *Nicholas*. It rolled off his lips and wrapped around her like a blanket, and the shiver she'd felt before exploded into a world of sensation.

It didn't strike her as a remarkable name, rather it was one that she'd heard many times before. However, that did little to explain why she felt so...

*Complete.*

And then, like proverbial mist, he was gone.

\* \* \* \*

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Raven nodded, breathing heavily and wiping sweat off her brow. "I'm sure," she said, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. The Guardian regarded her curiously, as though providing another opportunity to answer the question. "Seriously certain," Raven said again. "Mind's made up. Whatever you need to hear me say, pretend I said it. I'm going out tonight."

"It's your birthday."

Her brows perked. "Yeah," she said, nodding. "Kinda the point of going out. Party hardy, shake my groove thing, do my birthday shots."

Dexter's eyes darkened a shade at that. It didn't take much for her Guardian's feathers to ruffle, and there were certain things he didn't joke

about. Her safety topped the list. “If you’re drinking,” he said, shoulders tensing, “you’re definitely not going out.”

“Drinking’s part of the twenty-first birthday ritual.”

“Then you’ll do it here. With me.”

Raven laughed in spite of herself. “Wow, that’s really lame.” She paused thoughtfully. “Then again, you are the only person I know, which is even lamer.”

“Raven, you know—”

“The dangers. Yes. Consider me informed.”

“Especially this birthday. *Especially*.” Dexter sighed heavily and tore his eyes from hers, his shoulders dropping as his fingers combed through his sandy hair. “Twenty-one—”

“Three times seven,” Raven recited. “Two mystical numbers acting together does not a happy Guardian make. It’s just one of the evils of mathematics. Mystical numbers occasionally bump into each other.”

Dexter grunted unhappily. They had discussed this for weeks to little avail. Twenty-one was a particularly dangerous birthday for a particularly silly reason, being that three and seven were regarded as mystical numbers. They always had been, through ritual and tradition. Three was the number of the Holy Trinity, for one thing. It also came into play in the Three Jewels of Buddhism, the Three Pure Ones in Taoism, the Triple Goddess in Wicca, and the Hindu Trimurti. Practically every religion in the world had some mythology surrounding the number three. The connotations weren’t always bad or evil, but oftentimes the bad or evil creatures in the world played upon the sacred to create the obscene. Religious scholars often thought demonic forces set the time of Christ’s death at three o’clock with that concept in mind.

The number seven had its own mystical baggage. There were the seven days of creation, seven deadly sins, the number of days it took to tear down the walls of Jericho, the number of heavens, levels of earth, and fires of Hell in the Islamic tradition, the number of palms in an Egyptian Sacred Cubit, and so on.

For these reasons, Dexter had very little humor regarding Raven’s twenty-first birthday, though Raven felt reasonably certain that most days, regardless of what day or year it was, presented its fair amount of danger. However, the mystics in the High Council remained convinced that year

twenty-one was a death warrant to the Few, therefore Dexter had on his worried hat. He likely wouldn't let up until this time next year when she crossed the threshold to age twenty-two.

It didn't help that so many of the Few died during their twenty-first year. Raven called it bad luck. Dexter called it something else.

"Do I have to remind you *again* of the dangers of—"

"Dex, if you remind me again I'm gonna do something you don't like."

"Like what?"

"Like tape over your *Baywatch* reruns."

"You wouldn't!"

She shrugged. "One way or another, I'm going out tonight."

He scowled but continued anyway. "You know the dangers—"

"Better than you do," Raven returned dryly. "Let's take a poll. Who in this room hasn't been attacked on their birthday every year?" A pause. "Dex, why isn't your hand in the air?"

"I can't believe how cavalier you're being."

"After all this time, I gotta say that sounds like a *you* problem," she reasoned, shrugging again. "Look, I know the song and dance by now, all right? Turning a year older means gaining more strength, ergo I have a big stamp on my forehead that reads, 'Hey, you, attack me.'" Raven watched the Guardian a minute longer, then sighed one of those defeated sighs sure to win him over. In the end, Dexter was a pushover. He hated denying her anything normal because she had so little of it. "Sorry," she added for good measure.

"You know what happened last year," he warned, voice low.

"Yeah. I was kinda there."

"They would have killed you."

"It's their job, and really, I can't begrudge them that. It's my job to kick their asses night after night, isn't it? It's not personal, it's business." Raven's shoulders relaxed. "Come on, Dex. A girl only turns twenty-one once, and you promised."

Dexter made a face. "When did I ever—"

"When I turned eighteen."

"I was just trying to negotiate."

"Yeah, well, you need to learn more about women. We never forget things like that." She tossed him a wicked grin. "Please?"

Dexter stared at her a beat too long, and she knew she had him.

There stood one constant in her life and one alone: Raven was One of the Few. Beyond that, she knew little else. She walked among the darkness, one of many, perhaps, but the only one she knew. She could not know the others, could not share their battle or feel their pain. Knowing one would invoke devastation the likes of which she'd never encountered. The Few were solitary figures, all save their Guardian.

Only tonight, Raven was determined to forget things like duty and calling. She didn't want to be anything except on the cusp of her twenty-first birthday. Tonight she would not stalk gravesites, pore over ancient texts, or spar with her Guardian. God knew Dexter needed a break. Tonight, Raven would go to a club, drink a margarita, and forget everything about the Few.

At the very least, that was the plan.

"You promise you'll be careful?" Dexter asked, fight abandoning his voice. "We've been having trouble since that new demon, the vampire—"

"Nicholas," she supplied.

"Right. He's a tricky one. There's no telling if he knows it's your birthday."

"Well, trust me. I'm not going to go out with my guard down. I just want to drink, dance, and make with the merry for once. And if Nicholas shows up, I think a stake in the heart ought to do the trick." Raven smiled gratefully. The space between them closed, her arms looping around Dexter's neck in a thankful hug. "I'm just a phone call away."

"I don't like this," Dexter warned, tightening his grip.

"I know. But it'll be okay."

"That's what you said last time."

"And I managed just fine after the cat stopped barfing up snakes."

Dexter sighed. "You know what you're not doing?"

"Inspiring confidence?"

"That's right."

"I'll be careful, Dex. Cross my heart."

"Yeah," he replied, pulling back with a sad half-smile. "Heard that before."

## Chapter 2

He was a simple guy really. A girl to fuck, warm blood to drink, something entertaining to watch, and he felt set. The past few weeks hadn't cooperated with him. Rather, they had spanned into all-out torture, and not in the way he preferred. It was as though he'd snapped into a part of himself he'd never known, and he ran too slow to be in on the joke.

Perhaps things would seem different if Octavia's attitude hadn't also changed. She couldn't claim herself a huge fan of hunting down the Few to begin with, but something about this particular girl—about Raven—had her knickers twisted tighter than ever. Nicolai supposed he could understand. He hadn't been the same since meeting her.

Perhaps that had something to do with the fact that the dreams were growing stronger.

No point in denying it. Denial did not make the truth any less significant. Denial didn't make the dreams vanish. Denial didn't do anything but exacerbate an unmovable fact. The dreams grew stronger, more frequent, and he felt lucky now to escape a single night without a visit from his nocturnal angel. Perhaps he wouldn't be so concerned about the dreams had the faceless woman remained faceless. The dreams had lived with him since childhood—always the same thing, always the same woman. Always the same *everything*.

Only now they had a face.

A face that looked frighteningly similar to another that had made his acquaintance. A face belonging to a girl who was One of the Few. Raven.

Nicholas honestly didn't know what to make of it. Not once had the phantom woman in his psyche assumed the persona of a woman in his life. Not when he lived as an awkward teenager in middle class London, not when Octavia's fangs had rescued him from the human condition, and

certainly never in the instances wherein he'd hunted down and bathed his hands in warrior blood.

The fact that something consistent in his life had suddenly turned inconsistent didn't really bother him. It seemed unusual, yes, but not unheard of.

No. What bothered him remained the same. The dreams stood as the only remnants of his human days that had carried over into the twenty-first century. The dreams brought a woman, a woman composed of poetry and shining with light, a woman whom, in his youth, he'd assumed was his guardian angel. Adulthood had transformed the romantic notion into a proverbial pipe-dream, his subconscious telling him what sort of woman he truly wanted. Vampirism had molded the interpretation into the pinnacle of desires, what he needed in Octavia but never received. What he wanted more than anything was a perfect, nonexistent being who would complete every hollow crevice of his worn body.

Suddenly, the angel of night had transformed into something else entirely.

Suddenly she looked like Raven.

It was bizarre the way it happened. Nicholas had always seen a young woman with emerald eyes. Her hair was dark brown, her smile infectious and her laughter addictive. Her lips felt soft and warm, her tongue a golden caress against his own. Her flesh felt like cashmere beneath his touch, and her body molded against his as though they had been fashioned together.

There was power in her hands and loyalty in her heart. The love she gave him in a single glance bent time and reshaped realities.

None of that had changed. The only difference was that her face carried over now. It hadn't before. He'd always awaken from the dreams with a vague recollection of what had occurred, of what he'd seen and experienced. He'd feel her skin beneath his hands and taste her kiss for the day's duration, but her face always eluded him. He recognized her instantly at night, of course, but never during the day.

Not until now.

At night. Every night. Ever since he met her at Club Intensity, he'd known she was One of the Few, and somehow, in some twisted, sick way, she was also his.

It was outrageous, insane, and it had to stop.

Nicholas knew his obsession with the Few had exploded beyond his reckoning. He wanted more than anything to snap Raven's neck and finish the whole sordid affair. The fact that the idea alone made him feel nauseous was more than enough reason to proceed with her regularly scheduled death. The sooner Raven Rayne was out of his life, the better. Perhaps her face would fade and the nightly angel would return to him, enigmatic and distant, a proverbial woman who did not exist.

He hadn't gotten very far in convincing himself.

"Going out tonight, Octavia," Nicholas announced. "Grab me something tasty. Anything you fancy?"

She did not answer him. She rarely did nowadays.

He tried hard not to compare her cold, fragile touch to the warm, strong touch of his night angel. It wasn't right. Never before had the dreams disrupted his life. The life he led between sleeps. The life with Octavia.

"Did you hear me?"

She glanced up from the sofa. A sofa. She probably resented that. She resented everything that played against the role Hollywood wanted them in. He could tell her until his lungs were dust that there were no rules in their world—some vampires slept in crypts, others in coffins, others in the earth of their homeland. He chose cushy residential streets with unsuspecting owners of houses too good for them. As it happened, the Hendersons had made quite the tasty meal. He merely grew sick of leftovers.

"Going out," she echoed. "To see the girl, I suspect."

A rush of guilt raced up his spine. Sometimes even he found Octavia downright spooky. "Not unless she runs into me."

"It's her birthday, you know."

"How do you—"

"I just do."

Nicholas's brows perked. *Interesting*. "Well then..."

"You want to play with her, don't you?"

"Don't know what you mean." He cleared his throat and glanced down, guilt becoming more prominent. Looking into his love's eyes and wishing she were someone else had a way of doing that.

Nothing at all stood right with this picture.

As though reading his mind, which he nearly figured she had, Octavia cooed, "You think I don't see it, but I do."

Nicholas swallowed hard. “Don’t know what you mean,” he said again, fighting off a wince. He sounded pathetic. “Look, if I run into her, I’ll knock her off good and proper. It’ll make it right, won’t it?”

Once he killed her, she’d no longer haunt him, only he didn’t say that part.

“Until the next one. You’re obsessed.”

“They’re the ones hunting us down.”

“And you’re the one seeking them out.”

His hands came up. “Just trying to be a bit proactive. Don’t see the harm in that.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Octavia sighed heavily and looked away. “Go out, Nicholas. Find whatever you’re looking for.”

He wouldn’t get anything else out of her—that much he could see.

He just wished he knew the words to say to make things right. To make the dreams vanish and turn his world right-side up again.

He didn’t. All he had were the dreams.

Those he had to follow.

\* \* \* \*

There were parts of town that absolutely thrived after midnight, and thanks to her hours, Raven knew exactly where to find them. The sort of places where people lost themselves to music and sweat, where shadows played and inhibitions melted away until nothing existed but the hard roll of bodies colliding. While not a frequent patron, she found her otherworldly activities brought her to the doorstep of where pheromones were highest, and often Club Intensity served as a beacon of depravity. Since she didn’t have normality in many forms, she often took up people-watching in her free-time, and nowhere else provided what Club Intensity provided. That made it the favorite hangout of vamps, demons, and lonely, desperate people.

Still, this didn’t strike her as the sort of place she would typically consider attending with Dexter at her side.

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” she grumbled, fishing out her ID for the club’s bouncer, which proved unnecessary. Bones knew her well enough.

"It's your birthday," Dexter called.

"Believe me, I got that memo."

"You shouldn't be alone on your birthday."

Raven twisted around and plastered on a saccharine smile. "I'm never alone," she said. "I have you."

"Can't we just be friends tonight?"

Her shoulders slumped as she sighed. Friends. She'd like that, in a perfect world. Friends would make her something other than what she was. This job didn't allow for friends. Her life expectancy didn't exactly shine through the roof. Sure, she had the whole supernatural strength thing going for her, but the Few couldn't be everywhere, couldn't even know each other, and the loss of one wasn't anything to cry over. Why snivel over one when the replacement was on its way?

No one did. Not unless the Guardian was emotionally involved, which Dexter was whether he wanted to admit it or not. Big Brother Dexter would jump in front of a bullet to save her for reasons not at all pertaining to what she represented to the world, rather for what she meant to him.

"Sure, Dex," Raven replied, forcing a smile and nodding to Bones, who immediately dropped the somewhat hostile look, which she didn't think Dexter had even noticed.

However, before she could even whirl around to face what would assuredly have gone down as a brilliant evening, she crashed with a wave of dizzy and promptly collapsed.

\* \* \* \*

*Voices.*

"Raven!" a strange man yelled. "God, I knew we shouldn't have gone out tonight. Raven! Answer me!"

The voices belonged to no one she knew, no one in particular. Then again, as Kenneth Mal's ward, she knew very few people. Such was the life of the Few.

She recalled the face of a demon lord and nothing after that. The demon.... One she'd summoned. She'd been on her back, drowning in her own blood, and he hadn't allowed her wound to heal. Her inherent super-strength should have guaranteed her survival beyond the blood offering, but

Paimon had denied her. Just as well. The sooner her life ended, the sooner she could be reborn.

The sooner she and Nicolai could be reunited.

*Reunited.*

Ravenna blinked blearily and tried to sit up, catching only a glimmer of light and a semi-circle of concerned strangers surrounding around her. The one who had called her name, a name he couldn't possibly know, was at her side. Handsome, young-looking with sandy blond hair, his warm eyes quieted the panic stirring in her chest and nearly distracted her from his very odd state of dress. He struck her as far too worried to be a stranger.

Something cold stabbed her insides.

"Raven?"

Ravenna's heart skipped a beat. "What?" she demanded, blinking and sitting up. She thought perhaps she'd misheard, but she had not. No one knew that name except Nicolai. He had given it to her.

How had the stranger known?

*"My gorgeous girl." A lick of his tongue moved across her quivering skin. Her insides pooled into desire, and she reached for him with trembling hands. He grinned in kind and kissed her lips, his hands framing her face. "My sweet Raven."*

"Raven?" she replied, indignant. "What sort of name is Raven?"

"Your name."

"I prefer Ravenna, thank you very much."

"Ravenna is One of the Few," Nicolai countered, his calloused fingers tugging expertly at her hard nipples, his mouth exploring the creamy flesh of her throat. "The Few are not welcome here."

"I am always One of the Few," she replied, her words little more than a dreamy gasp. She thrust her hips hard against his and melted when he growled and thrust back. She'd grown addicted to the hard feel of him between her thighs, rubbing her with reckless disregard to anyone who might find them.

"Not here, you're not," Nicolai replied simply, wheedling a hand between them. "With me... you're...mmm..."

"Uh..."

"You're..." His fingers pried her vaginal lips apart and slipped across her swollen, tender clitoris. He favored her with a cocky wink. "Raven."

*She fought the urge to laugh. "I am not."*

*"You're Raven. You're my Raven."*

*"I am not!"*

*Nicolai's dancing eyes glanced over her face, wandering southward until he was staring at her breasts. "You most certainly are," he told her.*

*"Nicolai—"*

*"You're mine, and I'll call you whatever I like." He grinned and tickled her lips with his tongue, the fingers at her pussy massaging her throbbing pearl into a new form of madness.*

*"You're mad."*

*"Love tends to turn a man a little nutty, yeah? Especially a man who falls for the enemy." He nuzzled her throat tenderly and pressed a kiss against the sacred mark blushing her flesh. "You're my Raven, darling. Accept it."*

*Ravenna's vision blurred, another gasp clawing for freedom. Around him, air seemed in short supply. "I might need some... convincing," she conceded, feeling very wanton and rather unapologetic about it.*

*Nicolai met her eyes, the demon in him all but purring with pleasure. "Oh kitten," he growled, his hand abandoning her center to free his cock. "You know how I feel about challenges."*

*"Remind me."*

*The man standing over her knew her name, but he remained a stranger. The room burst with light, occupied with far too many people for this to be anywhere near home.*

*She'd landed far from home.*

*Paimon had inserted her into a society far from her own. Her body felt the same. When she looked down, she saw her hands. When she spoke, she heard her voice. She fisted handfuls of her own hair and recognized the familiar contours of her face as her fingers explored what she could not see.*

*Everything seemed to be where it should. She was Ravenna Mal.*

*"Raven!"*

*She blinked, her heart leaping into her throat. Never had another man said that name.*

*"Raven, come on. Stop scaring these nice people and sit up." He leaned down, close enough for her to feel his hot breath fanning through her hair, and her blood rushed. Men simply didn't speak or act this way around*

women they hadn't known in the manner left to the marriage bed. Who was he? How did he know her?

And where could she find Nicolai?

Perhaps Paimon meant to test her.

"Dexter," the man said, tapping his chest. "Tell me you know who I am."

Ravenna just blinked.

"For crying out loud, I knew we shouldn't have come out tonight."

"Dexter," she repeated.

Worry washed away from his face, not completely but enough. There was, she supposed, some comfort in hearing one's name in the midst of panic. "Okay," he said, tugging at her arm. "Enough fooling around, Rave, get off the floor."

"Good idea," she agreed, crawling to her feet and dusting herself off. Her clothing was...well, interesting, but she decided not to linger. Chalk it up to being in a foreign time, surrounded by people she didn't know. The man at her side might be anyone, but he knew her, and that seemed more than she could say for herself.

All that mattered was getting to Nicolai.

"All right," Ravenna said, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "I have to go."

Dexter's panic came blazing back without warning. "Go? Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Well, I think it's obvious," Ravenna said firmly. "I'm going to find Nicolai."

"Nicolai?"

"Yes. He's why I'm here, and I'm going to find him now."

Before Dexter could grab her wrist, Ravenna had turned on her heel and tore into the night.

She had a vampire to find.

## Chapter 3

Nicholas wouldn't to toss away a golden opportunity like this. The birthdays of the Few served as the perfect time for attack. According to myth, myth he'd hunted down and proven as fact, the hour between midnight and one in the morning served as the time when the Few stood most susceptible to the night's ugly games. The transition phase went quickly, but he had a window of opportunity, especially since Octavia had indicated that Raven turned twenty-one at midnight, and twenty-one was an uncannily mystical number due to its relationship with seven and three.

Personally, Nicholas didn't give a fuck how numbers worked. He just knew that the cosmos aligned a bit more perfectly on some nights than others, and tonight would shape up to be one of those nights.

Raven turning twenty-one meant her strength would fortify. Not many of the Few got to that age—even more died upon arriving—and Nicholas had good intention to make sure her luck ran the same. He'd hunt her down and snap her neck. He'd spice his liquor with her blood and make a trophy of her body. He'd been merciful with the Few in the past, but with Raven, any semblance of his favorable side would be nonexistent.

In order to obliterate her from his dreams, he needed to obliterate *her*.

Perhaps then he'd win back his nights.

Or perhaps he'd be haunted by her face forever.

Nicholas shuddered and snarled. The girl best not even consider wheedling her way any further into his psyche. The way he figured it, he'd have to send his brain through a shredder before Raven's face faded to ambiguity. Too many things remained of his existence that he wanted to remember, and wouldn't forfeit for the sake of banishing one troublesome warrior.

It was ridiculous how deeply one little girl could affect him. One girl whom he'd only twice encountered in the flesh. He'd seen her dance, had

approached and felt heat rolling off her hot little body. Every glance he'd stolen of her since had been at a woeful distance.

Then there was that time they'd met while she patrolled one of the local cemeteries. He'd tried to kill her, she'd tried to kill him, the typical song and dance. Neither one of them had gotten very far, and he didn't care to examine why.

Nicholas had already reconciled himself to the fact that he wasn't one for master plans. He had a hard time staying away so necessary events could unfold. What he truly wanted was to storm up to her, provoke her into a fight, and rip her beautiful head off her shoulders. He didn't want to be *patient*. He wanted this to end. Now.

He wanted to get her up close. He wanted to get his hands on that annoyingly perfect skin of hers.

He wanted...

*To fuck her into the ground.*

Nicholas snarled again and turned a sharp corner down an unfamiliar alleyway. And without warning—without anything at all—her scent filled his nostrils. Her potent, intoxicating scent. The musk of the girl, undeniable in its richness. The flavor of Raven Rayne, undeniably Raven Rayne.

Something significant shifted inside him. His cock took immediate notice as well.

And then he saw her. A fucking vision if one existed. She moved down a dark alleyway with nothing but confidence at her side. Her mahogany hair made her a true visage of his night angel. Her eyes were large and bright. She was lost, but unafraid. She moved like royalty, and she was looking for something.

He knew the moment she sensed him. He saw the shudder of realization grip her shoulders, heard the gasp that claimed the night air, watched as she raised her head and met his eyes. All at once, he felt thoroughly paralyzed, as though trapped in an odd moment of pure *déjà vu*. His mind scrambled to catch up with the fading memory of something long forgotten, but it raced too fast for him to catch. Somehow in the shadow of an instant everything had changed.

He needed to kill her quickly before he talked himself out of it, and preferably before the angel of his dreams turned into something of his nightmares.

As a vampire, he knew how particularly horrific nightmares could be.

“Nicolai,” she breathed, her eyes shining with tears.

Everything inside him collapsed. He hadn’t heard that name in years.

His true name.

Then she burst into tears, hard, body-consuming tears that could only be shed in the light of one’s greatest loss or one’s greatest triumph. She lurched over, holding her stomach as her whole being collapsed in sobs. Before he could stop himself, Nicholas rushed forward, a twist of fear and concern seizing his insides, shielded with an overpowering veil of confusion. The whispers in his brain commanding him to snap her neck faded to the hysterical screaming that suddenly demanded her safety. He didn’t understand it, and he moved too fast to allow second-guessing.

He didn’t even have time to shake off his fangs. Before he could even consider blinking back to the part of him that even vaguely resembled sanity, Raven choked a heartbreaking sob and lunged into his arms. Then she captured his face between her warm, warrior’s hands and touched her tear-stained lips to his.

Some inner dam broke. Reason shot far out the proverbial window. The salt of her tears collided with his taste buds, meshing everything he knew and everything yet-to-be-decided in a colorful frenzy of meaningless shapes. All he knew at that moment was that somehow redemption, purity, and light had manifested in Raven’s kiss, and he found himself aching for something he’d never thought to touch or desire. The part of him screaming in protest swiftly fell silent in defeat by the man yearning for the visage of perfection that haunted his dreams.

The warmth of her tongue invaded his mouth. Her tears doused his cheeks, and her kiss set his body aflame. He touched the sun, her taste consuming every nerve in his body. She ripped him apart and pieced him together. She caressed him like a lover, holding him to her as she explored every crevice of his mouth, as she touched him as no other woman had ever touched him. Her hands didn’t abandon his face, didn’t dip between them to rub his denim-clad erection. They didn’t do anything but hold him to her as she bathed him in sunlight.

“I’m so sorry,” she sobbed against his mouth when their lips parted.

“Nicolai, I’m so sorry.”

Nicholas blinked, bewildered.

“I had to do it. I *had* to. I had to find a way to bring you back. I couldn’t...God, I couldn’t...”

He stared at her broken face, the fragmented pieces of his mind clawing for some sense of understanding. None came forward. Instead, all he had was an armful of weeping woman. No, she definitely embodied a girl tonight, a girl whispering soft, tender kisses across his face, even kissing his fang when his jaw refused to snap upward.

“I’m so sorry,” she whimpered again, her small, perfect breasts pressed fully against his chest. “Nicolai, oh Nicolai...”

Nicholas’s gaze wandered covetously over her face before focusing on her round mouth again. He became painfully aware of her feminine softness. She burned him up through his clothing, and if he got any harder, he would burst through his zipper.

He needed to get her somewhere secluded, away from prying eyes.

Not that he cared a lick if the girl flaunted her goodies to the world. The fact that she currently looked at him as though he’d descended from the heavens was an entirely different matter. She’d wound up trapped under some wonky spell, and if he wasn’t careful she would entangle him in her web.

He moved her quickly through the nearest doorway he spotted, and found himself inside what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse and without the faintest clue how to proceed. His mind rapidly deteriorated. What had seemed so important just a few minutes ago had muddled into something beyond his understanding. Intellectually, Nicholas knew it’d be simple to off her now, to trap her gorgeous little head between his hands and give it a good twist until she was nothing more than a lifeless heap at his feet. It seemed easy—beyond easy—rendering her nothing more than a footnote in history, a name with an asterisk beside it in some old Guardian’s dusty volume.

But he couldn’t. God, he couldn’t. Fuck if he knew why, but he stood powerless against it, powerless against *her*.

She wove a spell around him, fogging his senses and dragging him into the murky place where dreams attempted to overpower reality.

God help him but he let her.

“Hush now,” he murmured, his voice resonating with tenderness he’d never used with anyone other than his sire. He placed her atop a crate, his

hands sliding up her body, barely skimming her breasts, and cupping her face as she'd cupped his outside. "Look at me."

"I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

Her face began to crumble again, her tear-filled eyes taking in his face. "You changed your hair," she said, running her fingers through his short chestnut locks.

"Did I?"

"It's...shorter."

"Been this way a while." His hands slid down the length of her, careful not to cross any boundaries, if there were boundaries to cross. "Fancy it?"

Raven shook her head and glanced down again, her body going rigid under his hands as she battled another incursion of tears. "I...I..."

"Raven..." He watched her dissolve again, feeling more helpless than he had in the whole of his existence. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to shake her and wrap her in his arms. He wanted to beat her to death and kiss her blindly. He wanted so many things and none of them made sense. "What the hell is going on?"

The world swirled around him.

"I...I did..."

"Yeah?"

"A spell. I did a spell." She glanced up again, her face a shield of contrition. "I did a spell. I summoned a demon."

He blinked, a blur of rage coming over him. "You *what*?"

Well, at least that much made sense. Barmy woman had cast some magic over him. As was typical, the spell had gone wrong. Perhaps it was the reason his night angel suddenly wore her face, the reason he suddenly couldn't stomach the idea of ripping out her throat, the reason he wanted to hold her to his chest and whisper that everything would be all right.

Bitch.

"I had to! I couldn't..." Raven's voice failed her, her soft lips quivering as tears consumed her once more. "You were gone. I watched you leave me. And I tried, Nicolai. I tried to...I didn't know what to do. They tried to kill me a-and..."

Nicholas's heart softened before he could help himself. He blamed it on the spell. "Who?" he asked gently. "Who tried to kill you?"

“The...they thought I was a witch.” She paused and searched his eyes. “Do you remember that?”

The fact that she’d fallen completely off her tree didn’t bother him, but he found himself immensely bothered that he wanted to tell her yes. He wanted to reassure her of anything which demanded reassurance.

He hated this.

“Kitten, I don’t—”

“I did it. I summoned him,” she continued. He could practically see her mind racing. “It was easy. It was so easy. I found one of Kenneth’s books. The sort he never let me near, you know?”

“Raven...”

The sound of her name brought everything to a still. She glanced up at him with wide eyes, swallowing him whole into an abyss he’d never before ventured.

To keep himself grounded, Nicholas tried not to focus on how wonderful her name felt on his tongue. Saying it in his head was problematic enough but giving it life in the real world, calling her something beyond her title hardened her in his head. It humanized her, and while such was never a problem for him—as a vampire—something about her name made his nerves tingle and his body sing. Humanizing her was dangerous. He’d always found it easier to land the killing blow if he didn’t give his victims time to talk or prove that they were, at the core, more than a quick meal.

“Are you real?” she asked him softly, her soft breaths doing things to his skin that he’d never known a breath could do. “Please tell me you’re real.”

This was something he knew. He *was* real. As real as anything.

He just didn’t know what sort of real she needed him to be.

*And why the hell does it matter?*

“I’m real,” he heard himself murmuring, his eyes falling shut as her hands took to exploring his face again. Fuck if her touch didn’t feel wonderful. “I’m real, Raven.”

“Then can we...can you just kiss me?” Her mouth brushed his. “Please? The rest—”

He smashed his lips to hers without allowing himself time to think. He didn’t want to think anymore. He just wanted to touch her. At the moment, nothing seemed more important. Her thighs parted, and he fell between them

as though magnetized, the warm heat of her pussy doing more to set his skin aflame than any amount of sunlight could ever accomplish. Her taste had him thoroughly drunk. Nothing existed but her feel. The way her mouth moved against his. She held onto him as though trying to anchor herself, as though her existence in this world depended completely on how tightly he held her.

“Raven,” he moaned, sucking her tongue between his teeth. He wanted to draw her blood but didn’t dare. That would shove him across a threshold he hadn’t prepared to cross. “God...”

“Please,” she whimpered again, nipping at his lips. “Please.”

“What do you need, baby?” Nicholas heard himself asking. He lost himself farther down the rabbit hole and bugger if he cared. He released her just long enough to hike her skirt up her legs and bunch the fabric around her waist. “Need me to touch you?”

Raven sobbed and nodded hard, thrusting herself against his hand. “It’s been so long.”

“Lifetimes,” he found himself agreeing, not without a dose of irony.

“Please...”

Nicholas inhaled sharply, his lips brushing the corner of her mouth. He knew he should stop for both their sakes, but he didn’t dare. Something had a hold of her, and whatever it was, it had her believing he was someone else, someone beyond anything anyone had ever believed him to be. Not even Octavia had looked at him the way Raven looked at him now. He fell too quickly to grab hold of anything but her, and with reality blurring around him, he couldn’t bring himself to give an honest damn.

“Please!” Raven gasped again. “Nicolai, please...”

He wheedled through what felt like yards of fabric, his body rejoicing when he finally touched skin. Christ, she burned so hot, and one touch would do rot to satisfy him. He ran his fingers over the soft curls of her mound, the heady aroma of her desire tickling his tongue and making every inch of him hunger for a taste. He wanted to experience everything. He wanted to feel her wet, warm pussy clench around his cock. He wanted to tease her sweet little clit and thrust his tongue deep inside her body. He wanted her to drench him—drown him—in her ambrosia and mark him as no woman had ever bothered to mark him.

He wanted to ruin her for all men. He wanted anyone who ever looked at her to know she was claimed.

Raven jerked against him with desperation he'd never before encountered. He'd never seen a woman so starved for him, and fuck if it wasn't brilliant. "Nicolai!" she cried. "Please! Don't tease me!"

"I live to tease," Nicholas replied coyly, flicking a brow.

"It's been too long. I need you!"

"Want me inside you, sweetness?" He ran his index finger between her pussy lips, dipping as far into her sweet liquid warmth. "Fuck, but you're wet."

"Oh my...ohhh..."

"This for me, kitten? All this juicy—"

"*Nicolai!*"

He'd never heard his name screamed that way before. He'd never known how hot it could be. He'd never even considered it.

A guy could get used to this in a big way.

Nicholas grinned as his thumb slipped over her clit, the symphonic moan tearing through her lips hardening every vessel in his body with lust.

He had to have her. He had to have her *now*...which made the arrival of her Guardian one tragic inconvenience.

## Chapter 4

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

The darkest time of night. No moon. No stars. No warm glow of a lantern from a nearby cottage. Not even the wind offered companionship. Grass blades whistled against her bare ankles with every step, the stake in her hand growing heavier by the minute. The vampire Kenneth had predicted would rise tonight refused to cooperate. Calculations had timed his rising at approximately seven minutes past eleven.

It now approached one in the morning, and the grave had yet to stir.

Kenneth's predictions were typically off the mark. He constantly pieced together mathematic formulae, determined to find a way to pinpoint a vampire's rising to the second. It never worked, of course. Not many of his ideas ever did.

Thus Ravenna had wasted most of her evening.

Not that she had much waiting for her at home.

She fought a yawn, stuffing the stake between the small of her back and the waistband of her trousers. Trousers. She liked them much more than she would have imagined. While her clothing wasn't an appropriate fashion statement, she'd taken to wearing them as much as possible, even though she was on strict instruction to remain discreet. The change in wardrobe had come last week after the wind had caught her skirt and allowed her prey an easy escape. After a long, embarrassing discussion, Kenneth had decided men's clothing served her better than skirts on her nightly outings. She never questioned her Guardian.

Ravenna propped herself up against the nearest tree, her eyes taking in the still graveyard with nothing more than bored acknowledgment. The part of her that had once regarded cemeteries as sacred ground had died the night of her first slaying. She used to think them hauntingly beautiful, a place

resonating with spirits beyond the imaginings of the physical. The romantic in her had died long ago.

It was a graveyard. One of many. A demonic playground—the birthplace of those she hunted. No more. No less.

Ravenna sighed and glanced up to the starless sky.

It really was the darkest time of night.

It also served as her favorite time of night. She loved it when the sky grew dark, even more so when it became so still that she could hear things like grass blades caressing her skin. Silence and darkness might rightly terrify any other human within proximity, especially in a village as superstitious as hers, but Ravenna didn't feel afraid. Not anymore.

Ravenna loved this time of night because it made her job easy. She had yet to encounter a demon whose eyes didn't glow in some fashion. When it was *absolutely* dark—when the air in front of her face colored with blackness—she felt at her best. She felt at her safest. If something came after her, she'd know exactly where to look.

Silence contributed in the same way. If all hung quiet, noise would betray anything lurking in the night. Noise would give her the advantage, no matter how indiscernible it sounded to human ears.

Oh yes. Ravenna loved this time of night.

She didn't, however, love being bored.

"I see the moon," she recited under her breath, her eyes fixed on the black space where the moon would be were it not shrouded in clouds. "The moon sees me."

"Moon can't see anything. This is what we call a starless night."

Ravenna fought an eye-roll and crossed her arms, turning fully to face the owner of the voice. The chill she once felt at its sound remained absent, as it had been for weeks now. There was only so much a person could shudder before boredom set in. After all they'd been through—the numerous times they'd tried to kill each other, the numerous times they'd come close—she felt she knew him well. As it happened, she was fortunate if he didn't linger around every corner she turned. He stalked the night as he stalked her, at times beating her within an inch of her life and leaving her to heal before returning to do it over again. It was a mutual arrangement. They hadn't the healthiest relationship but it seemed she'd come to depend upon it.

Her weekly nocturnal visits from Nicolai.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “Can you not see I’m otherwise engaged?”

“Oh right,” he retorted. “Watching the grass grow and waiting for one of my newest relatives to show its ugly head. Your life looks entertaining.”

“Go away.”

“Sorry, no.” He grinned, hooking his thumbs through the waistband of his trousers, his brows flickering upward devilishly. “I came here for a reason.”

“To annoy me?” she ventured.

“To kill you.”

Ravenna couldn’t resist it this time. She rolled her eyes. “How many times have we had this conversation?” she asked.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he replied, shaking his head with a condescending tsk. “No need to get testy.”

“We’ve done this before. You know how it goes.”

“Yes, and I think you took our relationship for granted.” Nicolai’s grin widened as his fangs descended, his eyes burning like a deep ember. Always told you I wanted to know how it feels to kill One of the Few.”

“Nicolai —”

“And while I feel our...arrangement has been mutually beneficial, this dance has run its course, darling.” He took a step forward. “You’re brilliant and beautiful. And after tonight, you’ll make a lovely footnote in one of your Guardian’s dusty old books.”

Ravenna swallowed hard, her bravado vanishing. Her tough exterior betrayed her and the child inside, the part of her that would remain forever young, felt terrified. There were nights when she bested Nicolai, yes, but he was an old demon. An ancient, as Kenneth would say. A vampire whose reputation left no room for error.

A vampire who had, for whatever reason, made her his number one priority.

A vampire whose company had been oddly appreciated, despite the violent terms of their relationship.

“You taught me a lot,” Nicolai said, nodding to her respectfully. “Never saw a girl with moves like yours or a body like yours. You’re enough to make a fella want what he can never have.”

The words lent her pause. Ravenna blinked and glanced up. “What he can nev—”

Her voice severed at the biting smack of Nicolai’s fist smashing into her jaw. The ground swept up from under her, and the next thing she knew, she’d crashed on her back, her eyes blinking numbly at the starless sky. She barely had time to gasp, to blink, to do anything but register the dull pain spreading across her skin before he pounced, tossing her back to her feet if only to knock her down again. This time she managed to fall onto all fours. She perched awkwardly with her open palms supporting her, her cut-off trousers sliding up her legs and introducing her knees to the cold forest floor. Nicolai came at her again, his foot slamming up into her gut, knocking what little wind she had in her out again and sending her body spiraling through the air before she collapsed once more.

“Uh...”

“Oh come on, Ravenna!” Nicolai snarled, the toe of his heavy boot sinking into her ribs with wrath that knew no bounds. “Don’t tell me you’re not even gonna fight!”

Ravenna sucked in a breath so deep her insides ached, rolling over quickly to avoid another angry kick. She fought to her feet just in time to catch his swinging leg with her hands, clamping down her grip and bringing her own leg around in a roundhouse kick which had him soaring through the air in a flash of thunder.

The move made every part of her hurt. He’d taken her by surprise.

“Why now?” she screamed, lashing with furious fists at his advancing form, each of her punches wasted on the dead night air around them. She collapsed inwardly, too blinded with pain and outrage to take note of her surroundings, or even calculate how close he truly was to her. “Why now, Nicolai?”

“I’ve told you—”

His calm voice only strengthened the fire in her blood. “We were—”

“What? Getting along?” He managed to evade her swings and smash another punch into her cheek, forcing her to the ground again. “We’re not *meant* to get along. That’s how this thing works.”

Ravenna recovered quickly this time, tossing her hair out of her face as her swollen eyes met the demonic glow of his gaze. Her face felt drenched. She had the horrible notion that it came from tears rather than blood. Blood

she could understand and could defend. Blood she expected. Blood was justified.

Tears were deadlier than blood. Tears meant something else altogether.

"I thought—" she began weakly, but her voice died without argument.

"You thought what? That I was enjoying this? That I looked forward to seeing your annoying little face every night? That fighting with you makes me...." Nicolai trailed off, his eyes softening as he took her in, running his gaze down the length of her body. Something unprecedented flashed across his face, something she didn't know and had never seen before. It made her feel, of all things, self-aware and feminine.

Standing under a starless sky, bleeding and likely sporting more than one broken bone, she looked at her attacker as though only then realizing he was a man.

"Nearly two hundred years," he breathed, shaking his head. "I've never felt this way."

Ravenna shivered, a confused frown wrinkling her brow. "What way?"

A few seconds of endless silence settled between them. She didn't even know if he'd heard her.

"Not right," Nicolai continued, shaking his head, his balance stumbling as he advanced upon her. She found herself walking backward, but it didn't register until her back collided with a tree. Nicolai lingered still, his eyes glued to the dip in her shirt where her small breasts made themselves known. Her nipples were hard and poking intently through the fabric, and seeing as Ravenna had yet to come across undergarments with enough freedom to allow for the sort of acrobatics that were demanded of her nightly, she wore nothing beneath her clothing for protection.

"Ravenna." Her name sounded like a prayer on his lips. He had her stunned into immobility, her body rigid with anticipation, tight with the need to lash out or shove him away and do anything to get away from him. She should drive a stake through his chest, even if her heart started racing in a manner that seemed most curious at the thought.

"This isn't right," Nicolai murmured, his chest now rubbing her breasts, his eyes fixated on her lower lip. There was something hard pressed against her stomach, something she'd never felt before. Perhaps she'd never been close enough to him to feel it. At least, not close like this. Not close in the capacity of a sudden lack of swinging fists and veiled threats.

She couldn't name it. It seemed unnatural.

In the meantime, he kept talking. "Should just kill you," he said. "Be done with it. No more dreams. No more wanking off to the scent of... Christ..."

"Nicolai?"

A sliver of moonlight peeled through the curtain of clouds, hitting the length of his ivory fangs with such intensity that she felt smacked at once with the notion of kismet. Perhaps it was meant to be this way. Perhaps fate had decided to intervene once and for all. Perhaps fighting it would only make it worse.

"Ravenna..."

Then, sweet Lord, he pressed himself close. She felt a cool draft against her throat, his hands sliding up her body until he held her by the arms. Something soft, wet and wonderful laved at the pulse-point of her neck, and it seemed for a moment that he felt content just to hold her there. His body came into intimate contact with hers, the foreign hardness pressed against her, rotating and sending a blaze so intense throughout her body she felt at once certain that he meant her to die this way.

"Nicolai—"

Pleasure-laced pain ripped through her insides as his fangs sliced into her skin, and Ravenna cried out in a confused mixture of horror and euphoria. Her nerves burst and her blood burned, her body roaring toward a screaming inferno. Before she knew what had happened, Nicolai whimpered against her bloodied skin and his fangs receded. The movements of his mouth softened inexplicably, and suddenly there seemed nothing but the gentle caress of his lips across her flesh, the rhythmic thrusts of his hips against her increasingly-pliant body, and the way his grip on her loosened into something resembling tenderness.

"Oh God," he murmured, his hands sliding up her arms and over the sides of her neck until he cupped her cheeks, his eyes leveled with hers. "Ravenna...."

As One of the Few, she'd been raised with limited purpose—to hunt. To kill, to protect, to die. Nothing in her upbringing had been reserved for romance or the want of human contact. Kenneth had flatly refused to discuss the closeness men and women enjoyed with each other behind closed doors,

and while her imagination seemed rather inventive, most areas of human relations remained a mystery to her.

She'd witnessed those around her find happiness. She'd attended weddings, occasionally stumbled across lovers stealing kisses, and pined for a connection of her own.

At the very least, she wanted to experience a kiss. If only a kiss—one kiss before she died.

How strange that a vampire would be the one to fulfill her desire.

His lips were cool but not cold, and they brushed against hers with such tenderness that she could have sworn he feared doing anything lest he break her. His thumbs caressed her cheeks, the lower half of his body moving against hers in a way which seemed sinful. The skin between her thighs felt hot and wet. He seemed to be grinding against her with fixed intent, the movements of his mouth melting her resistance and driving her into insanity.

"Open up for me," he whispered, his tongue tracing the crack of her lips. "I need to taste you."

Ravenna gasped, and the next thing she knew, his tongue had slipped inside her mouth, licking every corner. His hands slid down her throat again until he had a breast captured in each palm, his thumbs brushing the hard pebbles of her nipples. Every touch singed her insides, burning with pleasure she hadn't known existed. She couldn't take much more but she needed it all the same. She needed something she didn't know, and she didn't even know its name.

"Oh my God..." she gasped, throwing her head back and hitting the tree hard enough to hurt. She barely felt it. "What...what are you...?"

"No one's ever touched you like this, have they?" Nicolai replied, his eyes growing wide as his left hand dropped to the hem of her shirt and slipped beneath the fabric. He looked for all the world starved for her. She'd never seen anyone look at her like that, like she was something precious, something desirable—like she was a woman. "God, of course they haven't."

"Like what?"

Nicolai's eyes darkened and he growled softly, dropping another kiss across her lips. "I want you."

"You...you what?"

"I want you. I shouldn't. God knows I shouldn't." He glanced away quickly as though he feared betraying himself, his jaw clenching. "I've wanted you for so long. Since the first time I saw you, I think."

Ravenna blinked, her heart thundering. "I don't understand," she said hoarsely. "What does it mean to...to want me?"

A long pause. Nicolai's attention remained glued to a spot on the tree, or something behind her where her eyes could not follow. At last he glanced up again, and the storm in his gaze stole the breath from her lungs.

"Give me your hand," he said quietly.

The request surprised her. He didn't seize her wrist, rather waited until she placed it in his care. Then, slowly, he guided her hand southward until she cupped the hardness she'd felt against her a few minutes before. At first contact a short, passionate breath broke through his lips and he stole another kiss from hers before he could help himself.

Ravenna didn't mind. She found his taste addictive.

"This is what it means to want you," he murmured, eyes shining. "I want you. I want to be your first. No...no, I wanna be your..." He shook his head. "I want things from you that I shouldn't. I've been alive so long, Ravenna, so long. And everything's been the same till you showed up and all went to..."

"You want—"

"Inside you. I want inside you." The hand still curled around her breast gave her tender globe a tender squeeze. "I want inside that tight little quim of yours. I want you squeezing me until I can't remember I don't need breath to live. I want to mark you." Nicolai held her eyes a minute longer, then dropped a kiss across the healing wound on her throat. The hand clamped around her wrist released her abruptly, his attention suddenly focused on stripping her trousers down her legs.

His body dipped out of sight, falling to his knees before her, his eyes on the skin he'd revealed, particularly the forbidden part she'd never considered overly remarkable.

She had no use for undergarments when on the hunt. Not for binding her breasts and not for her bottom. Thus she was completely naked to him from the waist down, and with her blushing flesh exposed to his overly hungry gaze, the wetness between her thighs intensified and the ache within her belly exploding into all out need.

"I...I don't..."

Nicolai raised a trembling finger to her skin. "You really don't know about any of this, do you?"

"Any of...oh *Lord*."

His finger brushed the soft wetness at the opening of her vagina, rubbing her with such tenderness that she swore she would melt. And then he pushed upward until that small part of him had slipped inside her, exploring flesh no one before him had ever before touched. Ravenna feared her legs would buckle, but she somehow managed to maintain balance, even when he leaned inward, parting her private lips and favoring her skin with a long, sultry lick.

"Oh...oh..."

"This part of you is gorgeous. You know that, right?"

She barely heard him.

His other hand, warmed from the heat of her breast, gently grazed her dark curls. "More than gorgeous, even, you're...delicious." Nicolai's eyes traveled up the length of her torso until their gazes locked. Somehow the buttons of her dress-shirt had become undone, so she was completely open to him. No trousers, no undergarments, just her breasts peeking out through the lapels of her hunting-attire, her legs spread and a hungry vampire perched between them.

"You know what this is, darling?"

A long, hoarse cry ripped through her throat as his fingers slipped over something in her body she'd never known existed, euphoria exploding through her veins. "Oh *my God*."

"This juicy little pearl is what we call a clitoris." His lips encircled her, giving her a good, hard suck. "Mmm. Do you know—"

"Oh my..."

"You like that?"

"I...I don't know...I feel...so..."

"Hot?"

"*Yes!*"

He grinned and licked her again. "You taste divine," he purred. "Divine. I could eat you like this for hours."

Ravenna shuddered. "E-eat?"

“Sweetheart, this—” Nicolai sucked her clitoris hard again, eliciting another husky moan. “—is the only eating I wanna do. And that’s the problem, right?” He rubbed his face against her with a growl. “It’s always been the problem.”

“I don’t—”

“I need to be inside you.” He licked his lips, sliding two more fingers inside her body, massaging the flesh he discovered, sharing her moan when he felt the wetness she gave him. “Like this.”

“Oh.” She licked her lips and thrust her hips forward, forcing his fingers deeper within her. “Okay.”

Nicolai trembled and flashed a half-grin. “But with my cock.”

“Your...your what?”

For a long minute, she thought she’d said something wrong. She thought he’d remove his touch from her body and walk away from her forever. Instead, when he glanced up again, awe shone in his eyes. Awe and adoration, and a thousand things she’d never thought she’d touch.

“You’re so pure,” he whispered. “How can you be so...fiery...and so pure?”

“I...I don’t...”

Nicolai grinned and laved her clitoris with a long, parting lick before rising slowly to his feet. “I know,” he replied. “You don’t understand.” He studied her for a long minute, then slowly turned his hands to his own trousers. “I don’t wanna alarm you.”

“Alarm me?”

“It’s gonna spring out at you.”

A beat. “What is?”

“Little boys and little girls aren’t built the same. Surely you know that.”

Ravenna nodded at once. *This* she very much did know. She’d helped several of the villagers through childbirth—enough to not be surprised. Well, not too surprised. She hadn’t prepared for the size of his cock, nor had she prepared for the way it indeed sprang out at her.

“Oh.”

Nicolai grinned and wrapped a hand around himself. “I want to be inside you,” he repeated, the fullness of his intent hitting her hard.

“That won’t fit inside me.”

“Oh, yes it will.”

He pressed against her again before she could react, his lips consuming hers in another burning kiss. Her legs opened farther apart without prompt, his cock sliding up her abdomen until the hard length of him rested against her belly. "I wanna make love to you, sweetness," he murmured between kisses, his fingers slipping between their bodies to caress her clitoris. "Please let me in."

The world spun madly around her. The feel of his fingers against her throbbing flesh had everything melting into shapeless colors. Ravenna nodded hard before she could stop herself—before what she consented could truly hit her—and found herself lost in another kiss. The way he whimpered against her lips had her reconfiguring what little knowledge she held about the universe. There was no way an evil creature could feel like this or taste like this, and no way an evil creature could make her body cry out with pleasure with something as simple as a touch. There was no way an evil creature could get this close to her without meeting his end.

Nicolai was an evil creature. She knew it.

What did that make her, then, if she could let an evil creature touch her?

*I don't care. I don't care at all.*

The startling thing was it was the truth.

"Hike your legs around my waist," Nicolai murmured, his tongue laving the mark he'd given her. She obeyed quickly, eager to do whatever he asked of her, and he rewarded her speed with a quick, playful pinch of her clitoris. "That's my girl."

At some point, his demon had receded and his eyes were again human. She honestly didn't know when that had happened—or how she hadn't noticed it sooner. The gaze meeting hers shone a deep, royal blue, filled with such rich emotion that it became difficult to breathe. She saw him clearly. She could see nothing else. The second her legs were off the ground, the second she placed her balance in his care, she knew she'd crossed some invisible boundary.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, drenching his length with her wetness. He had a hand between them, navigating his cock so that the silky tip caressed her swollen clitoris once, twice, and again before slipping down her slit until he was poised at her entrance. "Figure I've never told you how beautiful you are before."

"Uh..."

“This is gonna hurt a bit.” He licked her throat and purred. “I’ll be slow, okay? You tell me if you need me any slower.”

Words had no meaning anymore, but she found herself nodding anyway. Then the world stopped. She heard only his ragged pants and the thunder of her heart before the walls around her collapsed and she catapulted into a new world, the clouds above parting as he began to sink himself inside her. It felt at once that she ripped apart completely, her flesh separated and her body split in half. She clenched and moaned, every inch of her going rigid, her hands clamping his shoulders and a hoarse cry battling her throat for freedom.

“Oh...”

“It gets better, kitten. I promise.”

Ravenna nodded and tried to speak but words failed her completely. Even so, she didn’t know what she wanted to say. The sting felt minimal compared to sensation, and while her body strained around him, it was more for the alien feel of invasion rather than actual pain. She felt parted but strangely complete all in the same blow. She felt as though she’d been made for this as naturally as anything else, more so, even, than her calling, and she’d only just discovered herself. She inhaled sharply and nodded her silent consent when he asked her if he could move in just a little deeper. Then the walls of her existence toppled over once more, his length pulling at her wet flesh as he seated himself deep within her body.

She felt trapped, then, between the tree at her back and the vampire pressed against her breasts, and she didn’t care. She was at last whole, and she realized it took coming apart to render oneself whole. While she didn’t understand how or why, it didn’t matter.

In all her life, there had never been a more perfect moment.

“Mmm,” Nicolai murmured. “No barrier.”

It took a few seconds to register his comment. “What?”

“You didn’t have a barrier. What the poets call your maidenhead, or what all. Most girlies do.” With one hand supporting the weight of her thigh and the other at her cheek, he pulled her toward him and kissed her lips sweetly, his hips moving only slightly against hers. “Guess all those high kicks are good for something, yeah?”

“I don’t...oh...”

“Ride many horses?”

She nodded, finding this an extremely bizarre conversation considering she had Nicolai trapped within her body. "A little."

"Could've been that way, then." He grinned and nuzzled her neck. "You've never been with anyone else, though. I'd know it. I'm your first."

"What..."

Nicolai chuckled, and the sound reverberated through her every inch. "Better watch it," he mused, though there was a look in his eyes that told her he spoke to himself. "I could get myself in trouble."

"Trouble?"

He shook his head and kissed her lips once more, the hands at her face sliding downward until he had each thigh cradled in his palms. His fingers dug hard into her skin as he pulled back from her, his cock dragging against her flesh before plunging inside again. "Oh hell," he breathed. "You're...never had it...so tight."

"Tight?" she echoed. She could only repeat whatever he said.

"Your sweet little pussy," Nicolai purred, a rakish grin tugging at his lips. He forfeited the hold on one of her legs to brush his fingers through her soft pubic curls. "Squeezing me. Oh God, squeeze me."

"You're vulgar," Ravenna gasped, though she couldn't deny the thrill racing down her spine. She didn't want to deny it.

"You love it." He buried his face in her throat, growling hard as the thrusts of his body gained speed and fervor. Every slip of his cock from her burning flesh had her falling farther into an abyss from which she could never climb free. "You have no idea how good you feel, do you?"

"Oh..."

"You feel wonderful. So wonderful. So hot. Burning me up, you are." He trembled hard against her, his eyes squeezing shut. "How do I feel, sweetheart?"

The hysterical screaming in her head fizzed into nothing, but left no words in its wake to feed him. How did he feel? Ravenna barely knew herself. The nerves he struck were ones she hadn't known she possessed. The way his cock moved in and out of her body, slick with her wetness and seemingly determined to push her over some final threshold, had her skin humming with ecstasy beyond ecstasy. He thrust against her, into her, slamming her between the tree and his chest. Cold night air whipped across

her skin, and in the distance, if she looked, she could see the gravestones of the cemetery she patrolled every night.

This place she guarded—this place she knew—was suddenly completely different.

“My sweet little Ravenna,” Nicolai moaned against her skin, “please talk to me.”

Ravenna fought off a whimper and thrust her hips against his. It maddened her, the way he attempted to remove himself from her body. She didn’t want him gone. She wanted him locked inside forever. She wanted her muscles clenching around him, holding him, claiming this piece of herself she hadn’t known to be lost until he stumbled into her life.

Until tonight.

Until this moment.

He couldn’t give her his body and then take it away, no matter how brief the loss. She would battle him for custody, and she would win.

She was, after all, One of the Few.

Her revolt didn’t land her the scolding she expected. Instead, his eyes about crossed and the hold on her tightened still, his thrusts hardening with need. “Oh God,” Nicolai growled. “That’s it, kitten. Fight me.”

The words almost angered her, they seemed so inappropriate.

Still, fighting felt natural, and she did what felt natural. She fought. Every time his cock pulled away from her, she slammed upward to claim it back again. Every time his lips pulled away from her skin, she seized his face and tore at them with her own. Every time he laughed she growled, and every time he growled she laughed. They fought each other with their bodies until their mutual snarls faded into whimpered moans before sound melted altogether into the intimate smack of their flesh as they moved together.

“Oh Ravenna...”

The ring of her name off his lips had her insides trembling.

“Tell me...this feels...good,” Nicolai begged, driving hard into her, hunger straining his eyes. “Tell me...you...love it.”

A foreign sense of ascension sparked within her belly. “Love...love it,” she agreed. “Feels...”

“This is *mine*, you hear?”

The spark grew rapidly, spreading through her veins like wildfire. Pressure gathered and spread, moving and rolling into something so large

she knew her small body wouldn't be able to contain it. "Oh—oh—my God. Oh..."

"You're so hot. So tight." Nicolai turned his attention to the bite mark on her throat again, caressing it lovingly with his tongue. "This is *mine*, Ravenna. *Mine*."

"Oh yes. Yes."

"You don't let *anyone* touch you like this, you hear?"

She didn't bother to tell him that no one else would. Her brain had melted anyway, the fire spearing her veins and burning down the parts of her that were built for such reactions. She drove forward at speeds she couldn't believe existed, and she headed directly toward an inferno unlike anything Dante could ever dream up.

Then Nicolai's fingers found her clitoris again, and he rubbed her gently even as their bodies battled one another toward an unfathomable objective.

She would burn. Her body was simply going to burn until she knew how it felt to touch death.

A fitting ending, she supposed. It seemed only fair.

"*Nicolai!*"

And then it happened, an explosion beyond anything the gods could have orchestrated. Her body clenched and spasmed, her grip on her vampire tightening so hard she was surprised when he didn't cry out in pain. Instead, his thrusts grew harder, demanding more from her, and he murmured dirty little confessions into her ears as her heart battled her chest for freedom. Her blood turned to lava, and as her skin touched the heavens, she became wrapped in euphoria and drenched in the sweetest peace she'd ever known. Ravenna buried her head in his shoulder and cried out, her arms finding their way around his neck as he continued pumping his cock inside her. When his fangs found her throat again, she felt liberation rather than fear. Then he provided the fire burning her insides with cool release. The next thing she knew, they fell together, bodies intimately locked and arms wrapped around each other.

She didn't care to ever find freedom again.

Ravenna truly had no grasp on how long it took for her chest to stop aching, nor how long her body blazed with the aftershocks of what they'd shared. When she blinked back to herself, she found that she rested upon Nicolai's chest, his hand woven through her hair, his body still a part of her

body, his greedy lungs claiming air he didn't need. While the earth had moved and the night was forever changed, she found herself captured all at once in a moment of stark realization.

No going back from this.

Everything had changed.

*Everything.*

"What happens now?" she asked, surprised at how hoarse she sounded.

Nicolai tightened his arms around her, his lips finding her brow, but he didn't say anything.

Perhaps he had nothing to say.

The thought died just as quickly. Words tickled the air.

"Ask me again some other time."

Before she knew what had happened, she found herself on her back with Nicolai above her, his eyes smiling into hers.

Her heart stopped and warmth tingled her previously-numb nerves. She felt him hardening within her body, and thrust her hips hard against his without thought.

A moan crossed his lips, which twisted into a grin. "Right now," he continued. "I just need you."

And for once, she was not one to argue.

## Chapter 5

### *Present Day*

Raven became aware of several things all at once.

First, cool, musty air caressed her bare legs. Second, Nicholas had perched attentively between said bare legs, his fingers seated deep within her pussy, his thumb poised over her clit. Third, every nerve in her body blazed with fire in ways that her body never had before. Fourth, she possessed stark awareness that she sat on intimate display, and Dexter crowded the entryway, staring at her in numb shock.

Nicholas released a trembling breath against her, meeting her eyes in a swarm of furious confusion. He just stared at her, lost, his fingers curled inside her, her wetness spilling over his hand. For endless seconds nothing existed but the stormy ocean in his eyes. He looked lost and bewildered, though at the same time furious, as though not knowing whether to kill or love her.

That wasn't it though.

Beyond the shadows clouding her mind, one constant shone with brightness that couldn't be denied.

She remembered. She remembered *everything*. It blazed so clear, so present in her mind that she had to remind herself to breathe. She remembered a backward history beginning before her birth, one ending in a pool of blood on her first Guardian's cabin floor, her true first Guardian. She'd been nothing but a memory, and now she lived again.

*Nicholas*. He looked the same yet so different. His eyes sparked with a need for recognition, and he seemed as though he knew her beyond the capacity of what this world offered. However, Raven knew Nicholas—knew *Nicolai*—well enough to recognize what he couldn't.

In an instant, she knew what she couldn't have known before. Nicholas didn't remember.

He didn't remember, but somehow, he still knew her.

She remained One of the Few, and she'd found the reason she lived at all. He stood here, looking at her with wonder and heartache, fingers inside her, and he didn't know he was the reason for *everything*.

The spaces of her mind quickly compacted as the rest of her shot back to the immediacy of the present. She didn't know how she'd come to the life she currently lived or why she hadn't remembered anything of her former life until now. Nor did she know how Nicholas had barreled into town without so much as a smile and a nod with seemingly even less in the way of memories than she had. She knew everything and nothing at all.

She didn't have time to consider the sudden surge of love that consumed her entirely, nor did she have the will to question it.

Her vision was suddenly clear and cloudy all at once.

Nicolai—or Nicholas, or whatever he was called these days—was the reason she existed. Whether or not he remembered her, whether or not he knew why, he was the same. He was the exact same man she'd left behind. The same man for whom she'd bargained with the devil to follow into oblivion.

In a blinding flash of light, she loved him. Raven and Ravenna collided.

"I'm gonna pull out now," Nicholas murmured with tenderness that made her heart sing. "Don't move."

Raven sucked in a breath and nodded awkwardly, her hands gripping his forearms as he deftly slipped his fingers out of her pussy. They winced together at the wet suctioning sound that smacked the air as her body fought to keep him locked with her. Nicholas trembled hard, his breath crashing against her lower lip as his eyes searched hers for answers she didn't have.

He recognized the spell had passed—that she knew she sat before him, again Raven Rayne. He knew the girl who had been here just minutes before was gone. Well...not *gone*, at least not in any way which would make sense to him. Ravenna hadn't gone. She was just reborn. She and Raven had collided—their histories, their memories, everything. She remembered who she was without a doubt. She knew herself.

And she knew *him*. She knew him completely.

He just didn't know it.

His mouth neared her ear, and she found herself inexplicably lost. “What do you say you don’t kill me for thinking you’re the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen?” Nicholas murmured softly, his voice so low she could barely make out words from the breaths he took. “Besides, kitten, you came on to me.”

Raven nodded blindly and watched in astonishment as he raised his fingers to his mouth and licked her juices off each glistening digit.

“Decent yourself up,” he murmured, nodding to her state of undress. “I’ll buy you a few seconds, savvy?”

Her every inch trembled. She nodded again hurriedly, her hands immediately turning to her exposed pussy. She tugged her panties up her thighs and straightened her skirt with a noisy shuffle.

Dexter stared, mostly in disgust. She felt too shaken to care.

She was a woman without a time.

Nicholas cast her one more meaningful glance before turning around, remaining purposefully situated between her thighs.

“Lo,” he said awkwardly. “You must be the Guardian. Don’t suppose you have ever heard of knocking?”

“Vampire,” Dexter growled, nostrils flaring. “Get away from her.”

Nicholas’s hands came up in some mock semblance of surrender. He tossed a wary look over his shoulder to size up the state of Raven’s recovery before continuing, “Some night, yeah?”

Dexter didn’t seem to be in the mood for small talk. “What the hell are you playing at?”

“Just making conversation.” He smirked. “By the way, it’s your girl’s birthday. Bit dangerous to let her wander the streets on her own, isn’t it?”

Dexter winced but didn’t respond. Instead, he took a step forward, shaking with what Raven identified as fear fortified in resolution. “You touch her—”

“Already did,” Nicholas replied, this time with a smirk. “She was begging for it.”

“Why you—”

The next thing anyone knew, Dexter had snarled something unintelligible and marched forward, murder in his eyes. He might have been successful in whatever he planned had Raven not jerked herself out of her stupor and leapt to her feet.

“Stop it,” she said shortly, leaping in front of Nicholas. “It’s fine. It’s...it’s fine.”

Dexter froze more out of astonishment than by command. “What the hell?”

An excellent question, or it would have been an hour ago.

Raven swallowed hard, her mind racing. She knew she should think of a witty, if not intelligent response, but all she could summon was a weak, “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

She immediately found herself in the awkward position of standing on the receiving-end of Dexter’s dubious glare.

“Are you high?” he demanded at last, gesturing emphatically. “He just had his hand in the cookie jar—and I mean that literally.”

“What a visual, mate,” Nicholas offered dryly.

“Shut up,” Dexter growled, turning his gaze again to Raven. “Look, I don’t know what you thought. You’re confused—”

“You got that right,” Raven agreed as she took a step forward, forcing him to step back. “But now’s not the time.”

Dexter’s eyes widened incredulously. “*How* is this not the time?”

“Just stop.”

“You’re gonna let him run?” the Guardian barked. “Raven, think about this. He isn’t one of the good guys. He isn’t even a good *vamp*. He’s a monster, and letting him go goes against everything we believe in.”

She didn’t comment. She could say nothing to appease him. No words offered clarity and nothing would make sense. God, it barely made sense to her. Reality had torn around them and the ground beneath her feet had cracked apart. Her memories raced alongside reason. Everything existed in duality.

Dexter couldn’t know that. He couldn’t know what she barely understood. Even if she tried to explain, he wouldn’t believe her.

She met Nicholas’s confused eyes and knew immediately that despite his lacking memory—despite everything—he stood in her corner. Perhaps not tomorrow, perhaps not in five minutes, but he did now. He was more lost than she could ever be. He didn’t know he existed solely due to a deal she’d brokered with the devil three centuries ago. He didn’t know anything beyond whatever ties had brought them together tonight.

She yearned for his arms but reason kept her grounded.

This remained a different life, and the rules had changed.

Everything had changed.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said softly. “I wasn’t in my head, Dex, and tonight’s not the night for this.”

“But—”

She held up a hand, eyes not wavering from Nicholas’s, and that ended the conversation.

Raven had no grasp on how much time actually passed in those endless seconds. She was lost in a sea of stormy blue and she didn’t care if she was ever found. Nicholas had to leave before the power of her word ran dry and Dexter took it upon himself to end her vampire’s life himself, and while she wanted more than anything to stay by his side, there remained truths yet to be revealed.

Nicholas inhaled sharply and nodded. “See you around, Raven.”

Then he turned and walked out, and she let him.

With nothing certain, with everything changed, she had to let him go.

It was the only way she’d ever be allowed to keep him.

\* \* \* \*

The world had gone bonkers.

Nicholas stormed out of the warehouse, a swarm of unidentifiable emotions darkening his every step and haunting his every thought. His hands still tingled from the feel of her skin, his mouth exploding with her flavor, the rich taste of her which he’d so foolishly licked off his fingers. He hadn’t the slightest idea what had just happened.

What he’d done with the warmth of a human girl beneath him.

What he’d done...

A growl tickled his throat, his hands gripping either side of his face as he rounded the nearest corner. He’d betrayed everything. He’d betrayed his oath to Octavia, the one he’d given her without her ever demanding it. He wasn’t the sort of guy to add notches to his bedpost. Octavia was the only woman he’d ever wanted. From the second she discovered him, he’d had nothing more to demand from life.

He’d never desired anyone else.

No one save his night angel.

But that was the bitch. His night angel shouldn't actually exist, and should certainly never leak from dreams into reality. It had always remained confined to the subconscious in which she'd been born. She wasn't meant for *this*.

She shouldn't exist as One of the Few.

What the hell was wrong with him? What would Octavia...*Christ*, Octavia. She couldn't know. He couldn't let her find out what had happened or what he'd come so close to doing.

He didn't want her to know how desperately he'd wanted another woman, no matter how often she wordlessly reminded him how much she wanted other men.

This wasn't him. If he'd embodied any incarnation of himself, the girl would now rot and he'd be free of whatever spell she'd placed over him, the one making him think he knew her beyond the call of her blood. The one making him think she, in some twisted form, belonged to him.

More than anything, he wanted to regret what he'd done and what he'd failed to do. He wanted to regret *something* beyond the simple knowledge that he should.

It seemed easy knowing what he should feel. Feeling it was a different matter altogether.

*Nicolai*, she'd called him. *Nicolai*.

The answer seemed simple enough. Whatever spell she'd cast or deluded herself into thinking she'd cast had propelled her into some parallel universe in which she believed they meant something to each other. She'd clung to him, pleaded for his forgiveness, baptized him in the downpour of her tears and begged him to shag her delectable little body. She'd wanted him in every way a woman ever wanted a man.

Still, from the second he saw her in the alleyway to the haunting look she'd given him before his departure, she remained the warrior. She just, somehow, had managed to live inside two different people.

Dammit, he had a headache.

Nicholas sighed, propping himself against an alleyway wall.

He didn't want to go home. He didn't want the night to end like this.

He didn't want the night to end at all. What he wanted—what he truly wanted—was to hunt down the girl and demand to know what the fuck had happened between them tonight.

Demand how she'd known him without knowing him at all.

Demand how she had the balls to muck up his life.

Demand how she could leave him confused and frustrated, and more in need than he'd felt in all his years.

His cock craved her pussy and his fangs yearned for her throat, but not for the kill.

Christ, how fucked was that?

How could she leave him like this?

How the hell had he *let* her?

## Chapter 6

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1700*

He shouldn't have come here.

Nicolai sighed, casting a wary glance to the ominous clouds brewing above. It would storm, but if the heavens thought a little rain would scare him off, they'd know disappointment. He wouldn't go home until he saw her. He wouldn't go anywhere until he knew she was all right. No amount of verbal confirmation would do it for him. He knew it was time to stop fooling himself and the only way to do that was swallow his damned pride and place his heart on the proverbial chopping block. Nicolai felt that he was in for a penny, in for a pound.

Three nights ago, he'd sought out Ravenna Mal with a mind to kill. Never had he thought he'd be so reluctant to harm anything. He'd been eluding death for a long time now, and he'd seen some remarkable things in his time: things he'd never imagined seeing when he first crawled from his grave. The world had become a larger place overnight. He was a born Englishman who now stood on American soil.

The years had certainly been good to him.

Very good.

And very lonely.

Nicolai propped himself against a tree, his eyes glued to Ravenna's window. A light burned inside but he had yet to catch a glimpse of her. A silhouette would do. In all honesty, anything would do. He just needed to verify that she'd made it back safely. Not that she'd faced anything particularly dangerous tonight. There just seemed much more at stake.

Especially now that he knew he loved her.

Nicolai had long guessed that it was symptomatic of not knowing the one who'd made him. He'd clawed his way out of his grave and met the

cool air of night, knowing what he was but not why he'd been turned. He didn't even remember the face of his sire—only the fragrance of a woman's perfume and a quick rush of pain before meeting darkness. He'd spent decades begrudging his maker for leaving him without guidance, without reason or explanation, but time had proven grudges a fruitless effort. Grudges wouldn't right old wrongs; rather they would only make eternity even longer.

The years had seemed good to him overall. Good but empty.

Then he received word of a warrior in the Americas, and curiosity more than anything had prompted him to cross an ocean. Rarely did locations of the Few emerge in the underworld, not unless one knew where to look, and he'd felt pulled beyond himself to find her.

Now that he stood here, he never wanted to return.

Ravenna was magnificent.

Nicolai had heard many stories about many warriors, each more ludicrous than the last. For years, he'd brushed them off as nothing more than a celestial bogeyman to keep the demon community in line, concluding that those who died at the hand of the Few were more in awe of the calling than bested by talent. He'd formed presumptions based on aged ideals of the frailty of the human condition.

For years, he'd been wrong.

He knew, however, no matter the strength of any warrior, that he would not have fallen so hard for any woman but Ravenna. The girl defied convention. She fulfilled everything he'd ever wanted and everything he feared wanting.

She was so glorious, so radiant, so strong and courageous.

So alone.

Nicolai had thought *his* existence lonely, but he hadn't known true loneliness until he met her. She walked through darkness with nothing at her side. She relied strictly on her own cunning to make it through the night. She often feared the road ahead but never revealed her weakness. She didn't cry when she was owed her tears.

She shone with innocence he hadn't thought existed anymore. She had a child's laugh and a warrior's will. She didn't know how beautiful or alluring she was, and she certainly didn't see the way the men in town looked at her. She didn't notice anything that heightened the reality of her humanity.

While the reason didn't seem ambiguous, it darkened him with rage all the same.

Her wanker of a Guardian regarded her as less than human. To Kenneth Mal, Ravenna was a disposable weapon rather than a girl.

The knowledge blackened his veins with rage. Christ, nothing about Ravenna screamed disposable. He'd known it the second he saw her. She'd been fighting under the light of a full moon, drenched in sweat, her body contorting to kick the demon behind her as her hands thrust a stake through the heart of the vampire at her head. A third beast had lurked in the shadows, intent on surprising her, but he'd crumpled to the ground, courtesy of her aim, before being given the chance to lunge into her warpath. Ravenna had fought all with grace, not once betraying fear or alarm. Her impeccable senses made her flawless in her trade. She'd finished them off one-by-one, turned to face Nicolai even if she couldn't see him for the trees between them, and waved.

She'd *waved* at him.

He'd fallen. Hard.

Granted, it took a long time to admit as much. Nicolai had fought loving her with everything he had. He might not be the world's most conventional vampire, but he drew the line at going soft for humans. For One of the Few. The idea of the Few had never sent cold shivers down his spine, but he'd never envisioned himself going so far the other way as to fall over himself in love.

He'd occupied months fighting Ravenna and his growing feelings for her. He fought admiration with what he tried to call loathing. Even when he beat her within an inch of her life, she refused to beg for mercy. He'd gotten close to killing her so many times that he'd fooled himself into believing he wanted it. He made himself lash out at her in the hopes of eradicating her presence from his dreams. He'd wanted to beat the love in his heart into something twisted and dark, something he could truly call hate.

Three nights ago he'd had enough. Three nights ago he'd determined to end it. Either Ravenna had to go or he did.

Instead he'd tasted her blood and surrendered.

God, how could he help loving her? He might not be human, but he remained still a man, and being near Ravenna was as close as he had ever come to perfection. She had wit, humor, strength, and beauty. She

was her own woman without trying. She didn't fear fighting him, knowing him as she did. Nor did she fear the dance.

She didn't fear anything, and he had grown sick of trying to fool himself.

He was in love. He'd known it since the first night he saw her. Nicolai had fallen for One of the Few, and anyone who tried to take her from him would find themselves on the wrong side of dead.

"What are you doing here?"

Nicolai blinked and turned, belatedly overwhelmed with the richness of her heavenly scent. He met her emerald eyes and felt surprised when a shiver commanded his body. There lived something so wondrously perfect about her, something that commanded adulation whenever in her presence.

Now that he'd ceased fighting his love for her, he'd spend the rest of her life and all of his worshipping the ground she walked on.

This was something Ravenna would realize in due time.

"How'd you do that?" he asked, pouting.

She blinked innocently, then crossed her arms as though to hide her reaction to him. She couldn't know it was impossible hiding from him now that he'd tasted every forbidden crevice of her soft, perfect body. He'd explored the paradise between her thighs. He knew how she whimpered when stroked, and how her tight pussy muscles squeezed him when she climaxed.

No, she couldn't hide from him, if she ever could.

"How did I do what?" she asked, shifting her weight from one leg to the other.

"Sneak up on me."

"I didn't sneak. I was just—"

"Overly quiet?" He'd been too lost in his thoughts to notice her approach, but he didn't want to tell her that, especially when caught lurking outside her cottage while drowning in longing for her. "You just arriving home?"

She nodded and licked her lips. He wished she'd let him do that for her. "Kenneth sent me to the Mill Lane House. Mr. Wells had a demon caught in his armoire."

“Demon?” Nicolai took a step forward, determined to close the space between them but mindful not to move so fast that he’d startle her. “What sort of demon?”

She hesitated for a beat, and he knew why. They had parted the other night on uncertain terms with Ravenna limping slightly as a result of their passion, but quite adamant on managing home unaided. They hadn’t had time to talk about what had happened, or how things had changed. Perhaps she didn’t think things had changed.

Perhaps she thought they were going to resume the relationship they’d grown into prior to their lovemaking. Perhaps she thought he wanted her dead, as he’d claimed only nights before.

If that was the case, she certainly was a silly child. Didn’t she know he was crazy for her? Didn’t she know that had been the problem all along?

“Talk to me, Ravenna,” Nicolai murmured, seizing advantage of the distraction his voice provided and closing another space between them. “What sort of demon?”

“A boggart.” Her gorgeous eyes grew wide but she made no move to recover the step he’d claimed. “Nicolai...”

“Damn shape-shifters. Bet old Wells didn’t know—”

“No, he was petrified.”

“You should’ve waited. I would’ve tagged along.”

Ravenna inhaled sharply, suspicion clouding her eyes. “I don’t think that would have been a wise move,” she said, tossing a quick glance to the front door of the Mal cottage. “I need to go. Kenneth is expecting me.”

Before he could stop himself, he’d wrapped a hand around her wrist and tugged her forward, desperate for the feel of her against him. “Don’t,” he pleaded softly. “Stay out here with me.”

“I don’t—”

“Dangerous vampire here. Kenneth wouldn’t want you neglecting your duties, would he?”

Ravenna’s gaze softened with longing, and the wave of relief that crashed over his chest could have flooded the village. “What are we doing, Nicolai?” she asked softly. Her tone dropped with gravity he’d never heard before coloring her voice. The idea that he’d put such conflict in her life tore him in two, but he wouldn’t let her go without a fight. “The other night—”

“Was just the beginning.”

"The beginning of what?" She shook her head hard, her eyes suddenly shining with tears. "I'm so confused. What we...what we did the other night...it—"

"You don't regret it, do you?" God, he couldn't stand himself if she did. She couldn't regret it. She *couldn't*. She'd changed him—changed everything—and if she regretted it, he didn't know what he'd do with himself. "Please, Ravenna—"

She shook her head again, but the tears spilling down her cheeks spoke volumes for what she couldn't put into words. He was at a loss. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and will the world away. He wanted to toss her over his shoulder and make a run for it. Fuck the Guardian. Fuck her duties. Fuck it all. He was the one who truly loved her. She should live with him, not the wanker who sent her out to face ugly death every night.

She belonged to *him*.

"I do not regret what we did," Ravenna whispered. "But Nicolai, we can't again. It's too dangerous."

"Making love with me is too dangerous?"

A stupid question. Of course it was dangerous. One of the Few entrusting a vampire with her body? Very, *very* stupid question.

Her answer, however, threw him off his feet. "If Kenneth finds out, he'll kill you."

Nicolai froze. For long, empty seconds, he could do nothing but stare at her in astonishment. She worried about him. Ravenna *worried* about him. About what would happen if her Guardian discovered what had happened right under his nose, if he found out that his warrior had thrown in her hat with the enemy? The idea that any human could ever best him seemed beyond ridiculous, let alone an aging sod who lacked the strength or the will to fight and sent a young girl out to face the night's dangers alone. Ravenna worried for him—about him. She *worried*.

He'd never had anyone worry about him before. Never.

"He won't kill me, darling," Nicolai promised softly. "He doesn't—"

"No, no, you don't know him. If he ever found out, he'd—"

"He won't find out."

"But if he did—"

"He won't."

She shook her head, her tears coming harder. "He'd kill you."

“He would *try*.” Nicolai turned his attention to her gorgeous mouth, unable to keep his lips to himself a minute longer. He needed to taste her kiss. He needed to feel her body against his, rocking against him, squeezing his cock until he saw stars. He needed her hands on him and her mouth on his skin. He needed *her*, plain and simple. He needed her like he’d needed nothing, and the realization nearly rocked him off balance.

There was something in her eyes, something familiar and haunting, something he’d carried with *him* as long as he could remember. Her existence was as lonely as his, but she managed to find and enjoy life whereas he had lost his taste for it. They were creatures of the same mold. They both walked alone when solitude was no one’s friend. Still, her spirit hadn’t suffered. Ravenna was intimate with death every night, yet managed to remain more alive than anyone he’d ever encountered, be they human, vampire, or some other breed of monster.

Perhaps he deceived himself in what he thought he saw, but Nicolai didn’t think so. He wouldn’t pretend to know why she hadn’t killed him yet, but a part of him wanted to believe it was because she’d recognized him in the same way he had her.

She was too compassionate. Any other warrior in her place would have killed him, but she showed him mercy. He didn’t know why—*why* remained a concept larger than himself.

Now she worried about her Guardian, and what human hands could do to end a non-human life. Nicolai wouldn’t let her concerns become his. Ravenna was the old man’s only real weapon, and now, regardless of whether or not she knew it, she belonged to Nicolai.

“He would try,” he said again. There remained no doubt in his mind about that. After what Nicolai had tasted, had taken from Kenneth Mal, the Guardian *would* try to kill him. It was only a matter of when. “He’d fail.”

“You don’t know him, Nicolai.”

“I don’t need to.”

“He—”

Nicolai kissed her again, his touch hungry and demanding this time, tongue shoving past her lips to explore the hidden secrets of her mouth. It seemed forever had passed since he’d last tasted her and he wouldn’t deny himself a minute longer. Not when she stood here. Not when she felt for

him. Not when she cried tears over the thought of his death, ridiculous as the notion sounded.

Ravenna cared for him. Even if the words never breathed life in her sweet voice, he had proof enough in the liquid crystals trailing down her cheeks. She cared.

God, he'd become so completely hers.

"Please," Nicolai whispered against her mouth. "Please...fight with me a bit."

She batted her pretty eyes in confusion, her succulent tongue peeking out to taste him on her lips. "Fight?" she repeated, her hips moving against his erection in a manner he knew had to be subconscious. "You want to fight?"

He couldn't help it. He grinned. She was so cute and innocent.

"Oh yeah," he purred, nipping at her lips. "All night long."

"But Kenneth—"

"You'll have bruises enough to prove to him you were tied up by a particularly nasty beast." Nicolai grinned devilishly, squeezing her tighter to him and thrusting his hips forward. He loved the wanton widening of her eyes, the comprehension born there and coinciding with the secrets she now possessed. She now knew what her body could do, just as she knew his. She knew what they could do together, and that was just in the bedroom. She had no idea of the world he'd show her once he managed to sever her ties with the Guardian for good.

"I want you," he whispered. "I want you like I've never wanted anyone. I always have."

Tears were forming behind her gorgeous eyes again, but this time, they were not out of fear. "Always?"

"Since the first moment I saw you. I've been fighting it forever. Trying to convince myself you hadn't turned my life upside down." His head dipped, tongue eagerly sampling the mark he'd given her with his fangs, the one he itched to make permanent with a blood link. He wanted her at his side for all time, not just in the limited span humans were given on this wretched planet. No, he wanted her cemented beside him, free of her calling and everything that held her prisoner. He wanted to make her his.

He wanted to claim her and tie their blood together once and for all.

“Have you wanted me like I’ve wanted you?” Nicolai asked softly, his mouth fluttering over her throat, dropping sweet kisses as he made his way back to her lips. “Wanted me like this?”

She hesitated. “I didn’t know what it meant to want anyone before you.” Her tone indicated an apology, as though she should feel shame at her innocence.

The idea, however, that she’d never wanted anyone before him had him soaring. She didn’t know what a gift her desire was, how it felt to be the first man she had or would ever touch. She didn’t know what a precious rarity she was.

She didn’t know her own worth, and the knowledge nearly made him weep.

“Do you want me now?” he whispered. He knew the answer, of course. He just needed to hear it.

Ravenna inhaled sharply and nodded.

“Then have me, sweetheart. I’m right here.”

His lips found hers again, and he rejoiced when she didn’t fight him. Instead, she whimpered against him and surrendered, her arms linking behind his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist. Her tongue pushed inside his mouth, eagerly stroking his as her body molded against him. The warmth of her surrender had him swimming in bliss.

There existed nothing in the world like this. He’d settle for nothing less.

Ravenna was the only one for him.

“It’s going to rain,” Ravenna observed, her eyes wandering heavenward.

“Better get inside.”

“No.” She brushed a tender kiss across the corner of his mouth. “Will you dance with me?”

“In the rain?”

She nodded, and he about collapsed to his knees in awe. Never before had he known anyone like her. He’d never met a woman, human or vampire, who didn’t wilt at the idea of getting wet. She burned with courage, was witty and beautiful, and belonged to him.

Ravenna was his perfection.

“Sweetheart, I’ll dance with you wherever you like.”

She smiled softly, tossing a wary glance to the cottage behind them. “He’ll be expecting me.”

“Evil vampire,” Nicolai countered. “Right here. You can’t let me go, can you?”

A fond smile crossed her lips, and she shook her head. “Never.”

He’d make her keep that promise. She belonged to him. She’d lived alone for so long, but she was not alone anymore. Neither was he.

They’d saved each other without knowing it.

He only had to convince her it was a chance worth taking.

## Chapter 7

### *Present Day*

Dexter hadn't said anything as he led her back to the apartment they shared, nor had he said anything when she wordlessly closed herself inside her room, which she appreciated. She needed her space right now.

Raven barely recognized her own face. Her hair hung too short, her skin was too tan, her face too youthful. But then, this was the face she'd known for twenty-one years, which was as long as she'd known the face she'd left behind. The differences that did exist were glaring, though mainly cosmetic. Her hair hit her shoulders rather than dragging along her back. Her eyes were painted with make-up, her lips were a ruby red, and her skin's imperfections hidden beneath a layer of foundation. She presented the picture of a woman born into the twentieth century, rather than One of the Few from the eighteenth. She presented the image of a woman who only now knew who she was.

She was Raven Rayne. She knew that. She'd lived as Raven Rayne all her life.

Before that, she'd lived as Ravenna Mal.

The only reason she lived at all—that she hadn't made it as nothing more than some footnote in history—remained due to a bargain she'd made with a demon.

A bargain she'd made with a King of Hell, no less.

No doubt stood in her mind, no room for second-guessing or thinking it might be a dream concocted by the night's bizarre twist of events. No, Raven knew her purpose. She knew everything. Her memories of the past were painted as fresh as her memories of yesterday.

Nicholas—Nicolai. Her Nicolai. She remembered so many things. The way he smiled and how his eyes lit with life. The way he held her at night

and kissed her tears away when she woke up crying. The simple way he loved her.

Now he didn't know her. He didn't know her at all, just as she hadn't known him until tonight. She'd come into a future she'd wished for herself—wished for them—without remembering a damn thing.

She was supposed to be with Nicholas now, but Paimon hadn't wanted that. He'd buried their memories and given them new lives, distant but the same, all except for each other.

He'd deceived her.

Raven met her reflection's eyes and laughed.

Of course Paimon had deceived her. He was a King of Hell. Deception marked his job description. Deception, lies, taking what he thought belonged to him...

Raven glanced down, rubbing her arms and fighting off a shiver.

He hadn't taken anything yet. Perhaps the terms of the bargain hadn't been met. Perhaps he'd forgotten.

Only she knew he hadn't. Bargains made with Hell were written upon unbreakable stone tablets and signed in blood. She knew it because she'd watched Paimon carve out the details of their agreement with a hardened quill. He used the last of her blood to verify her signature, then wished her a happy death before leaving her in oblivion.

No, Paimon hadn't forgotten her or her debt. He just hadn't collected.

Raven released a long, pained breath, tears prickling her eyes. She glanced up again and gazed into the face of a stranger.

She'd lived two decades not knowing who she was. Now by the grace of some cosmic accident, she had an answer.

She sat here because of Nicolai, who now went by Nicholas and didn't remember her.

Sure, he felt drawn to her—she'd seen it in his eyes. He felt drawn to her but he didn't know why. He couldn't know why. Paimon hadn't intended for them to ever reunite. He'd made sure they were both reborn, yes, but he hadn't intended them to find each other again. He hadn't intended for any of this.

Only now Nicholas lived in her town. Raven understood now. She understood the way her heart had stopped the second he introduced himself

at Club Intensity. The second their eyes clashed and his voice tickled her ears.

It had felt unlike anything she'd ever experienced, unlike any response she'd had to another vampire—it was a response built on recognition. She'd met his gaze, and she'd known him.

She just hadn't known how until tonight.

Raven sniffed and wiped away her eyes. She'd tasted his lips and felt his hands on her body. He'd stroked her clit and murmured things he couldn't have meant. He hadn't known her, but something about her had spoken to him, called out to him in a way both intimate and primal. It had been the same way before, a game of history truly repeating itself. She didn't know what had first caught his attention back then, except her willingness to spare his life, but he always came back for more. They would fight and go their separate ways, only to return to fight some more. It became such a ritualized tradition that the inevitable change had felt like a betrayal. On that night, he had come to kill her for real, but things hadn't turned out that way.

Nicolai hadn't known compassion or anything but the fight for self-preservation, in himself or anyone else. He'd once told her that her want of goodness went against nature. People didn't look out for each other and she couldn't count on anyone to return the favor when she needed a helping hand. A part of her had always believed that was the reason he couldn't keep away. A stranger to compassion and warmth, he'd felt magnetized by her, and angered when he didn't understand why.

Perhaps even angrier once he did, explaining why they came together as violently as they had. Then again, their natures lent themselves to violence. It seemed just as fitting now as it had then.

Why she had fallen for him was anyone's guess. He was hardly the first vampire to appeal to her generosity, and she'd met more than one silver-tongued demon in her time. All had fallen dead at her hand. As One of the Few, she knew no mercy. Kenneth had raised her under fierce prejudice; the fact that she'd spared Nicolai at all had gone against everything she knew.

But spare him she had. His eyes had done it. Eyes of killers were cold and resolute. Nicolai's had been playful but sad, screaming loneliness she knew intimately. Loneliness which spoke to her, touched her, and made her want to touch back. Nicolai's eyes had spared his life. He'd barreled onto

the scene and nothing had stayed the same. They'd fought for months before giving into the dance, and then her love for him had gotten them both killed.

She'd watched life fade away. He'd died right in front of her, refusing assistance and asking for nothing. All he'd done was kiss her, thank her, and tell her goodbye.

And then Raven couldn't help it. The pressure on her chest exploded into a thousand tiny shards of pain, and before she could catch herself, she'd slumped forward in a storm of tears.

She'd come three hundred years to find him, and he didn't remember her.

\* \* \* \*

"All right," Dexter said the second she emerged from her bedroom. "I can't take it anymore. What the hell was that?"

The pain in her chest deepened. She'd expected it. Dexter could only remain quiet for so long. What had happened tonight stretched beyond anyone's imagination. She still didn't know *how* it had happened, but that wouldn't be good enough for the Guardian. No one had ever touched her the way she'd let Nicholas touch her tonight. No one had gotten close enough.

Nicholas didn't even know why. How should Dexter?

"I don't know," she replied. The look on the Guardian's face clearly demanded more, but she had nothing else to give.

"You don't know?"

Raven licked her lips, sinking into the nearest sofa. "Do you believe in past lives, Dex?"

"What? Don't change the subject. We're talking about—"

"What happened," she confirmed with a nod. "It has something...I think, no, I know Nicholas and I..."

"Have a past life."

"Together."

Dexter's eyes narrowed. "Now, I've heard of cop-outs before, but this one's bad, even for you."

"It's not a cop-out. It's real. Everything's real."

"Let's play a game. Pretend for a second you're the sort of person who tells me *everything*."

A hard sigh coursed through her body. "I'm trying."

"And your answer is past lives?"

"Or something."

A silence fell between them at that. Dexter stared at her long enough to determine that she wasn't kidding, and only then did his defenses fall. They'd been together long enough to know when the other dished bullshit, something she counted on to give her story some much needed credence.

"Raven?" he asked, his voice small.

"I don't know how it happened," she said quickly, "but I know it's real. I have all these memories and they're all *mine*. But they're from the eighteenth century." She expelled a deep breath. "I was One of the Few. And Nicolai was a vampire. And we were lovers."

Dexter blinked. "Did you hit your head?"

"What?"

"Did you fall down and hit your head on something hard?"

Her heart wrenched. She knew it was a big pill to swallow, but she'd counted on at least some support. "Dex!"

"You have to know how this sounds, Rave."

"Well, you were there tonight, weren't you?" she demanded. "I passed out and when I woke up, I was someone else. I was me from another time."

He rolled his eyes. "I really don't think—"

"My name was Ravenna Mal. I was under the care of Kenneth Mal."

"Uh huh. And Nicholas..."

"We were lovers. He was killed and I made a deal." She licked her lips, her eyes growing distant. "I made a deal with a demon."

"A demon?"

"A demon I summoned from Hell. Our deal stipulated that Nicolai would be reborn and so would I." Raven bit her lower lip, cold shudders commanding her body. "This is it. This is the second chance I asked for. All I know is for...how long was I out?"

Dexter stared at her as though he'd never seen her before. "What?"

"I don't know what caused it or why I remember. It was..." Her eyes widened. "My birthday. Something to do with my birthday. It was midnight when it happened, wasn't it?"

The Guardian nodded. "The hour between midnight and one is the most sensitive."

"I know."

"And you were turning twenty-one."

"I remember."

"I told you going out was a bad idea."

"I really don't think that's the point, do you?"

"Yeah, well, right now *I told you so* is looking pretty good." Dexter heaved a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know if your birthday has anything to do with what happened tonight, but if there was a reason at all for what happened, I would think that had to figure in." He met her eyes somberly. "Raven, this is insane. You know it's insane."

"I have two sets of memories, Dex. Try to talk to me about sane."

"All right. Impossible, then."

"The world we live in doesn't believe in impossible."

"A relationship between a vampire and One of the Few..."

Raven waved a hand. "That's why he was killed. That's why I made the deal at all. It's why I'm standing here."

"You're serious."

"As a heart attack. Nicolai doesn't remember me, but he's mine. He always has been."

A dangerous look crossed the Guardian's face. "Whatever you're thinking, don't."

"What?"

"You can't go to him, Raven. You can't. You know the rules."

"I played with fate to get here, Dex. This is the reason I'm alive."

His hands came up. "All right. Say it's true. Say I believe you. It's different now, isn't it? You're One of the Few *now*, and Nicholas—"

"I love him."

An exasperated sigh tore through Dexter's throat. "Do you hear yourself?" he demanded. "Do you know how *insane* this sounds? You don't know the guy—"

"I came through centuries to find him. Believe me, I know him."

"Raven—"

"When we were together tonight, he was the way I remember. We're not talking about me and some other girl, Dex. This is me, all me. And I came here to find him."

"You're certifiable."

“You don’t believe me.”

Dexter made a face, waved dismissively and then disappeared into the kitchen. She waited, but when she heard him pop open a beer, she knew the conversation was over. It served as Dexter’s way of ending an argument.

Just as well. They could talk themselves in circles.

She knew what felt real: Nicolai, herself, and the emptiness in her heart.

## Chapter 8

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

A splatter of yellow, red, and orange stained her hands. Paint had long since crusted against her skin and she knew without a doubt she'd be scrubbing herself raw for hours to eradicate the evidence of her artistic foray. She was allegedly training right now. The light of day shielded her from the evils at night. The sunlit hours were, therefore, occupied by Kenneth and a variety of exercises she should have accomplished by supertime.

Once upon a time, her Guardian had accompanied her into the daylight. He would stand under the cool shade of an oak tree, barking orders and offering criticism to whatever flaw he noted. Sometimes he had her hunt down demon breeding grounds and take out whole clusters of otherwise nocturnal creatures when they could not fight back. Sometimes he sent her on missions to find some ancient artifact rumored to be buried or hidden in the woods and caves surrounding their village. Sometimes he was contented to allow her to practice new moves on the scarecrows he constantly pieced together. No pattern existed in Kenneth's orders. He simply threw whatever he wished at her, and he expected nothing less than perfect completion by sundown.

Today, the order of business entailed dismantling the hay-stuffed dummies with a series of new moves and low punches. Once she was finished, she was to piece the dummies together again and repeat as needed.

Only she wasn't dismantling scarecrows. Point of fact, she was far from where she was supposed to be. Instead of spending a day under the sun in a hot field, she'd taken the familiar turn toward the cottage Nicolai had secured for them. It was the place he slept during the day, and the place where at she felt most at home.

No, the scarecrows would have to wait. Today she wanted to create something lasting, not destroy stuffed dummies while pretending they were anything like the very real dangers she faced every night.

She wanted to lose herself in a world where those dangers didn't exist.

Ravenna turned her hands over and stared at her open palms. Yes, it would take hours to scrub the paint away.

But it was worth it.

She glanced up again with a grin. Nicolai would love this.

Things had changed between them so rapidly that it was hard for her, at times, to grasp that she hadn't dreamt it all or lost her mind. It had actually happened. Nights were something she anticipated now with the impatience of a child at Christmastime. It had become increasingly difficult to smother her grin upon leaving the cottage at sundown, as difficult as keeping her feet from skipping every other step and her mouth from humming along with the song in her heart. Her duty had become fun, adventurous, passionate, and all because Nicolai was with her. He'd meet her smiling eyes with a twinkle in his own, grab her around the waist and maul her lips with his, demanding kisses as though it hadn't been only a matter of hours since they last saw each other. Then he'd fall into stride next to her, and while he didn't participate in the fight every night, he always kept vigilant watch at her back. He remained prepared to jump in if she needed him.

More often, though, Nicolai simply enjoyed watching her. She moved like poetry, he said, and he was a man who appreciated poetry.

The months had appeared good to them, if not a little stressful. Ravenna didn't know why, but she had assumed it would become easier to keep their secret the longer they were together. She'd thought the eggshells on which she treaded would become pliant with age, rather than harden. Even now, she expected her fear of discovery would ease in time. She expected that she would eventually stop looking over her shoulder. She expected the rush of terror commanding her insides upon sneaking into her bedroom every night would eventually fade. She expected so many things.

Even though Kenneth remained none the wiser, she remained terrified.

It was one of the reasons she insisted that Nicolai remain in the makeshift cellar they had built for use during daylight hours. Even if Kenneth *did* find the cottage that Nicolai had secured for them, he wouldn't

find her lover slumbering, and therefore wouldn't have the opportunity to catch him off guard.

While Nicolai felt touched at her concern, he similarly remained certain that she had nothing to worry about. He did as she begged, of course, and had a second bed stored in the subterranean room. After their nightly patrols, they would race each other to their small home, warring with each other to see who could get naked the fastest. Limbs entangled, tongue battling tongue as they pawed at each other with need beyond anything any poet ever put into words. They would crash onto their bed and make love for hours, holding each other in the sweet aftermath while talking about things that held no consequence, but somehow made her happy all the same. In the early hours of morning, they would take solace in each other's bodies again, argue about whether or not Nicolai would walk her home, and end their night with hungry, desperate kisses a safe distance away from the Mal residence.

Soon they would be able to awaken in each other's arms. Soon they wouldn't have to say goodbye every morning. Ravenna just had to make the move to leave Kenneth. She had to tell him it was over, that while she appreciated his guidance and his role as her guide, she felt ready to live her life.

She knew, of course, that Kenneth wouldn't see things quite her way. Chances were that he wouldn't even acknowledge her beyond a quick nod to the day's itinerary. Nicolai, however, remained resolutely unconcerned. If Kenneth didn't acknowledge her independence, he said, it was solely his problem. Once she declared herself free of him, she was no longer bound to his orders or subject to his anger. She and Nicolai would leave the village and go somewhere where her Guardian would never find them.

It sounded lovely, as far as dreams went.

She just hoped that she had the courage to make the dream a reality.

"Have you been here all day?"

Ravenna jumped and turned. "Nicolai," she breathed, a blush tingeing her cheeks. She hadn't wanted him to see her smeared with paint, but she had nowhere to hide so she didn't try. She sat on her knees on the bedroom floor, hands saturated in a blend of orange and yellow, the wall for the most part complete, if not perfect. "I...um...is it sunset?"

“A few minutes ago,” he replied. “Didn’t answer my question. Have you really been here all day?”

She shrugged guiltily. “About an hour after you walked me home, Kenneth had me out again. I’m destroying scarecrows right now.”

“Because after fighting the spawn of hell all night, a lot of straw-ridden dummies are gonna provide you with good defense techniques?” Nicolai rolled his eyes, which landed, not so subtly, on her artwork. “This your alternative?”

Ravenna wrinkled her nose and wiggled, feeling at once very self-conscious. “I’m sorry it’s not good. I just thought...”

Nicolai turned back to her, his gaze tender, the lines of his face softened with awe. “Raven...”

A thrill raced down her spine. She adored that name. Not that she’d ever admit it, of course, but she adored it just the same. She loved the freedom of being Raven with him. Raven the girl, the lover, the woman.

Nicolai never expected her to be anything more, and never thought of her as anything less.

“Do you like it?” she asked gently, rising to her feet.

“You painted me the sunrise.”

She nodded, her heart skipping a beat. “Do you like it?” she asked again.

“Did you...God, you did this for me?”

“It’s still wet. Don’t touch it.” Ravenna glanced down with a small, smile. “I just thought, if we ever got the chance, we might watch the sunrise in here.” She indicated the small window that sat across from the entrance to the bedroom. “It should strike the wall every morning. I’m not sure if—”

She would like to think she would have said something profound had Nicolai not moaned her name and stormed forward, capturing her paint-smeared cheeks between his hands and brushing his lips over hers. As always, the taste of his kiss had the walls melting and the world swirling away until there existed nothing but the sensation of Nicolai’s mouth moving against hers, his thumbs caressing her cheeks as his tongue stroked hers. Nothing existed but this.

Nothing but Nicolai.

“You painted me the sunrise,” Nicolai murmured again, pressing a kiss across the corner of her mouth.

"You deserve it," she murmured back.

"Oh Raven..."

"Do you like it?"

"You made it for me."

Ravenna grinned and curled her arms under his shoulders, walking them backward not-so-subtly until her legs hit the edge of their bed. "Pretend for a second that I did not and it was someone else's work."

"But it's not and you did."

"I used the word *pretend* for a reason."

He smirked against her mouth, his hands dropping to her waist so he could drag her shirt over her head. "Someone's feisty tonight."

"I'm always feisty."

"And that's why I love you." Nicolai grinned, tossing her unwanted fabric to the ground, his palms now free to cradle her breasts. "Have I told you I love you?"

Warmth flooded her insides as heat flamed her cheeks. The words never grew old. He whispered them a thousand times a night. He'd kiss her hello and then tell her he loved her. He'd shout his love for her in the middle of a particularly nasty fight with the local demons. He'd make a mantra of the declaration as he unwrapped her from her clothing. His lips would whisper love as they kissed her skin. And the second his cock was locked inside her, his body sang all else which couldn't be entrusted with words.

Nicolai loved her.

Someone in her life actually loved her, someone who didn't see her as a duty or a burden, someone who loved her for who she was and not what she was. Every time he whispered those magical words, she propelled into a world where nothing lurked in the shadows, where nothing but Nicolai waited for her in the night. In this world, the place she called home was one she loved rather than dreaded.

"Not yet tonight," she replied.

Nicolai's eyes twinkled, his mouth skimming southward to taste her throat. "Shame on me."

"Yes, shame." She hissed and thrust her hips against his as he guided her onto her back, his body falling easily between her thighs. "You're a bad man."

He grinned, skimming his blunt teeth along her jugular. "The baddest."

“Oh...touch me.”

“I am touching you, sweetheart.” His thumbs caressed her nipples before his left hand dipped between them to unfasten her trousers. “God, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Nicolai glanced up and smiled into her eyes. “I love hearing that.” He watched her face expectantly as his fingers grazed through her curls, uncovering her clitoris and favoring the small pearl with a delicate caress. “Have you given any more thought to what I asked?”

Ravenna’s heart skipped a beat, and her breath caught in her throat. Thought? She’d been able to think of little else since the question crossed his lips, since he explained what it would mean to him—to *them*. It was one of the reasons she’d been desperate to occupy her mind all day.

She wanted to say yes more than anything.

The part of her remaining afraid of taking the final step, however, could not be moved. If she consented to what he’d asked, they would essentially be fugitives. They would have to run from Kenneth, the High Council, and the world. They would have each other even if they never had rest, and though her mind remained conflicted, her heart had decided.

She wanted this. Any life with Nicolai was better than the half-life she lived now.

“I’m afraid,” she murmured.

“Bollocks,” Nicolai replied. “You’re afraid of nothing.”

“I’m afraid of what Kenneth could do to you if he finds—”

He rolled his eyes, his index and middle fingers sliding between her vaginal lips, his thumb settling over her clitoris. “Not this again,” he muttered, though his tone was good-natured. While she knew he didn’t like her constantly tormenting herself over his safety, she also knew a part of him very much loved having someone worry over him.

“Nicolai, you need to listen—”

“I’m not afraid of the old man.”

Ravenna inhaled sharply, jerking her hips forward to drive his fingers farther into her body. “I’m afraid for you,” she replied breathily. “You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“Vampire, kitten. Remember?”

“He’s killed vampires.”

"Raven, please." Nicolai's head ducked, his tongue flicking over one of her nipples. "We'll go away. Far away. We'll go anywhere that's not here. I'll take such good care of you."

She smiled. "You already do."

"We won't have to say goodbye every morning." Nicolai paused, his lips unable to refrain from brushing over her breast, his fingers adapting a cool rhythm driving in and out of her aching body. "If it's the other part where you're mine forever—"

"It's not."

If anything, the promise of eternity in Nicolai's arms acted as the strongest counter to her head's logical argument.

"Yeah?" he asked hopefully, the hand at her breast deserting her sensitive skin to free his cock.

"I want that with you, Nicolai."

"Then take it." He grinned and nipped at her ear. "We'll watch the sunrise tomorrow."

"That doesn't seem healthy."

He nodded at the painting, his brows flickering. "*Your* sunrise."

Her fragile resistance began to melt. "I need to go home."

"You are home. This is the only home that matters."

Ravenna tossed her head back and gasped as her vampire's lips found her throat again, his tongue laving the bite mark he'd given her their first night. Arousal tugged at her gut, and she felt herself drench his fingers with desire. Then his hand abandoned her center and the head of his erection nudged her sensitive folds, pressing into her body with slow intensity that had her insides swirling into an unconquerable storm.

The only home that mattered.

The home she had with Nicolai.

"Come on, sweetheart," Nicolai gasped, thrusting himself all the way home. "Watch the sunrise with me. The one you painted."

She was drowning in his eyes.

"Raven...my Raven..."

"Oh..."

"Please. *Please*..."

And then there was no question. None at all. The clouds parted and the stars pierced through the darkness, allowing an instant of perfect clarity, of

unbreakable understanding. No matter the price, this seemed worth anything. If she could have this—have Nicolai—for always. She wanted to live her life rather than watch others live around her. She wanted to *live*.

She had love now. She had a reason for living beyond the monotony of her duty and the perilous certainty of her eventual death.

If she allowed him to claim her, link their blood forever, an end would finally be in sight. Their paths would merge, tied together forever by a sacred exchange of words. Taking his blood into her body meant she owned a part of him. It meant she accepted him for what he was. It was an ancient vampiric practice, not unlike the modern concept of marriage, only a completed claim couldn't be broken. She and Nicolai would always be able to feel each other, regardless of what distance separated them.

It would also ensure her immortality. Granted, she wouldn't be immune to death if it came knocking in the form of an axe or some ugly beast's hungry teeth, but her body would cease aging. As long as Nicolai lived, she lived.

He couldn't turn her, but he could take her with him through eternity.

"Yes," she gasped, arching her hips off the mattress in desperation. "Yes, Nicolai."

Awe overpowered him. "Raven?"

"Make me yours."

She heard his gasp and saw his fangs, and then her body was plunged into ecstasy beyond grasp. He thrust into her with raw need, need that surpassed tenderness. The air around them exploded into the illicit smacks of their bodies rocking together, the wet suctioning sound that slurped through the air every time he tried to pull himself away from her pussy. He drank hard and deep, commanding every part of her that she had to give.

"Mine," Nicolai growled against her bloodied flesh. "You're mine."

"Oh yes."

"Oh God. God..." He pulled back and smashed his mouth to hers, too much in need to shake his demon away. His fangs nicked her lips, but she didn't care. She felt drunk on his taste, lost in the sensations that he sent racing through her body. Pain and pleasure often went hand-in-hand with him, and even if it rendered her hellbound, there was nothing about being with Nicolai that she would trade or change. Not for anything. "Raven? Please..."

She needed no direction. Ravenna snapped to herself and lodged her teeth in his throat, clamping down until her tongue was bathed in the undeniable taste of blood. His blood. Her lover's blood.

And after this...after tonight...

*Mate.*

"Mine," she whispered, licking delicately at the mark she'd made.  
"Nicolai..."

"God, yes. Yours. Always yours."

Her vision blurred, pleasure seizing her every cell. "I love you."

"I love you. God, how I love you."

"Yours."

Nicolai nodded hard and kissed her again, his hips still rocking desperately against hers. "Always. My girl. *Mine.*"

It was done, then. It was complete.

She was one with him. She was whole.

No going back.

## Chapter 9

### *Present Day*

“You’re not in the history books.”

Raven glanced up from polishing her favorite sword, brows perked. She felt glad for the distraction. Her mind kept running her in circles, and if she didn’t watch her step, she’d end up as loopy as people who wore those special jackets and slept in padded rooms.

“What?”

“Neither you or a vampire named Nicolai are in the history books. Believe me, I know my history backwards and forwards, and if anyone bearing your name had been One of the Few before, I’d know.” Dexter held up a volume. “Not above looking again, but I thought I’d mention that.”

She licked her lips. “How long has it been since you did your homework?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“I was different.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Maybe the history was erased.”

After years under Dexter’s care, Raven considered herself rather schooled in the many expressions of an overly-analytical Guardian. Never had she expected to fall witness to the entire catalogue in one sitting. Raven inhaled sharply and quickly averted her eyes. It would help if she could find a little sign that Dexter believed any part of her story.

Finally he broke with a pointed clearing of his throat. “I still don’t believe you.”

So much for that.

She shuffled uncomfortably. “I know. I know it’s a lot to take in, but I’m *not* crazy.”

Dexter nodded hard and took a step back. "Of course you're not crazy."

"You seemed to think I was."

"When?"

"When you said I was crazy."

He winced and ran a hand over his jaw. "You misread that."

"I misread, 'Raven, you're crazy'?"

Dexter nodded. "I just thought you...perhaps...I thought you..."

"You think—"

"I thought—think—you might be confused."

"I'm not confused." Raven shuffled again and heaved a long sigh.

"Really, I'm not. And I know how it sounds."

"I don't think you can."

"No, I do." She paused. "And maybe if I wasn't absolutely certain that this is what happened, it'd be different. But it's not different, because my memories are crystal clear, Dexter. I might as well have been there yesterday."

"Yes, well..." The Guardian exhaled, turning a quick corner around the coffee table toward the bookshelf to retrieve one of his many aged texts. "Hallucinations can be very convincing."

He began flipping through pages, and Raven's temper grew short. If she didn't watch out, she would lose what little patience she had left.

The period for understanding had ended, and it seemed time for Dexter to take her at her word. While she knew that her story did have its gaping holes, she felt reasonably certain it wasn't the strangest thing that had ever happened, especially in the world they lived in.

Raven remembered so many things. She remembered how she felt making the deal, how she'd trembled while sealing her fate, while her blood poured over Paimon's quill and the clouds above her head crashed together in frenzied foreboding. She hadn't minded the price then. She hadn't cared. At the time, it seemed merely the cost of doing business. Signing over the part of herself she had come to view as a burden rather than a blessing. Signing over the part of herself that had sealed Nicolai's fate.

The part of herself that, at the moment, still belonged to her.

Paimon hadn't shown his head once. Not once. In the years she'd been slaying demons, fighting vampires, and abiding the laws of the Few, she hadn't once crossed paths with the Hell King or his legion.

The knowledge unnerved her. Had Paimon intended for her to remember him and their deal before he came to collect? Did he plan to collect in person, or would she just wake up one morning with an essential piece of herself missing? If he hadn't intended for her to remember anything, how did she?

*A fluke.*

A mystical happenstance that only occurred because of her birthday.

God, she didn't know. Not knowing would drive her mad.

Then there existed Nicholas. Nicholas, who likely felt confused and furious and a thousand other things she didn't wish to consider. She'd sold herself to come and find him, to give him life again so that they might be together, and he lived in the world, void of her memory. No matter how drawn to her he felt, she couldn't continue fooling herself. He looked and acted the same, but Nicholas wasn't Nicolai. He'd had a very different upbringing than the man she remembered. Pretending otherwise did no one any good.

When she'd known him, he'd lived alone most of his life. He'd tumbled into her village and everything had changed for both of them. She'd felt so lonely—so miserable and isolated from others that she truly forgot, at times, that she was more than just a living weapon. She felt more than a girl saddled as One of the Few.

She was a woman, someone to be loved and respected.

At least Nicolai had loved her. He'd given her so much and asked for so little. He'd wanted forever with her, and she'd happily acquiesced. Only she hadn't felt brave enough to take the final step, the part that could have saved his life.

She hadn't run. Kenneth had found them in the end.

Had she run, had she had the courage to toss all else aside for him, she wouldn't be here. Raven didn't know why she hadn't acted. The life she'd had with Kenneth seemed meaningless, but a part of her had clung to it. After all, it'd been all she had before Nicolai barreled into her life.

Even when he asked her to trust him, she'd been reluctant to sever the last essential tie.

She'd failed him in that sense.

If she hadn't failed him, she wouldn't be here now. She'd live with Nicolai. There never would have existed a bargain with a demon, a death, a

rebirth, and this damnable separation. Instead, Paimon had strategically placed them at opposite ends of the universe. He'd made sure that Nicolai grew up as he had, of course, and while Raven knew without question that Nicholas embodied completely the man she loved, she also knew that consequences had changed the circumstances.

She could handle it if he wasn't the same. She'd *hate* it, but she could handle it.

Yet she'd seen him, touched him, and he seemed the same.

She sniffed hard, her eyes filling with tears.

How had she lived twenty-one years of a life she'd bartered for without knowing it until now?

How had she not remembered the man who had saved her from herself?

They had claimed each other as mates. It was allegedly one of the strongest ancient bonds, more powerful than any spell or incantation and stronger than any demon power in this or any other world. A union forged with blood and held together with love. True, there stood much danger in binding oneself with a vampire. Even other vampires, according to Nicolai, rarely enacted the practice because they were, by definition, mutinous creatures. So few of them cared for the frailties of human emotion, especially love. Those vampires who did live to protect the human race rarely allowed themselves to feel human emotion. Even they viewed it as a weakness.

Vampires typically didn't feel love, not love like what she and Nicolai had shared.

He'd wanted eternity with her, and she'd given it to him. They had linked to each other with blood.

Yet she hadn't remembered him. She'd sacrificed so much for him, but she hadn't remembered him. Yes, a part of him had called to her, just as she was certain a part of her had called to him, but she hadn't recognized him as she should have, not even after seeing his face.

It occurred to her that she'd been very quiet for a very long time. With a hard sniff, Raven looked up and met her Guardian's worried, compassion-filled eyes. Not for the first time, she felt herself swelling with sisterly love and gratitude.

Dexter was the one good thing Paimon's deal had brought her—the only good thing.

God, if only he'd lived three centuries prior. If only he'd served as her Guardian then.

"I know it's crazy," she said slowly. "I really do. But it's real, Dexter. It's very, very real. All of it. But you don't know this demon I summoned. He wasn't a garden variety guy. He was powerful. *Is* powerful. One of the most powerful demon-lords in the history of those kinda guys."

"What was he called?" Dexter asked, flipping through his book. "The demon?"

Raven bit her lip and wiggled guiltily.

"Raven..."

"He's bad news."

"And if..." Dexter sighed his exasperation. "If I believe that you made a deal with this demon, we need to know all we can about him and his powers so we have a way to stand up to him whenever he comes to collect whatever it is that you bargained."

She swallowed hard and rubbed her suddenly chilled arms with her hands, desperate for some friction. "I don't think it'll work," she replied. "What I signed is a tablet. A stone tablet. With blood. I don't think this is the sort of bargain where you can just ring up an attorney and try to find a loophole."

"I still think it best to know what we're dealing with if it comes down to it."

Raven inhaled sharply. "I don't wanna."

"What?"

"I don't wanna tell you. You'll get all..." She shifted again, feeling all at once very itchy. "It's something..." He would definitely flip out over it, and given the fact that she'd made the deal while she mourned and in a different century, she didn't feel up to getting an earful from a man who hadn't even existed then. "I plead the fifth?"

He sighed. "Raven—"

She needed a distraction and fast. "Who was the ward?"

A long pause was followed by an equally long blink. "I beg your pardon?"

"Kenneth's ward. His ward during the time when *I* should have been his ward. I mean, I might not be there but another warrior would have been, right?" Her brow furrowed, her mind playing a rapid game of catch-up.

“Who do the history books list as being under Kenneth Mal? If not me, Paimon had to—”

Dexter’s perked up, his face draining of color. “Paimon?”

*Rats.*

“Um...”

“The Hell King? That Paimon?”

Raven smiled uneasily. “Unless you know of another one.” Her stomach dropped when her Guardian met her eyes, and cold invaded her skin. “He has the kind of power to make the universe his playground, right?”

Dexter swallowed audibly and nodded, every inch of his expression wholly frozen. “He does.”

“He had to do some major mojo, then, to make it so that One of the Few wasn’t me and to make sure that Nicolai was born to his mother and me to mine.” Raven’s eyes dropped again, a long shudder commanding her tired body. “He never wanted me to remember, Dexter. He did what he said he’d do. He put me in this world and he put Nicolai here, too, but we were never supposed to cross paths. Never.”

Dexter frowned. “Never?”

“If he had,” she reasoned, “we would have remembered. It wouldn’t have *just happened*.”

“That’s speculation. You can’t know that.”

Nothing would move her certainty. “But I do,” Raven said. “I was too warped when it happened. Too focused. I only wanted him back. Paimon’s an agent of Hell. He wouldn’t just give something over. No, he gave me everything I asked for, but *only* what I asked for. Everything else, he did to fit his own agenda and to get what he wanted.” A pause. “Nicolai was never supposed to remember.”

The numbed look on her Guardian’s face slowly thawed into something more encouraging. “But you did,” he said swiftly. “Cross paths. If Paimon was playing another angle, then his plan was thwarted by Nicholas’s coming here.”

Raven glanced up slowly, her heart thundering with hope. “Dexter, you’re talking like you believe me.” She paused. “Do you believe me?”

“I...” He flushed. “You know Paimon. You know the name. That much makes me...it lends you credibility. We’ll leave it at that.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn't contain her relieved smile if she tried. "Gee, thanks."

"You have to admit, Raven, books and demon names are not your specialty."

"I still managed to woo the High Council and earn the award that is you, didn't I?"

"Five years ago, and by the skin of your teeth. You're more of a learn it and ditch it kind of girl."

A long, dry laugh rumbled through her throat. If she didn't pace herself she might laugh until she cried. The wealth of what she could tell Dexter now would have his jaw permanently stranded on the floor. The things Kenneth had made her remember. Recite. Memorize in seven different languages. Oh Lord. She could teach Dexter a thing or two now. She could become the Guardian.

Thankfully, the conversation rolled onward before she could reveal as much. She didn't want to give her surrogate brother a complex. Not now.

"Something went amiss," Dexter mused. "In Paimon's scheming, there was something he wasn't banking on. Something that threw Nicholas into your path again."

Raven nodded slowly, the wheels in her head at last beginning to turn. "Yeah. You're right. If Paimon never intended for me and Nicolai to get back together, to find each other, then—"

"But you said he doesn't remember you. Nicholas doesn't, I mean."

"No, he doesn't, but there was something. When we were together, there was something." Raven worried a lip between her teeth, her brain desperately pulling on fact and theory, trying to make sense out of a senseless world. She wanted something concrete, something she could grasp and hold to give her some form of hope. "Dexter, he could've killed me last night. I was completely defenseless. I thought he knew exactly who I was. I thought he was just lost and confused like me. I mistook the confusion and stuff for, well, confusion of a different kind. There was a part of him that recognized me. Not a big part, but enough of a part, and he got all protective of me when you showed up. There was something about me that he knew."

"Something else Paimon hadn't considered," Dexter mused thoughtfully.

The implication in his words made the world stop spinning. Raven held her breath, hope seizing her tattered heart. “Do you think...” She closed her eyes. “Do you think that if Paimon didn’t plan on Nicolai—I mean Nicholas—remembering me, but a part of him does at least on some level, do you think it’s possible—”

“That Nicholas might one day remember you completely?”

She nodded hopefully, and he sighed in turn. “Even if he does,” Dexter said, “the rules haven’t changed. You’re still One of the Few and he’s still a vampire.”

“I don’t care.”

“Raven—”

“I. Don’t. Care.” Tears prickled at her eyes and she nodded, choking in a sob that desperately wanted freedom. “Dexter, he was...” She inhaled sharply. “He was everything. I was ready to walk away, do you get it? I loved him so much. And knowing he’s out there with someone who’s not me, not remembering me or what we had, it’s...”

“There’s a chance,” he said quickly, eager to calm her. “Raven...all things are possible.”

“Did I tell you he gave me that name? He’s the one who first called me Raven.”

Dexter blinked but didn’t ask. “All things are possible.” He glanced down, his gaze focusing on the page his fingers had landed on. “As it is, I believe your remembering might have opened a gate.”

She sniffed miserably and wiped at her eyes. “A what?”

“Unlocked doors of history. As long as no one knew what had happened, it was as though it *hadn’t*. Understand?”

“Uh...”

“But now that you remember, the history cannot be concealed. The missing history occurred.” He looked up again, an odd twist of astonishment and pride sweeping his eyes. “Ravenna Mal. Born 1679, died 1701. Warrior mentored by one Kenneth Mal.”

Everything stopped. Her blood ran cold.

“What?”

“It’s here. A page that wasn’t here before.” Dexter held up the thick, aged manuscript and turned it around for her viewing. “No drawing. Just a name.”

She saw it immediately. There was no way she could not.  
Her name.  
And beside her name was Nicolai's.  
Listed as her killer.

## Chapter 10

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

He couldn't keep his eyes off her. He'd made several futile attempts to look away from the goddess currently massaging his foot, but found himself irrevocably drawn to the curves of her gorgeous mouth and the light in her eyes. She positively glowed every time she glanced upward and those precious emeralds met his gaze.

He couldn't drag his eyes away. At times he feared she'd disappear if he so much as blinked.

Ravenna's creamy skin reddened with the provocative hint of awareness, and she ducked her head. Her hands moved over his foot with such attentive affection that he had to wonder, truly, if he'd been slain and somehow managed to sneak through the pearly gates. "You're staring," she said.

"Am I?" he replied.

"You know I don't like it when you stare."

"You should try to be a little less beautiful then."

She wrinkled her nose at him, and he couldn't help from grinning. "You needn't say such things," she said, lightly tickling the soft underside of his foot. Nicolai grinned and wiggled, not that it did any good. No one, living or dead, knew how ticklish he was except for Ravenna. He didn't mind that she knew. The wealth of things he didn't mind that she knew amazed him—things he believed made him vulnerable or weak, things he wished had died with his human self, things not befitting a demon.

Especially a demon with his reputation.

Nicolai truly had to wonder when he'd stopped caring so much, or if he'd truly ever cared. There had seemed a point in life where certain things had seemed so important, things he reflected upon now as a fool's gamble or

an all out waste of time. He remembered well how he'd felt upon first arriving in their village. He'd come to the Americas to hunt and kill her and as many of The Few as he could, and a part of him had known the first second he saw her that he was incredibly lost, no matter how he'd tried to hide the revelation from himself.

Not much of his pre-Ravenna life seemed to matter a damn anymore. He still hunted and fed, though he tried to leave his walking-meals alive. While Ravenna had never asked him to be anything other than what he was, he knew that the idea of him killing would eventually drive a wedge between them. He loved her too much to hurt her if an alternative existed.

Other things figured in, of course. Things like his reputation, which he'd once thought his most valuable asset but no longer cared to salvage. What did it matter what other vampires thought of him? He'd had that reputation for damn near two centuries—two long, lonely centuries.

A reputation seemed worth rot against the awesome power of love. He'd give it up. He'd give up anything and everything.

Ravenna felt precious. She felt worth any price, and no price would ever be enough. Any fool could see it.

He just happened to be the fool she'd chosen.

Somehow, this creature of light loved him. She'd let his fangs mark her throat and had whispered that she belonged to him. She'd let him claim her.

This woman belonged to him for an eternity.

It hadn't been an easy transition, and they still had a journey ahead. Ravenna hadn't yet mustered the courage to break the news to her wanker of a Guardian, and while Nicolai tried to remain sympathetic, his patience grew shorter as the days went by. He wasn't irritated with his beloved at all. He was more irritated by the strain of control exacted on her by the bastard who had raised her.

Ravenna felt terrified of breaking away completely. Kenneth Mal remained all she knew of her former life. She'd grown up believing herself less than human, a weapon forged in flesh and blood, born with only one purpose: the Few. Nothing more, nothing less. She wasn't made for love, rather to die.

It was a callous existence, but it was the only one she'd ever known. And hate it though she did, a part of her clung to it. Nicolai understood, truly he did. Her life was based in this understanding of herself. To grasp

something else entirely and abandon the person she'd been before was a monstrously huge step. She wanted to do it. He felt how desperately she wanted to be free of Kenneth, but it remained hard for her.

Nicolai could do nothing about it other than caress her scalp lovingly and try to keep his manly giggles restrained to amused chuckles when her fingers manipulated his most ticklish nerves.

In the meantime, he had this, and this seemed so much more than he'd ever hoped to touch. They lay in a bed they shared with the sunrise she'd painted for him proudly on display. Ravenna—his little Raven—sat gloriously naked, massaging his tired muscles. She liked doing little things for him. She liked giving him pleasure in any way she could.

"Why?" he asked belatedly, trying unsuccessfully to bite back a moan when her fingers gently skimmed the arch of his foot. His cock had taken notice of her gentle touches a while ago, something he knew she'd noticed, as he was rather naked himself. He didn't know whether or not she'd evaded touching him out of coyness or because her massage was intended to satisfy a need that wasn't sexual. Not that it did any good. He always wanted her.

"Why what?" she repeated, playfully pinching his big toe.

"Why shouldn't I say such things?" Nicolai perked a brow and shot her his best seductive look. "You're gorgeous."

"You have me. Flattery is unnecessary."

"And the truth? I'd expect you'd still want the truth from me."

Ravenna made another face at him, her hand skimming up the inside of his left leg, her big, gorgeous eyes at last landing on his aching cock. "Sometimes I think you say things just to get me to..."

Nicolai grinned and thrust his hips upward. "We both know I don't have to say a damn thing to get you to..."

"Nicolai!"

"You just take it when you're hungry."

He loved provoking her and watching her moonlit skin turn red. He loved knowing that the part of her innocence he adored remained untainted. He could be as vulgar as he pleased and she would never become jaded. A part of Raven would perpetually remain the fluttering virgin, and he absolutely adored it.

"You're a bad man."

“The baddest.” Nicolai offered a wink, wrapping his fingers around his erection and favoring his aching shaft with a long stroke. “Wanna kiss me and make it better?”

She slapped his chest and giggled. “You arse.”

“Well, if you’d rather kiss that—”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Nicolai...”

He grinned devilishly and sat up, cupping her cheeks and seizing her lips in a hungry kiss. The world could end several times, and he wouldn’t care. The taste of her felt too rich to forfeit, and he didn’t deny himself. “Mmm,” he purred against her mouth. “You taste so sweet.”

She grinned against him, her palm skimming the underside of his erection before her fingers dipped to tease his testicles. “I know what you’re after,” she mused teasingly.

“Well, God gave you this mouth for a reason, woman.”

Ravenna’s eyes brightened with mirth. “I thought the reason was kissing you,” she replied.

“One of *many* reasons.”

“And talking? Or are you the sort who prefers his woman silent and submissive?”

Nicolai arched a sardonic brow. “Raven, sweetling, if that was what I wanted, why in the world would I be here?”

She giggled happily. “I love you.”

His heart lifted, and his demon rejoiced. “I love you more. Now suck me.”

She flashed him a look of pure defiance, a smirk stretching those utterly kissable lips of hers. However, rather than shoot him another barb, she dipped her head obediently and licked his erection from root to tip.

“Oh God...”

“Is that enough?” she asked cheekily, her mouth already descending again.

“I said suck me, not lick.”

“So no licking, then?”

He knew nothing good could come from elaboration or clarification, but that didn’t stop him from trying. Unfortunately, the most he could come up with was an ineloquent, “God, Raven.”

Ravenna grinned, her sinful lips welcoming his swollen, velvety head into her wet mouth, her tongue immediately crashing against him to explore his sensitive slit. She knew what she did to him. Christ, did she know what she did. He'd set out to teach her just how to drive him wild, and she shone as the best student a man could wish for.

"Deeper," Nicolai pleaded, thrusting his hips off the bed. "Take me in deeper."

She rolled her eyes and did the opposite. He groaned in frustration the second his wet cock smacked the cool, unforgiving air. "You're rather bossy tonight," she observed.

"And you're a tease."

"So says the man who..." She broke off and flushed deeply, and despite the heated rage of his need, Nicolai couldn't help but crack a grin. Heaven help the day she ever tried to verbally describe a sexual act. Thankfully, he knew exactly to what she referred: the way he'd bury his face between her divine thighs and lick her juicy quim until she trembled hard and bucked off the mattress. So close to fruition...

Then he'd pull away, lick his lips, and leave her aching for him until he decided to take pity on her and give her what she so desperately needed.

He maintained that this didn't seem the ideal way to get back at him. Still, a part of him couldn't help but beam with pride.

She certainly had learned from watching him.

"Oh stop," Ravenna grumbled, albeit good-naturedly. Her warm hand encircled his erection, pumping him tenderly in the absence of her mouth.

Nicolai blinked. "Stop what?"

"That look on your face. Don't think I don't know what you're thinking."

"I have to think it. If you'd ever finish a thought..." He grinned. "Sometime I wanna hear you say it. Try and say it. Say anything, really, as long as it's nasty. It'd be adorable."

"You're swine."

"You love me."

Ravenna heaved a long-suffering sigh. "It's my burden to bear, I suppose."

“You love bearing it.” His grin stretched wider as his hands wove through her hair, fingers gently massaging her scalp. “Please, sweetheart. I need to feel your mouth.”

Her eyes danced, and her head began to dip again. “Here?” she asked, brushing a hot, wet kiss against his belled head, followed by a sultry lick. “You need my mouth here?”

“Raven!”

A sinful smile stretched her gorgeous lips as she slowly welcomed his cock into the pleasure-dome she called a mouth. Nicolai gasped so hard he could have sworn his heart leapt within his chest, his head flying back to the mattress, his hips thrusting upward in a needful frenzy. Nothing about her wasn’t perfect. He loved it all: the strokes of her tongue along the underside of his erection, the way her teeth gently skimmed his length as he slid farther her heavenly wetness, the light which sparked her eyes at his every whimper. She closed her lips around him and sucked hard, pulling on his flesh and tugging him so close to paradise he could have sworn the walls around them didn’t exist.

“Oh God, Raven.”

“Mmm...”

*God.* The way she whimpered and mewled around him. He unwound completely.

“So hot. So hot, you are.” He bit down on his lower lip, his grip on her hair tightening. “I love you so much.”

“Luff yew,” she replied, winking.

Then the head of his cock brushed the soft, warm back of her throat, and she contracted her muscles around him, squeezing him so right. Nicolai howled and bucked, the hand at her head defying reason and dragging her upwards until he wrangled free of her exquisite torture and sat up again so he could kiss her perfect mouth.

“I wasn’t finished,” she complained when their lips parted.

It took a few embarrassing seconds to remember he didn’t need the breaths he gulped. “I was gonna—”

“I know.”

“You don’t like the taste.”

Ravenna winked and kissed him again. “I suppose I’m growing accustomed to it,” she replied, her hands gently shoving him backward until

he lay pressed against the mattress again. By some divine mercy, her tongue returned to his length, licking him like a treat. As much as he loved the feel of her mouth on his cock, he much preferred it when her wet sheath surrounded him, when her breasts were pressed against his chest and her lips were his for the taking.

“Raven, I need to be inside.”

She glanced upward with a pointedly arched brow, but didn’t argue. Instead, she released him completely and began a slow prowling up his body, looking positively catlike, her lips stealing kisses of his body with every move she made. She sampled his stomach and his abs before biting lovingly at his nipples. She drove him out of his mind, and she did it with such tenderness that he wanted to weep.

“God, you feel so perfect,” Nicolai murmured. The head of his cock rubbed against the fleshy wetness at her center. She felt drenched with lust for him.

“I bet you say that to all the Few,” she retorted, nipping his mouth.

“Raven...” He gripped her hips, holding her above him. “I need...”

One thing he could say about the Few: they didn’t take to direction very well. At least this one didn’t, and he couldn’t be more grateful. She silenced him with a kiss and sank down, infusing his body in the warmest homecoming it had or would ever know.

“Nicolai,” she whimpered, her body beginning a slow dance against his without any need for direction. She’d transformed into a sex goddess overnight, a sex goddess who blushed through her innuendos and couldn’t verbalize anything overly seedy. “You feel...”

“So good,” he finished for her, his hands sliding up over her perfect skin until he had a breast cradled in each palm. “So hot. I love—”

Just as quickly, something shattered the sanctuary they’d constructed—a small, nearly indiscernible disruption, but a tangible one nonetheless. Nicolai froze immediately, grasping her hips again to cease their lovemaking. When she fired him a questioning look, he merely raised his index finger to his lips to indicate a need for silence.

Just like that, the mood shattered. Reality had settled in. With Ravenna perched on his lap, her pussy wrapped around him, the fog of their fantasy melted into the real world again—a world where she remained One of the

Few, he remained the vampire, and this thing between them remained forbidden.

He hated the way her heart thundered. He felt it, just as he felt the aching rush of her pulse and the way the passion in her eyes faded into fear.

Perhaps he was wrong, but he doubted it.

“Nicolai?” she asked sharply, her voice a harsh whisper.

He waited another beat. And another. And another.

Then the sound came again. Louder this time. More definite.

It was a quick decision, really, a call he made instinctively without bias, without weighing the factors and giving into temptation. It was a decision he made entirely with his Raven in mind, forfeiting everything his true nature demanded. Now didn’t seem the time to start another argument about confronting her Guardian. Now didn’t the time to make a rash decision. Now seemed the time to get up and get her downstairs, down to the cellar where he spent his days, to the hiding place only they knew about.

“Nicolai, what—”

Nicolai shot up, his arms clamping around her middle, his cock slipping out of her. Her legs impulsively wound around his waist, her arms locking around his neck, and then he moved, too quickly to be walking, but silently enough not to betray their presence. He refused to let her go, not even when he bent over to move the rug which concealed the trapdoor aside, or when he hurried them downstairs. Only when his feet touched the ground did he feel safe enough to lower her to the floor.

Now he had to straighten the upstairs’ appearance as best he could.

Ravenna usually situated the rug over the door. Ravenna had never hidden with him down here. There had never been reason.

They didn’t have the time to make things look perfect. He heard voices and heavy footsteps outside and made the final duck downwards with only seconds to spare.

When he turned again and took her in—his beautiful, courageous warrior—and saw the fear in her eyes, a part of him broke.

This was killing her. Perhaps so slowly she hadn’t even noticed yet. Perhaps she ignored it for the sake of her denial. Perhaps a thousand things. He just knew it killed her.

Not being with him. That wasn’t it.

She feared her Guardian, which she probably didn't recognize. She likely brushed her fear off as something overly insignificant.

Nicolai reached for her and she flew into his arms the next second, her face buried in his shoulder, her trembling body pressed so tightly against his that her tremors became his own. It tore him apart, watching someone so strong cower. Yet he couldn't help but understand, no matter how much he hated it. Monsters were one thing; facing someone she regarded as a father was something she'd never encountered, and the fear of the unknown could render anyone helpless. Even a warrior. Even One of the Few.

He'd never seen Ravenna helpless. He prayed he never would again.

"Shh..." he murmured into her hair, kissing her temple.

And then, from above, came voices.

"Not in here," one said gruffly. "Though the bed's all in a tangle."

"They were here recently," came another voice. A colder one, one that had Ravenna freezing against him.

That had to be Kenneth Mal.

"Spect they got tipped off?"

"No," Mal replied softly. "I think, once again, you and your men were too bloody loud."

"We was quiet!"

"Look here," a new voice said, inspiring a parade of thunderous footsteps as men shuffled toward the attraction. "Pretty. How you figure it got here?"

"No, it's not *pretty*," Mal snapped. "And I told you one of Ravenna's pastimes is painting, didn't I?"

"Oh, right." A pause. "What is it?"

Nicolai couldn't help it. He rolled his eyes. Honestly...

"She painted the sunrise for her lover. How...sickening." Another pause. "Search the premises and the grounds. I doubt they got far."

"And if we find the girl first?"

"Ravenna is my concern, not yours. You're to bring her to me." Mal stood quiet for another long, dramatic beat. Then, "The vampire...you may do whatever you want."

Nicolai tightened his grip on Ravenna to keep her from gasping. She didn't. She didn't do anything. She just held onto him.

Trembling.

Cold.  
Crying.  
But not making a sound.

## Chapter 11

### *Present Day*

Nicolai was her killer. Had she not sold herself to a Hell King, she would have been immortalized as Ravenna Mal, victim to Nicolai. History would have recorded the only man who had ever loved her as her killer. History would have branded him something he was not.

Raven inhaled sharply and shivered as she made a sharp left turn through the gate guarding one of the local cemeteries. She didn't feel in the right mind for her normal beat, but she'd be better off out here than at home. Home offered nothing but silence, and silence paved an unwanted path through self-reflection and other dangerous musings. She didn't want to offer her brain the chance to taunt her with knowledge.

Dexter had found something else, something that almost hurt more than seeing her lover's name listed as her killer. According to reports and historical records her Guardian had uncovered, both through books and the High Council's online library, Nicholas had a very good reason for not remembering her. He had a lover, a woman he'd been with since the commencement of his second life.

He had someone else. What had happened on her birthday had truly been a fluke, an accident of opportunity. Nicholas had reacted to her, but he had no reason to seek her out. The place to which he retreated when the sun began to rise wasn't empty. His life hadn't been lonely. He didn't need her now.

Raven had never known heartache. Something had grabbed hold of her chest, squeezing and tightening, twisting and pulling until the air she inhaled felt in short supply and she had to remind her lungs to fight for life. So here she was, forcing herself to behave normally all because she didn't want to

go home and allow the quiet to remind her of what Nicholas had in his bed, at his side, and why he wouldn't come after her now.

She didn't want to think about her *Nicolai* touching, kissing, and loving another woman. She couldn't stomach it.

In her world, Nicolai hadn't had anyone before her. No grand woman in his past had filled in the decades of silence with pleasure, which stood to reason why he'd seemed so resistant to falling in love in the first place. He hadn't known what love felt like, and when he put a name to it, the knowledge that he loved the enemy had nearly torn him apart. He'd responded violently and in haste, not that it had done any good. Their last fight had indeed been their last, but they had walked away united instead of broken apart.

Would Nicolai have loved her if he'd had a woman before her? One he'd loved as Nicholas loved Octavia? Or would Raven not be here at all? If Nicolai had loved before her, would her fate have been sealed three hundred years ago, leaving a different ward under Dexter's care?

God, she felt so foolish. She hadn't asked for enough and she'd still managed to take too much. Perhaps this was the unspoken price Paimon had collected. The cost of living in a world with Nicolai came at the expense of knowing he didn't love her here, and the looming certainty that he never would.

It amazed her what a little knowledge could do and how far it could go. Raven heaved a sigh and turned her eyes heavenward, taking in the stars. While she hadn't lived any longer in this life than she had in the last, she felt wiser. The unlocked gates of her mind provided knowledge she would never have possessed in this life. There were things she looked upon now with shame, particularly arguments with Dexter and how she took her support system for granted.

Without Dexter, she would only be half alive. In some way, simply by existing, he had saved her from the fate she'd been cursed to live as Ravenna Mal. She didn't fear Dexter in any sense of the word. If anything, Dexter embodied the perfect mentor and the brother she wished she'd had. She trusted him. He wouldn't look upon her unfavorably for her decisions.

Dexter knew and understood that being One of the Few didn't make one any less human. He didn't expect her to fork over her life. He just wanted her to respect her duties.

Strange how a simple set of different circumstances could change her world view so drastically. As the warrior under Kenneth Mal, her strength, her calling, had been something she resented above all things. At the end, she'd wanted nothing to do with it. After all, her strength had compromised her as One of the Few and labeled her as a devil-worshipper in the eyes of the villagers. Her strength had ultimately cost Nicolai his life.

Though similarly, her strength had brought them together.

The world burned with irony.

Likewise, Raven couldn't say that her attitude this time around resembled a beacon of sunshine at all. There were times when she resented her sacred responsibility so potently that she could spit nails. However, whether he knew it or not, Dexter had taught her appreciation and respect she'd never had before. Now, she felt she finally knew how important her duty was to the world.

So here she stood: One of the Few reborn, a woman with two histories, who had gambled everything away for the man who didn't remember her.

Chills spread down her arms and planted her butt on a gravestone. She didn't feel like walking anymore.

It was foolish to think she'd be safer from her thoughts here than at home. She didn't feel safe anywhere. Not from herself.

"I believe the words you're looking for are *be careful what you wish for.*"

Raven froze and the world froze with her. Her blood stilled. Her heart stopped. The wind fell silent around her. All shadows hardened into stone. She would know that cool timbre anywhere. Hearing it once had a way of leaving a permanent mark. Even if her birthday hadn't opened her eyes to her true past, the voice of the Hell King would have thrown her from her self-constructed abyss and plucked her back into a form of reality no one could deny.

The first time she'd seen Paimon, he'd stood well over seven feet in height, his head adorned with a jeweled crown. That much had not changed. He still seemed unreasonably tall, prancing around on proud display like royalty. She didn't remember much else of him aside from his pale and strikingly effeminate face, and the black robes his body had then been wrapped inside. There were no robes now. He wore a finely tailored Armani

suit. He struck her as a very tall and very deadly David Bowie, and had she not found herself paralyzed with terror, she might have laughed her ass off.

"I admit it a tad cliché," Paimon continued conversationally. He stepped fully out of darkness and under the pale moonlight, which made him appear more than ethereal. He formed from shadows—they composed his limbs, sculpted his face, and blended seamlessly into his skin. Perhaps he always lurked in the night, perpetually caught between worlds. The thought made her shudder.

"Cliché?" Raven repeated. "You take everything from me and call it a cliché?"

"All I took was your life."

"And Nicolai."

"Semantics. He was already gone."

She took a heated step forward. "But we had a bargain and you—"

"I gave you exactly what you wanted."

"I never wanted this."

"No? I beg to differ." A lecherous smile stretched his inhuman lips, his long, gangly legs sweeping a grand step to her left. "You were determined when we first met. Do you remember? You gave all away without demanding the price. You were quite adamant about that. Before I could even speak, you forfeited yourself. As long as I did not possess your soul, you seemed more than content to provide the cost of what you asked. And even so, I believe you would have gambled that as well—your mortal soul, your life. Anything and everything you could summon to get your precious Nicolai back."

"Nicolai doesn't remember me," Raven barked, fear giving way to rage. "He doesn't remember me at *all*."

"Ah. Sweet Ravenna. Lies do not become us."

"It's *Raven* now."

Paimon inclined his head politely. "Raven," he agreed. "Did you like that bit? I thought you might appreciate his name for you becoming the name by which you are known in this life. Call it a gift."

"Your generosity overwhelms me."

"I aim to please."

"He doesn't *remember* me," she snapped, unwanted tears stinging her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was give this unholy creature her tears.

He had everything else. Blood, her bargain, Nicolai's love—God kill her before she gave him her tears as well. "He doesn't—"

"Ah, ah. You said it earlier, did you not? You said dear Nicolai recognized you."

"Recognizing me and *remembering* me are hardly the same thing, and you damn well know it."

Paimon didn't attempt to argue the point. Rather, he offered another apathetic shrug. "You did not ask that he remember you."

The simplicity and contradiction of this statement had her seething in a blink. Raven jumped to her feet, seizing the blade she kept tucked between the waistband of her sweats and the small of her back. It was a feeble weapon against such power, she knew, but she had nothing else. She had determined to prove that she didn't fear him, even if all of her trembled in dread.

"Wrong answer," she nearly growled. "Wanna try again?"

The Hell King offered another indifferent shrug, not even blinking at the appearance of a blade in her hands. "You did not ask that he remember you. Nor did you ask that you remember him. All you wanted was Nicolai back, and I gave him to you."

"Nicolai was in love with *me*."

Paimon's malicious eyes sparkled with merriment. "And are you saying it is impossible for Nicolai...oh no...I'm sorry, *Nicholas*, to love you? He simply doesn't know you. I'm sure, given time..."

"He—"

The demon held up a hand. "Enough."

"You lying—"

The creature laughed. He looked at her and roared with laughter, and the sound was as chilling as anything she'd ever heard. It consumed her, filling the air with the emptiness of sorrow and the sting of loss. It sent shivers of absolute hopelessness down her spine. He mocked her without shame—without a need for shame. He mocked her with openness that left her insides bleeding.

"Imagine that," he sniggered, rubbing his jaw with pale, near-skeletal fingers. "A thing of Hell, lying to One of the Few. I simply can't imagine what I was thinking. My apologies, dear *Raven*. I assure you, it won't happen again."

“You son of a bitch.”

“Sorry. Forgive me. That was a lie.” He shrugged, laughing still. “I can’t seem to help myself.”

“How would you feel about me ripping out your rib cage?”

“A little disconcerted, seeing as I don’t have one.” Paimon smirked, but the mirth in his eyes was fading rapidly. She refused to blink. She refused to betray anything that could rightfully be construed as fear. He already knew she was terrified, and there was no reason to validate what he already knew. “You were a foolish child, Raven. Perhaps if you had listened to your dear Guardian, you would have learned the value of not making bargains with the Devil.”

“You’re not the Devil,” Raven spat, the grip on her knife tightening.

He shrugged again. “Close enough,” he replied. “And truly, dear, I would love to spend my evening catching up, but I have business to tend to. You know, souls to capture, havoc to wreak, the virtuous to corrupt. You were an unexpected stop, I admit, but a necessary one. Since you remember everything now—and much sooner than I would have preferred—I have concluded that it is time to collect.”

Everything stopped again.

“What?” she asked, her voice suddenly raspy.

“Your debt,” Paimon said simply. “Within one week’s time, I will be collecting your debt.”

Raven drew in a sharp breath, every corner of her body paralyzed. “You can’t.”

“That’s funny. Your signature on an unbreakable stone begs to differ.”

“You didn’t do what I asked. Nicolai is—”

“Here, as are you. What you mean, dear, is that you didn’t ask for all you should have, and you know it. You have admitted as much to yourself and your precious Dexter. Do not lie to me. I am many things, admittedly, and I confess as much with pride. But I always uphold a bargain. You simply didn’t ask for what you truly wanted which, sorry as I am, is not a problem of mine.” Paimon’s head tilted, the slits of his eyes drinking her in. “You threw me off, see. And while the timing is rotten, there’s little more I can do. You know too much now.”

“I know too much?”

“You know yourself. You know Nicholas. You know the true past rather than the one I forged in your favor.”

A fresh wave of anger rolled within her, and she grasped onto it. Anger felt good. She liked anger. Anger trumped fear in any scenario. “The past wherein you listed Nicolai as my killer, you mean? Big shocker, that. Demons fudge over the details.”

Paimon blinked. “But he was.”

“Um, maybe your memory isn’t that fresh, but mine is clear in the crystal sense.”

“Yes, and had it not been for Nicolai you wouldn’t have died.” He shrugged again. “Nicolai died, and you sold yourself. His death led to yours. It was the inevitable conclusion. Were it not for Nicolai, you would not be here. He killed you. I just hadn’t anticipated the claim. Not as I should have, at the very least.”

At the slightest hint of their blood-link, Raven felt her veins surge with life. The connection they had shared had been so potent, so amazingly powerful. She’d felt everything, save for what he didn’t want her to feel. He hadn’t wanted her to feel his death. He hadn’t wanted her to break any more than she had already broken.

He’d denied letting her feel him die.

Raven didn’t know whether his decision made him an angel or a devil. She didn’t care. All she cared about right now was Nicholas, and making him remember. Doing whatever she could to make him know her again.

And the claim—God, the claim. The claim would help. Dexter had given her that much hope—hope that the claim had survived death, even when they had not, and had managed to keep them united over generations of nonexistence. It was a hope now reiterated by the devil she would have to outrun.

“Damn,” Paimon breathed, rolling his eyes. “Did I say too much?”

“Just enough, but that’s just me talking.”

“Doesn’t really matter either way, I suppose. These are things you would have eventually discovered on your own.” He paused theatrically. “Were it not for the claim, you wouldn’t have remembered a thing...not even with your little birthday jaunt. Claims are especially powerful, you see. More so than demons such as I remember when, oh say, making bargains with a grief-stricken girl. Then again, they are so wretchedly rare that the

specifics can't help but escape us every few millennia. Blood never changes. Death cannot eradicate spells, oaths, bargains...or claims."

"He doesn't remember *me*."

"Oh, he does somewhere, buried deep down inside. He recognized you as you recognized him. He just didn't have special birthday to reconcile the past with the present." Paimon stepped forward. "But all of that doesn't matter. As I said, I'm here to collect the outstanding debt at your doorstep."

Raven shook her head hard, her feet seizing a step backward before her head could catch up with her. "You can't have me."

"Of course not. I'm only taking the power. That was the term of our agreement."

"Fuck our agreement."

"My sweet, your defiance is charming, but I'm afraid this isn't a matter of you handing over your debt. It's a matter of my *taking* it, whenever I like, however I like. You won't see it coming and you won't be able to stop me." He grinned. "The timing, as I said, is off, but no matter. I'm sure I can put it to use during the apocalypse."

She swallowed. She didn't wish to betray how hard she shook but she couldn't seem to help herself. Her walls had collapsed and she was on full display. The useless blade in her grip was drenched in cold sweat, and she held it so tight it might well never leave her hand again. "Oh, so you're planning to end the world," she drawled with false courage. "How stunningly original."

Paimon shook his head and took another step forward. "The attempts made by those before me have been child's play. I assure you, what I have in mind won't go unnoticed."

He caught her eyes again, and for an unbearably long minute, everything around them ceased. Everything. There were no trees, headstones or soil beneath her feet and no town surrounding them. She looked into his eyes and saw flames licking his pupils as well as the silhouetted dance of a thousand terrible things. At once, the sound around her deafened with the shrieks of millions. Her heart galloped so fast that she feared it might explode within her chest. Her skin grew hot and slick, as though trying to escape her bones. It only lasted a few seconds but she felt the effect would remain with her forever—the sting of fire, the sorrow of Hell. Everything he'd shown her by simply inviting her into his eyes.

“Until next time, my lovely Ravenna.”

Something scalding brushed her cheek, and then he melted back into the shadows which latched onto him as though he were a favorite cousin. He stood there one second and had vanished the next. He was gone, and she was again left in the cold.

It took long minutes to gather her bearings. Raven remained stationary, her chest heaving, her hungry lungs gulping down air. Her skin was numb but there. Her heart raced but didn’t abandon her. When she raised her hand to her cheek to make sure he hadn’t burned her with his kiss, she felt nothing but the smooth feel of her flesh. No scar. No raw, angry mark. Nothing.

Raven heaved a long sigh, her wobbly legs at last complying with her need to move.

She felt so shaken that she didn’t feel him, sense him, didn’t even hear him. When she turned, she found herself once again captured in a man’s eyes, only there was no damnation here.

“Nicolai,” she breathed. The air around them hummed in pleasure at the sound of his name.

Nothing at first. Nicholas remained motionless, the picture of a man whose words had just been robbed from his tongue. He appeared, for all the world, simply stunned by the sight of her.

He just looked at her, and she looked back.

Then, at last, there were words.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

## Chapter 12

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

Ravenna couldn't stand doing nothing. She never could. As a child, she occupied empty minutes of her day by doing housework, no matter how tedious. On days when the housework duties were sparse, she retreated to the backyard and practiced whatever techniques Kenneth wanted her to perfect. It had been much easier when she was young, simply doing as instructed without caring about how the outside world operated or the staggering differences in her upbringing versus other children.

She couldn't do *nothing*. Not as a child and definitely not now, when her home had been invaded. Kenneth had crossed into her sacred space. He'd threatened her mate. He'd come after her.

She couldn't ignore that, or hope Kenneth would eventually disappear. Similarly, Ravenna understood that she couldn't wait for another nocturnal attack. She wouldn't sit by as her Guardian plotted the death of her lover. And while she had no idea what she would say to him—if she'd have the strength and courage to do exactly what she needed to do—she refused to do nothing.

If anything, the raid on her cottage had assured her that Kenneth's motives weren't to harm her. He only meant to commandeer her—take her away from something he felt had slipped out of her grasp, something she'd stumbled into by mistake. As long as she went alone she had nothing to fear. Nicolai remained in the cellar of their home, having fallen asleep long after she did. They had listened to the heavy footsteps of the men above as their happy home was ripped apart until sleep commanded them and day chased the intruders away.

Kenneth wouldn't hurt her. He couldn't. She was One of the Few—his warrior, and he was her Guardian.

He couldn't hurt her.

She wouldn't let him.

Ravenna forced her thoughts to happier things as she trekked the familiar path to her former home. Nicolai slept in the safety of their cottage cellar. While he'd undoubtedly feel furious upon discovering that she'd made the journey alone, he'd remain safe until she returned.

The shield of daylight gave her courage she didn't have at night. Nicolai couldn't follow her and put himself in the line of fire.

Similarly, as long as she stayed with Kenneth, he couldn't search for Nicolai.

After this—after *doing something*—perhaps her life could take route down a happier path. She didn't have any delusions of leaving her Guardian on amiable terms, but some resolution would undeniably feel better than none.

She still hadn't decided whether or not she would tell Kenneth goodbye. With as much faith as Nicolai had placed in her courage, it felt almost a disservice to his love for her to remain silent. At the same time, however, her mate understood that her courage did not stand unreasonably resolute. She feared when fear felt appropriate, and while she didn't believe Kenneth would ever do anything to physically harm her, it didn't make the threat of his wrath any less terrifying.

*This one final hurdle...*

She could do this. She could. She couldn't let Nicolai coddle her, no matter how tempting it felt or how often she felt he wanted to. She was strong, and she was her own person, stubborn and independent. She wouldn't take defeat lying down.

A strange sense of familiarity settled over her the second she saw the entrance to the Mal cottage. Ravenna stopped short and dragged her hair out of her face, a long sigh heaving from her chest, her heart thundering.

She had to do this.

It felt beyond bizarre, fearing something she used to do every day, something as simple as walking through the front door of a place that used to be her home.

Ravenna inhaled sharply and thought of Nicolai.

She could do this. For him she could do this.

There were certain things she didn't remember like the long whine of the entryway door or how her footsteps echoed across the wooden floor. Her chest ached and her breaths trembled, and it seemed that the reverberation sounded far and wide through the cottage's solemn walls.

She didn't remember being so aware of herself before.

"You look mightily like a foreigner trespassing upon unexplored land," a dark, rough voice observed from the far right corner of the small room. Ravenna whirled around, her eyes immediately finding Kenneth's. He sat in a wooden chair he'd fashioned for himself years ago, a bottle of wine open at his side and a goblet resting in his hands. "Would you like a drink, my dear?"

"It's early."

"Not for us, I don't think. Those who walk with the night adhere to a different set of rules." He arched a brow, reaching for the unused glass sitting opposite the wine bottle. The silent indication spoke volumes. He'd anticipated her arrival. "Have a drink, Ravie."

Ravenna frowned and fought off an inward shudder. She hated the name. Ravie was a girl's name, not befitting a woman of her stature. Kenneth had called her that all through her childhood, but she had not felt like a Ravie ever, not once, and definitely not now. She was Ravenna, One of the Few.

Though more and more, she felt like Raven.

"Please," Kenneth prodded, waving the drink at her. "I insist. I didn't teach you to forget your manners when in the presence of elders."

"No, sir," she agreed softly, accepting the glass reluctantly. She hadn't come here to drink.

"Have a seat, Ravie," Kenneth said. "We have much to discuss."

She found herself obeying before her mind could catch up with her. "I came here to—"

"To barter? To plead your case for your vampire lover? To tell me how he whispered poetry in your ear and did sinful things to your body? How he *made you a woman*?" Kenneth arched a condescending brow and sipped at his wine, indicating silently that she should do the same. Again, she found herself obeying. She felt helpless to do anything else. "Please, Ravie. Spare an old man the details of your disgusting trysts. I don't wish to know of it."

She swallowed hard, tears blurring her vision. "I never meant to displease you."

"You have an odd way of showing it." Kenneth sighed heavily and rose to his feet, his hands sliding into his pockets. "I don't suppose you have given much thought to how this affair of yours has affected me, have you? I raised you as my own, Ravie. I taught you everything you know. I gave you all the care a father could muster for a daughter, especially knowing the destiny you were to fulfill. Did it never occur to you that I forfeited my own right to happiness for the sake of the duty I vowed to upkeep?"

Ravenna took another impulsive swig of wine and shook her head.

"There are things greater than us in this world, greater than earthly desires and other such flights of fancy. When priests take their holy vows, do you know what they are asked to sacrifice? Hmm?" Kenneth arched a brow, his fingers tapping the side of his goblet. "Possession, attachment, while embracing celibacy and chastity, of course, for they are married to God and God alone. No woman should ever come between the Lord and—"

"But I am not a priest!" Ravenna protested, leaping to her feet. "And neither are you."

"Are you implying our mission is not in some way holy? We fight the demons of Hell itself. Nothing should stand between us and the calling which has been bestowed upon us."

"Priests *choose* their fate, Kenneth," she argued. "They are not arbitrarily selected from birth to be summoned for service to God."

"Does the Lord not put the summons in the hearts of men?"

Her jaw fell slack and words gathered in her throat, but none would come.

"Priests, bishops and all members of the Church are designed to protect the demons of men's minds and hearts," Kenneth continued. "We are to protect people from the tangible demons of this world."

A strangled choke fought her throat for freedom. "I didn't *choose* this," Ravenna gasped.

"Nor did I, but you find I honor my calling."

"Your calling is to sit here and teach me tricks that will save my life most of the time but not *all* the time." She threw her hands up in exasperation and her wine glass went soaring through the air, shattering some distance from them in a hundred pieces. Neither blinked or followed

its flight. Their eyes were locked on each other. “I will eventually die doing what I do. And then what? An entire life thrown away at the High Council’s choosing—”

“You will die protecting the world. All of your kind do.”

“Armageddon doesn’t lurk around every corner, Kenneth, no matter what your priests tell you.”

He didn’t flinch. “Even if the Few do not die averting Armageddon, they still sacrifice their lives in the fight against evil. The fight will eventually conclude in the world’s end, child. Surely I have not failed you so much that you don’t realize this?”

Her nerves tingled. The air around her head felt monstrously thick, but she fought through it. Her eyes remained locked on Kenneth. She couldn’t allow him the upper ground. “You haven’t failed me at all.”

He looked slightly taken aback at that. “And yet you roll in filth every night.”

“Nicolai is *not* filth.”

“Ah. So the devil has a name, does it?”

Ravenna stepped forward, though her feet were confused and a wave of dizziness crashed over her head. “Nicolai is *not* an it,” she practically snarled, her hands blindly searching for a surface on which to maintain her balance. “He’s...he’s...”

“The devil assumes many pleasing forms,” Kenneth mused, almost to himself. “It is easy to see how one might be tempted.”

“Nicolai is *not* the devil, you callous bastard!”

“Of course he’s not, child. He’s merely the demon who seduced you away from your calling.”

“I love him.” The words sounded feeble, but they needed to be said. “I don’t care what he is. He’s mine. I love him. You can’t take him from me.”

A long silence eclipsed, and he only glared. No condemnation or anger or righteous outbursts on how entangled she was in sin. Only the cold harshness of his eyes and the whispers of nature outside the cottage walls existed. She didn’t want to betray weakness by looking away. She refused.

“No,” Kenneth said at last, his voice dropping in something almost resembling defeat. “I don’t suppose I can.”

On those words, Ravenna went crashing to the floor. Pain pierced her every inch, spreading through her veins and leaking through her insides, a

slow crawling disease which zapped her will and stole her strength. Her vision blurred, and her throat ran dry. She tried to scream but her voice had abandoned her. Instead, she seemed left only with the stoic face of her Guardian, who looked on dispassionately while nursing the rest of his wine.

"The fact remains that it would be much easier to take you from him," he said after a long, haunted pause. "Especially with what you are."

Ravenna's mouth opened and she tried to speak. The air stung with the hoarse cry she produced, and mocked her in the words it denied her.

Kenneth blinked. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "I haven't killed you. Even after betraying your calling, I couldn't do that. What you're feeling are the effects of a potent drug Guardians utilize on rogue warriors, mixed and brewed, of course, with my own special ingredients. It's much better to have you fully incapacitated than merely without your ordinary strength."

Her eyes went wide, her skin suddenly dry and her body incapable of producing tears.

Kenneth had drugged her? He'd *drugged* her?

She glanced to the shattered pieces of her fallen glass.

"Yes," he agreed, nodding as though she'd said something. "I'd imagine you're very angry. I would be, too, were I in your shoes. No matter. I expect you'll black out before the searing pain kicks in."

Ravenna made a sound which would have been a scream had her voice cooperated.

"There is a rumor a witch inhabits the village," he continued. "A rather nasty witch at that. The rumor started several months ago when Mr. Wells noted the appearance of a boggart in his armoire. He claims a young woman appeared to assist him with the matter, utilizing means well beyond her physical capabilities."

An angry growl tore at her throat.

Mr. Wells. The boggart.

That seemed so long ago. Just three nights after she and Nicolai first made love.

"Mr. Wells was naturally quite fearful," Kenneth continued, his voice adapting a tone only a schoolmaster could duplicate. "He believes the young woman in question bewitched his armoire. As only one of extraordinary power could inflict such a creature in this world, only one of extraordinary power could remove it. The poor chap. His luck has been rather unsavory

lately. I don't suppose you heard that all his crops have wilted? And his livestock are growing sicker by the day."

Kenneth knew she'd never touched magicks in her life. He kept his books in his room, a place she had never entered or cared to. If Mr. Wells had been cursed, it was her Guardian's doing.

She was just a convenient scapegoat.

"It doesn't help that uncommonly loud, often satanic sounds are heard from that cottage you're regularly seen entering," he added. "The one I investigated last night to find woefully empty. And I believe you have similarly been spotted at the graveyard, associating with demons and other creatures that defy the laws of death."

The Guardian's eyes met hers, and every nerve in her body froze.

"I'm afraid I misjudged you, Ravie," he said regretfully. "I can't well have a practicing witch under my roof. The townspeople have taken a vote. No, no. There is no need for a trial, dear. You see, I am considered your guardian. I speak for you in all public affairs. You are a strange, unnatural girl. Never mingle with the youths in town. Never seen but at night. Always lurking about when something mysterious happens. It's all very vexing."

Shapes around her began to blur and swirl in a collage of color. Kenneth at once sounded very far away.

Very far...

"Sleep well, Ravenna. I'm afraid I won't attend the burning. The thought of watching you die is unbearable."

Her head shrieked in agony, her throbbing temples pushing her toward dementia as tremors seized her limbs and the ground began to roll beneath her. Her stomach turned, and her heart felt close to exploding, and try as she might, she could not scream. She could not call for help.

God, how had she been so blind?

*Nicolai.*

Ravenna's lips tore apart, a choking sob fighting for freedom.

*I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.*

It was the last thing she thought before the world turned black.

## Chapter 13

### *Present Day*

He didn't recognize her as Ravenna. He only knew her as Raven.

She had to remember that. If nothing else, she had to keep her wits long enough to understand that the eyes staring her down didn't recall sweeping over her naked flesh with shameless admiration or gazing endlessly into hers as their bodies rocked together. He didn't remember laughing under her merciless hands as she tickled him, or holding her until it was impossible to tell where she ended and he began, or twirling her in the falling rain as the sky roared and thundered above them. He didn't remember kissing her brow whenever she fell asleep in his arms. He remembered nothing.

Nothing she could touch.

Yet Raven couldn't help herself.

"Nicolai," she breathed again, if only to relish in the feel of his name on her tongue. It felt beyond strange having the sensation of missing something she, so recently, hadn't known to miss. An essential piece of herself—her history—wrapped in a collection of restored memories, all encompassed in the whisper of her lover's name.

She stood before the man she loved, a woman thoroughly divided. A woman who knew him yet remained a stranger. The eyes boring into hers seemed devoid of anything one could attribute to love. The strain of recognition that had thrived the last time she'd been with him had vanished, as had the man who had caressed her mouth with his and stood in front of her to protect her virtue as she straightened her clothing. Instead, there seemed nothing but a conflicted veil of loathing and a sheen of cold self-disgust.

He looked almost sickened.

It served as all she needed to remember exactly who she was. With the sting of Paimon's hellish kiss burning through her skin, she *needed* to remember herself.

They would have no reunion of lovers. The woman who had sold herself to find him again might live once more, but the Nicolai she loved was buried in someone who loved someone else. Nicolai had died and Nicholas stood in his place. Nicholas, who did not know her.

It was a point he emphasized the next second, a low growl rumbling in the back of his throat. Before she could even muster a gasp, the biting smack of his backhand rocking against her jaw had the ground shaking beneath her, her back smashing against the rocky cemetery ground.

"Don't," Nicholas snarled, rapidly seizing her shoulders and jerking her back to her feet, only to knock her down again, "call me that."

Raven's lungs clamored for oxygen, pain blistering her skin. So here they were. Tears blinked behind her eyes and her chest ached with a pain too deep to be merely physical. She felt utterly alone.

"Sorry," Raven said, inhaling sharply. A dark shudder ran through her body, but she did her best to shove her emotional reaction to the far side of her psyche. She couldn't let him see how easy she was to manipulate when the right cards were on the table. Paimon had played on that once and it had cost her more than she could have fathomed; if the incarnation of the man she loved discovered her weakness, she wouldn't recover.

Raven had to be true to herself. She had to pull her mind out of the eighteenth century and clamor back to the girl she'd been before the walls around her mind were demolished. The life of the woman she'd once lived and the life of the woman she lived now could not be confused. While no part of her wasn't Ravenna Mal, she couldn't revert to form. She had to embody Ravenna *and* Raven. She had to be both.

Just because she remembered her life as Ravenna didn't mean she had to forgo herself as Raven.

Raven embraced her present. She *had* to be Raven.

"Do you have any idea what you've done to me?"

"Actually, no," she replied honestly. "Want to tell me?"

"You. Everywhere. Everywhere I look, everything I touch. All I see is you."

She frowned. "Sounds like a job for your therapist, not me."

“You know something.”

“Many somethings, I’d hope.”

Nicholas spat, his steps heavy as he trekked around her again. “You conniving little bitch, you—”

As he leaned over her, Raven’s leg smacked hard into his brow. Nicholas howled and flew back, giving her the opportunity to roll to her feet. Then she faced him, her hands poised upward, her chest heaving, her mind racing.

“What have I done?” she repeated, her voice coated with indifference she didn’t feel. She wanted desperately to seize the attitude that had once dominated her persona and wear it with confidence. While it lingered in spirit, her insides remained hollow and barren. “Oh, you mean give you a hell of a concussion?”

“Had time to think,” he responded icily. “Loads of it.”

“About...”

“Don’t play games with me. You know about what. And I’ve decided I’m pissed.”

Raven’s brows perked. “About rounding the bases with yours truly?”

“About *all of it*. Your lips. Your face. Your pussy. You played me.”

“I played you?”

He nodded furiously. “Haven’t figured it out yet, but that’s the only thing that makes a lick of sense. I was all ripe for the kill, see. Then you came alone and make with the fucking head games.” He swung carelessly for her again to little avail. “And I gotta tell you, sweetheart. Vamps? They don’t like to be played.”

“I’m not playing you!”

Nicholas just growled and lunged at her again but it came slowly, so slowly. She saw everything unfolding as though captured on a reel of film, rolling out before her eyes frame-by-frame. She knew at once what his next move would be, and the next, and the next. In an instant, she saw a blueprint of the battle laid out before her with Nicholas’s moves beautifully choreographed. She saw it all.

She knew every move he would make because they had done this a thousand times.

He just didn’t know it.

“Not playing me?” Nicholas snarled. “You come to me, crying, and call me, and I don’t snap your neck.”

“It’s a nice neck.”

“You’re One of the Few. This doesn’t work, and you played me.”

“Oh, come on, Nicholas,” Raven drawled. A fresh rush of adrenaline pumped her veins as she side-stepped his attack. Her hand shot up so his swinging fist met nothing but a forceful block. “Don’t hold back on me now.”

“Shut your mouth!” He made a move to knock her off her feet, but she’d jumped to avoid the blow by the time his leg took the swipe at hers.

“I don’t know what your problem is,” she retorted, ignoring the pangs each word shot against her heart. “And here I thought we were getting along.”

“‘Cause I *didn’t* kill you when you were begging me to fuck you raw? You’re nutty.” He snorted and dove for her again. Again, Raven shot into the air, flipping over his head and landing behind him.

She sucked in a breath and did her best to ignore the rush that raced down her spine. “How is that?”

“You wanted it, didn’t you?” Nicholas insisted, rage flaring behind his eyes when she deflected yet another blow. “You wanted me to plunge my dick inside that hot cunt of yours.”

Shamed heat flooded her cheeks.

“I don’t fuck my food.” He growled again, then grunted in frustration when she blocked his next attack. Every failed assault only seemed to strengthen his outrage. “Sure, you tasted sweet, but—”

“Aw, are you saying I’m *not* the most gorgeous creature you’ve ever seen?”

“What idiot put that idea in your head?”

Raven rolled her eyes, catching his leg when he attempted to kick her again. “You, you dummy.”

“You’re nutty.”

“You just have a lousy memory. And you said that already.”

Nicholas roared again, then again when his fists swung for her head and missed. “Rot,” he retorted. “I remember just fine. I remember Octavia waiting for me at home. The way she feels and tastes...” He closed his eyes with an overtly theatrical moan of pleasure. “God, just lovely, that is.”

Something squeezed her stomach. She did her best to shake it off. “Didn’t stop you from copping a feel,” she countered weakly. Her voice shook even as she applauded herself for not backing down. “I don’t seem to recall you putting up a struggle.”

“Girl throws herself in any man’s arms and he goes off upstairs.” Nicholas shrugged, but she didn’t miss the way his eyes glazed over, or the shudder that commanded his shoulders. “Doesn’t mean anything, sweetheart.”

“Well, if that’s all,” Raven continued, kicking him back when he began to advance, “I don’t see what the big deal is.”

Ignorance seemed a deadly sin. “You’ve ruined *everything!*”

She shrugged. “You’re not dead, and you got a hand in the cookie jar, as Dexter said. If it meant so little—”

“You say that like it’s some prize,” he retorted, swinging at her again. Again, she blocked him with ease which had his eyes blazing with rage. “I’ve been trying to wash your nasty scent off since we parted ways. Doesn’t work.”

She couldn’t walk away from this unscathed. Hurt swelled her insides, and her eyes threatened to leak with tears. “Sorry to be an inconvenience. It’s not my fault my senses were overtaken.”

“It was *your* birthday.”

Raven’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah. And I have so much control over that.”

“What sort of Few goes out on their birthday?”

“Hey,” she retorted. “I’m not a nun. I wanted to make with the merry. I didn’t ask what happened.”

“Don’t seem to recall you complaining.”

“Funny. Neither were you.”

He growled and swung again, eyes blazing when she easily ducked his advance and rolled a safe distance away. “How the *fuck* are you doing that?”

“Doing what?”

He didn’t answer. He shook his head and redirected his anger. “Just stop wiggling so I can kill you properly.”

Raven blinked, a rush of dark humor seizing her insides. A laugh erupted between her lips. “Sorry, sweetie,” she replied, shaking her head. “I didn’t realize this was ‘Shoot Raven in a Barrel’ night at the O.K. Corral.”

Nicholas ignored her and busied himself with another quickly-deflected attack. “How are you doing this?” he asked again, brushing himself off. “How are you—”

“Anticipating your every move?” Raven shrugged and did her best to ignore the warm rush of cool nostalgia which raced up her spine. The many times she and Nicolai had fought had schooled her well. She could script out his attack plan and hand it to him if so asked. As it was, even with the hurtful words spilling from his lips, a part of her relished this. The thrill of being with him again in any form, a feeling so familiar, so known, she couldn’t help but soak him in.

He didn’t remember her, but he knew her.

Even if he didn’t remember her, even if he loved someone else, she had him back. If watching her Nicolai pine after another woman served as her punishment for getting him killed, she would suffer but live through it. She would have to.

Presuming Paimon didn’t kill her first.

“Now that you mention it, yeah, I *would* like to know how you’re anticipating my every move,” Nicholas muttered, stalking forward yet again. His wouldn’t attack this time—the tell in his eyes always gave him away. It was a small nearly indiscernible flicker, seemingly hard to catch but impossible to miss once identified. Not once had it failed to betray a truer intent. Once she saw the tell, she saw that he meant something other than the words he spoke. Always. She decided, however, not to let him know.

Not when he asked the question. The important one.

“I know you,” Raven said simply, emotion welling inside. The words were tired on her lips, she’d spoken them so many times now.

Nicholas’s brows perked. “You mean the bit about you and me being lovers from days past? Don’t tell me you actually buy into that.”

Raven balked, cold consuming her thoroughly. That rang a bit more on the nose than she’d anticipated. “How?” she asked.

“Can’t keep much from vamps. We lurk. We eavesdrop. We stalk. I’ve been overhearing some damn funny things recently.”

She swallowed hard. “Oh yeah?”

“Some ridiculously funny things,” he agreed with a nod. “And I do mean ridiculous.”

The weight of her solitude came crashing down without preamble.

She was alone. Dexter believed her now, but he couldn't do anything to help. He couldn't orchestrate some miracle solution to prevent the demon from claiming his debt. He couldn't do anything to make Nicholas remember his former life. Dexter might believe her, but belief only got her so far.

"I'm going home," Raven said numbly, turning slowly. She didn't worry about showing Nicholas her back. Somehow she knew he wouldn't assault her again, just as she knew his eyes would narrow in confusion and his weight would shift impatiently from one foot to the other before he gave up the pretense of indecision and raced after her.

She knew him well, no matter what he remembered or believed.

"Raven." Nicholas barreled forward just as she'd predicted, the fight in his eyes vanishing completely. The next second he stood in front of her, his hands clamped around her shoulders, confusion barring the way for the conflicted anger which had lived there only seconds before. "Don't."

"Don't what? Go home?"

"I need to know."

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "You wouldn't believe me. God, you already don't."

Nicholas shook his head and tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Try me."

The words smacked her hard. Nicolai had always been a walking contradiction.

"Let go."

"If this is about the whole 'I'm here to kill you' thing, you should know it was just a cover."

"I know. And it was very convincing."

The lie was there to placate his ego, should he need it.

"I'm going outta my mind," he said.

Raven licked her lips. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"It's one thing or the other, isn't it? I can't kill you and I can't let you just *do* this to me. Every time I close my eyes, I see..." As though in need of whatever he saw, Nicholas closed his eyes and he fortified himself with a deep breath. "I see you. And I don't know why. You're everywhere. God, you have been for so damn long."

"If you'll just let me go—"

"It's crazy. You know it's crazy, right?"

Raven's humorless smile only grew wider. "I haven't really ever thrived on *sane*."

Nicholas didn't laugh. She didn't expect him to. She was just dodging a bullet, and they both knew it. "You called me Nicolai," he murmured instead. "You called me Nicolai tonight. Before, too, when we got all up close and personal."

"And you asked me to stop. Stop I shall."

"No one's ever called me Nicolai."

Raven inhaled a trembling breath, every inch of her threatening to crumble. A few minutes ago she wouldn't have hesitated, she would have started babbling a thousand explanations. She would have divulged everything. But Nicholas knew enough thanks to his snooping. He already knew what she thought, and what had inspired her to leap into his arms just a couple days back. Explaining herself seemed a wasted effort, as she had no answer, nothing to say that would satisfy him. The truth would lapse belief, and his reaction had already proven as much. Thus Raven felt rendered in a *Catch-22*. The truth wouldn't be believed and there seemed no lie to give him. Nothing at all.

So she stood mute, desiring nothing more than to throw herself upon the mercy of his incredulity and confess everything—desiring it, but knowing better than to forsake herself completely.

A sin she would only commit once. She wouldn't curse herself to repeat her fate.

"Go home, Nicholas," Raven said with intent, the name her lips formed sounding so out of place. She ignored the inner screams begging for Nicolai, ignoring how the scattered pieces of her heart shattered into something lost beyond recognition. To save herself, she had to ignore it.

"I've no longer got a home."

The confession froze her feet and her heart along with them. "You..." She broke off, shuddering. "I thought...your girlfriend..."

Nicholas snorted. "In the world according to Octavia, she's history. No longer a factor. She's made it clear she wants nothing to do with me." He met her eyes, trembling, his body wrought with vulnerability that made her ache. "Octavia booted me to the curb after, well, after you."

Raven inhaled sharply. "Me?"

"She smelled you all over me. Drove her crazy." He released a short laugh which held no humor. "It's a riot when you think about it. The bitch never could keep her hands to herself, but the second I wander..."

The words, when said over and over, finally began to form a sensible pattern in her head. "Octavia kicked you out?"

"Made quite a scene about it, too," Nicholas agreed. "Surprised this is the first you're hearing of it."

"I don't exactly read Vamp Weekly," she retorted with a small smile. "Octavia *really* kicked you out because of me?"

He nodded, a dark shudder racking his shoulders. "Didn't like it that I got a taste of someone else. I don't, either."

"I didn't ask you to kiss me."

"No, you grabbed me before you could ask."

Her cheeks warmed, and for the millionth time, she considered how far gone she felt. How deep into the labyrinth she'd allowed Paimon to drag her without stopping to consider the consequences he laid at her feet. How it must have been for Nicholas to encounter her, a sniveling girl composed of tears and heartfelt confessions, lunging into his arms and assaulting his mouth with her own. How he must have felt then, how everything in his mind could have shut down from logic and gone strictly to primal instinct. Perhaps a bit of their shared claim leaked through in the revelation. The reason he hadn't been able to thrust her aside as though she meant nothing was due to the fact that they would always share a blood link.

Perhaps the claim had saved her life that night, just as it had saved the hope of regaining herself. Paimon couldn't erase from her what had been ingrained in her blood, nor could he thoroughly eradicate the memory of her from Nicholas's subconscious. Somewhere inside her vampire lived the man she loved, beating against plate glass doors and screaming for freedom. Memories pushed at the corners of the inner walls Nicholas had constructed, walls fortified beyond reason. There seemed every chance those memories would be lost forever. The important thing, however, was the fact that they existed.

As long as they existed, so did hope.

"I was hoping you'd forgotten that part," Raven admitted, her voice low. "The part where I kinda attacked you with my mouth."

A strange light penetrated her vampire's eyes. "Forgotten?" he rasped. "No. Tried to. Tried to shove it out of my mind, far out. Figure that's a part of why I'm here, to convince myself it meant nothing, that whatever it was meant nothing. But forget? No, I couldn't forget. You changed me. Fuck, you changed everything. You..."

"I didn't mean to."

True, but even standing as she did, Raven knew she wouldn't take it back. Not for anything.

"But you did. You called me..."

"I won't call you Nicolai anymore," she told him again. "I know it now. You're not Nicolai."

No, but Nicolai *lived in* Nicholas. Nicolai loved *Raven*. Nicolai wouldn't have given a damn about this Octavia or getting kicked to the curb, as he put it. Nicolai would have taken her in his arms, laughing and peppering her face with kisses as he twirled her under the glow of moonlight. Nicolai lived within Nicholas, and if he ever broke free, he and Nicholas would be one and the same. But Nicholas, for all his looks, did not live inside Nicolai, at least not as Nicolai lived inside him.

The vampire who loved her was gone. The one before her might seem infatuated, even haunted, but he didn't love her.

"I'm not Nicolai," Nicholas repeated, and it sounded for all the world as though he were trying to convince himself. "I wasn't around then. In the eighteenth century, or whatever it was you told your Guardian. I wasn't alive. And sorry to break it to you, sweetheart, neither were you."

"I made a deal—"

"—with a demon," he supplied, nodding, taking a step closer. "That's what I gathered."

Raven swallowed hard. "And you don't think it's possible?"

"No," he barked, ostensibly trying to convince himself. The tell lurked again in his eyes—a glimmer he didn't want her to see.

"I know my life, Raven. I know it too well. There's no way I went through all that for nothing. To what? Meet up with you so we could have our merry happily ever after?" He offered a derisive snort. "Where were you *every night* when I needed—"

Raven couldn't help the sob she choked anymore than she could stop tears from gathering behind her eyes. "I can't help when I was born."

“No, you can’t, and that’s what I’m trying to get through that gorgeously thick skull of yours.” Another step. He stood so close now that if she reached out just a few precious inches her hand would be against his chest. “It didn’t happen. None of it. There was no you. There was no me. There was no brilliant fucking. There was nothing. It didn’t happen. And that, my love, is that.”

A frog the size of Texas leapt into her throat. “Brilliant?”

Unprecedented glimmer bled into his eyes. “Raven, with you, it’d have to be.” He paused and frowned, shaking himself to his senses. “Point being that whoever you think I am doesn’t exist.”

“Never say never.”

Something broke behind his eyes, the last snap of his restraint, and all seemed lost without warning. A snarl tore through his lips and his hands leapt upward, capturing her face between his cool, firm palms, his fingers making a prison of any escape. “I’m...not...Nicolai,” he snarled. “This is *Nicholas*. You hear? This is *all* Nicholas. Nod for me if you understand.”

Raven nodded. She could do nothing else.

Then everything vanished—the outrage, the anger, everything. Everything poured out of him in a blink, and suddenly his eyes swept over her, searching hers before landing on her lips. A ragged beat stilled between them, and for a long, wondrous second, she saw him fighting for memories he could not reach. She saw him denying his own convention and reaching for something beyond grasp.

In that instant, she saw Nicolai.

“My name,” he murmured hotly. “Say it.”

Raven steadied herself and gave him what he wanted. “Nicholas.”

“Good. Try to remember that.”

Then his lips came crashing upon hers, and reason melted away.

## Chapter 14

While his experience with women seemed rather limited, Nicholas stood reasonably certain that tears weren't the normal reaction to a man's kiss. Octavia, granted, felt like no basis of comparison. If she cried when he kissed her, there was a reason. The days of her living as a mystery to his lovesick eyes had long faded into the pages of yesterday.

Raven, however, struck him as an enigma. The second her lips opened to him, the second her hot, silken tongue drifted over his and explored the cool cavern of his mouth, her body trembled and she began to cry.

There were no sobs, no hysterics, no beating against his chest in demand of justice. There were only tears. She rumbled small whimpers against his lips but didn't allow them to seize her completely, and she wept. She wept so silently, so perfectly, as though she wanted to protect him from the thing that could inspire sorrow from something as simple as a kiss.

Then again, nothing simple existed about this kiss. Raven had every inch of him burning to a crisp. If fire had a taste, she certainly embodied it. There had been nothing like her before. He'd never touched anything like the life sparking through her skin, never experienced a kiss like hers, never felt a woman's mouth whisper words against his without making a sound. She consumed him without trying, drawing him further into her mystery and the abyss surrounding the world she'd constructed around herself.

The place where they knew each other.

It wasn't that he didn't believe her, though he didn't buy into her crackpot idea either. There seemed definitely something to her story, something beneath the surface of their complicated relationship something that designed her into his night angel and wheedled her into his every thought until nothing existed beyond the image of her when he awoke and her arms surrounding him as he fell asleep. He'd rolled over the words he'd overheard again and again, contemplating the chance of truth behind the

girl's outrageous claim and vetoing its possibility for the sake of logic alone. There was no explaining the way he felt now.

Octavia had kicked him out of her bed. For the first time in all their years, she'd kicked him out, allegedly because he no longer belonged to her. He'd come home smelling of a different woman, and because of the hint of infidelity, he was no longer welcome between her legs, no matter that half the world's demon population had taken residence there during their years together.

*"You're not mine. You never were. I've but borrowed you."*

Not a lick of sense in her words.

The bitch of it was, he didn't care. Sure, it smarted like hell but his mind was too preoccupied with the taste of the goddess whimpering into his mouth to give an honest damn. He felt sure that once the numbing melted into something tangible, his feigned outrage at what Raven had cost him would turn into something concrete.

For the moment, though, he let himself get lost in her heavenly taste, in the way her lips moved against his, the way her tongue stroked his and explored his mouth.

"Mmm," he murmured, sucking hard on her bottom lip, walking her backward until he had her pressed against a tree. "Fuck, but you taste sweet."

Raven gasped and trembled in his arms, her hips thrusting against his denim-clad cock with wanton abandon that he felt near certain she didn't mean. This girl had not known a man's touch, and the world could see it. He'd known it the instant he set his eyes on her gorgeous body. She personified every man's temptation, but she'd never known a sexual touch.

Not before him, anyway. Not before her birthday.

"You're playing with fire," he warned.

Raven met his eyes without bothering to blink her tears away and kissed his lips before she could stop himself. "I've played before," she replied, her voice low and certain. "Our first time together was against a tree."

A rush of irritation seized his insides, but he honestly didn't know if he was upset with her insistence on sticking to her delusion or the maddening knowledge that he couldn't see whatever glorious memory played in her mind. And with as nutty as the claim seemed, Nicholas couldn't shake the haunted notion that at least part of it rang true. There appeared too many

things in the air, too much to own entirely up to coincidence. The way Raven had whispered his name. The way she fought him as though she knew him, blocking his every attack without so much as blinking. The decisive lack of fear in her eyes. He didn't believe her story but he didn't *not* believe it, either. He didn't know what to believe anymore.

Of one thing he felt certain: Raven knew him. The knowledge terrified him, but it didn't make it any less true.

"Yeah?" he heard himself murmuring.

Raven nodded through her tears, a small, indulgent smile crossing her lips. "You came to kill me."

Nicholas snorted. Even in their warped fairytale, he remained a ruthless bastard. Perhaps there was more truth to her version than he wanted to allow. "Yeah," he agreed, his left hand abandoning her cheek to trail down her front until he had her breast cradled against his palm. "That sounds like something I'd do."

A gorgeous smile graced her perfect lips, and he felt something within him collapse with wondrous awe. No matter what the girl thought, the fact remained that she was with him.

"You were...oh...Nico...Nicholas..."

He heard the way her voice caught and decided to ignore it. The warmth of her breast in his hand felt too rich to forfeit for the sake of semantics. His thumb grazed over her nipple, his right hand sliding downward, fingers intent on undoing the clasp of her jeans before sensibility caught up with either of them. He'd felt her pulse around him not too long ago. Her sopping, blissful warmth humming richly around his fingers as liquid desire leaked from her body, as she gave him paradise no man before him had ever touched. He wanted to feel that again. He wanted her naked pussy against his hand, her wetness spilling onto his skin, her craving there for him and him alone to claim.

"Tell me about our first time," he whispered, feeling cruel for pushing on a lie. He didn't ask out of malice. He felt genuinely curious how, in this fantasy world of hers, two unlikely beings such as themselves had tumbled into each other's arms. Perhaps he searched for some connection, for a trigger that would unleash a memory the world had kept him from touching. He didn't know. Everything felt so confused. He wanted a reason to believe

her, no matter how crazy it seemed. He wanted to prove himself wrong. He wanted her to show him reason.

He wanted to *believe*.

Raven blinked, her head flying back so hard she nearly knocked herself out on the tree behind her. "You want..."

His other hand abandoned her breast to drag her jeans down her legs completely, and he fell on his knees before he could keep up with himself, anxiously working the cuff of her pants over one of her shoes. It didn't occur to him until her leg was free to just remove the damn thing, and by that time, he didn't care. He just wanted her open to him. "I came to kill you," he started for her. "Why'd I come to kill you?"

Nicholas glanced up to focus on the simple white cotton of her panties, and the damp line of her honey pooling in the crotch. She was wet for him. Christ, she was wet. He hadn't known it was possible for girls to get this wet. His bed had been occupied by a woman who took her pleasures and enjoyed them, sure, but never responded to *him* as an object of desire beyond what he could do to her body.

Raven drenched him because of what he meant to her, not just because he touched her or because she knew what would happen between them. No, she desired *him* and *him* alone.

A thrill raced down his spine.

Nothing in the world felt like this.

"I'm One of the Few," she responded, her voice trembling, her hips thrusting forward, waving her rich scent into the air and teasing his taste buds like the embodiment of forbidden fruit she symbolized. "You came to kill me."

"Seems reasonable enough," he agreed, raising his hand to the tantalizing fabric guarding her pussy. "You're the enemy, after all." He pressed his index finger against the wet center, trembling when she threw her head back and moaned. In all his years, he'd never seen anything so sexy. Octavia had dolled herself up in black lace and decorated her pale legs with fishnet stockings a time or two, but Raven, in her plain panties and her worn t-shirt defeated every conventional stereotype of desire. She was purity and radiance, wet and warm and wiggling beneath his gentle touch.

*Mine...*

She belonged to him.

The roar of the demon could not be denied.

“You were angry.”

“With you? Somehow I don’t figure that’s much of a stretch either.”

Nicholas grinned and licked his lips, hooking his fingers around the crotch of her panties to brush the annoying fabric aside and baring her juicy flesh to his hungry eyes. Her mound looked and felt almost as he remembered from their magic-induced tryst on her birthday. She felt smooth, plump, slick and...shaven? This was new, something she’d changed since he’d last touched her. Had she done it for him?

*Christ*, he hoped she’d done it for him. Especially for the way he couldn’t hold back his whimper or the famished lick his tongue gave his lips.

“Did I do this to you?” he murmured, his thumb finding her clit and rubbing it softly. “Did I get on my knees and taste this juicy cunt of yours?”

Raven choked a sob and nodded. “Oh...”

Nicholas’s brows perked. He honestly hadn’t expected her to confirm anything. Virgins were never too imaginative, at least that seemed to be what the years had taught him to believe. Not that he’d spent too much time deflowering virgins. Octavia lived as the only woman he’d ever bedded, and she’d been far from chaste the first time she’d welcomed him inside her body.

“I did?” he repeated, not bothering to mask his surprise.

“Yes, you were...” Raven’s teeth scraped her lower lip with such reckless seduction he nearly gasped. “You were teaching me.”

“Teaching?”

“Y-you...I’d never...”

Nicholas’s eyes remained glued on her face before trailing downward, focusing with hungry intent on her soft forbidden flesh. “What did I teach you?” he whispered. The answer seemed already within his grasp. He just wanted to hear her give it voice. “Tell me what I taught you.”

Raven gasped and bucked against his hand. “You came to kill...’cause you hated me.”

“I taught you that?”

“Then you bit me.”

Just the idea of her blood had his cock at full attention. A low growl rumbled in the back of his throat, his thumb’s attention to her clit becoming

more conscientious. He loved the way the slippery little pearl felt under his fingertips. "I bit you?" he repeated, his voice suddenly hoarse. "God..."

Raven nodded desperately and arched again into his touch. "Nicolai..."

"Nicholas," he corrected. It seemed important for them both to make the distinction. Nicolai implied a history that didn't exist. Or if it did exist—if he believed her insane story—a history he didn't remember. In that instance, the whisper of his true name became something beyond a different name by which to call him.

Calling him *Nicolai* impressed upon him the burden of memories he didn't possess. Calling him *Nicolai* made him undervalued as the man he was now. He wanted Raven to want *him*, not some aged memory of something which could very well be an elaborate hallucination, affecting her now like a well-detailed acid trip.

If he had Raven, he needed to know she knew *his* name. He needed her to know it was *him*—Nicholas. England's native son, born as a vampire in the nineteenth century courtesy of Octavia, and slave to her every whim until this amazing woman, One of the Few, danced onto the scene before his very eager eyes.

It stood to reason why he'd stressed the name before, and why he stressed it now.

He wasn't Raven's precious Nicolai.

"Oh..."

"My name. Say it."

Raven cooed, thrusting her pussy against him with reckless abandon of which he didn't think her entirely aware. "Nicholas."

"That's right. *Nicholas*. Say it again."

"Nicholas."

"Mmm. That's lovely, that is." He rewarded her obedience by taking a quick lap up her drenched slit with his tongue, rolling her divine flavor in his mouth. She tasted so warm and sweet. If purity had a taste, it would be found in Raven Rayne. "So is that it, then?" he asked, smacking his lips.

A long mewl tore through her throat. "Nicolai..."

"*Nicholas*."

"Nicholas," she agreed, but her tone indicated a sort of absence from understanding. She seemed only half with him, only half listening. While he

loved knowing he could drive her mad with a few simple touches, there were things too important to gloss over.

“Raven, my name.”

She blinked and glanced down, meeting his eyes. “Nicholas,” she said. “I’m sorry...I’ll—”

“I’m not him. I’m not your white knight.” His lips clamped hard around her clit and favored her with a good hard suck, two eager fingers slipping across her labia and massaging her juicy flesh with a mind solely aimed at driving her as crazy as she’d driven him. Fuck if he’d ever tasted anything like this. He’d never get enough of her, of this, of her rich honey. He wanted to drink this every day. He wanted to sample her and know her wetness was for him and him alone to taste.

He’d never known anyone who wanted him so. The knowledge intoxicated him.

“I’m not him,” he said again. His tongue flicked over her precious little button as his fingers slipped at last between her vaginal lips and teased the tightness of her opening. “I’m *not*.”

“I wished for you,” she insisted on a sob.

“You got something else. There’s no way I’d ever forget this.” He nipped at her, easing his fingers deeper within her pussy. She clamped down hard around him, sucking him in, dragging any chunk of him that she could into a place no man had ever before explored. It felt momentous, beyond anything he’d ever experienced. It belonged to him. No one could take this away.

It seemed impossible to look at the way she accepted his fingers without his cock straining at the feel. Christ, she felt so tight. She was the hottest girl he’d ever known. Beyond other humans whose heat, at times, inebriated, Raven embraced a new drug all in herself. He wanted her. He wanted everything she had to give him. He wanted to feel her body pulse around his fingers just as he wanted to watch his dick slide in and out of her wet sanctuary. He wanted it all.

Above all else, he wanted her to know his name.

“No way I’d forget this,” he murmured again, his fingers assuming a natural rhythm as they pumped her sweet little hole. “No way I’d forget fighting with you. Fucking you. Watching you bounce on my cock. No way.”

She trembled hard beneath him, a hoarse, desperate gasp clawing for freedom. "I loved you."

The words made his heart sing and his demon purr with delight, but he had to shove them off and away. They weren't true. They couldn't be. Raven didn't love him. She loved *Nicolai*—the figment, the allusion of a thing that didn't exist.

"You can love me like this," he countered. "Learn to love me like this."

"I do."

Nicholas froze, his gaze shooting upward. She couldn't have meant that. No way she even knew what she confessed. No way she could mean it, even if she did have her wits about her. The girl was dumb with love for the guy she wanted him to be. She couldn't mean she loved the one with her now; the man whose fingers slowly took her tender pussy, whose tongue kept flicking her clit, whose mouth stood a shrine to her taste.

No way she loved him. She loved the reminder. She couldn't love Nicholas because Nicholas wasn't what she wanted.

"Don't say that," he growled, his voice angrier than he'd intended. "Don't say things you don't mean."

Raven blinked stupidly. "But I—"

"You can't even get the name right." Nicholas huffed indignantly and gently tugged her clit between his teeth again. He toyed with her without hurting her, rolled her in his mouth and trembled when she whimpered and quivered against him. Then, just as quickly, he abandoned her ripe little gem and handed it to the care of his fingers.

His tongue felt in the mood to dive.

"I do love you, Nicholas."

The voice barely sounded like hers. Desperation lived in her tone, desperation that didn't sound like Raven at all. She sounded completely foreign at that moment, her voice heightened with an accent he knew she didn't possess.

"No, you don't."

His tongue channeled his outrage at the injustice of her declaration, plunging inside her hot, tight cunt with the intention of marking her so she'd never again mistake him for someone else. He should have known, of course, that the greatest masterminds were always foils to themselves. The drops of dew he'd licked off his fingers had nothing on the unbridled taste

of her trickling down his throat, of the sensation of drowning in hot perfection without any want of a lifeline. Nicholas was a goner, and he knew it.

No coming back from this.

She murmured a name, but he honestly didn't hear which. His mind was stuck on the former, the one she wanted him to be, and the phantom's name enraged him, but he couldn't deny himself. Instead, Nicholas poured all his aggression into devouring her as she'd never been devoured. His fingers manipulated her clit, his tongue thrusting so deep inside her he worried he might get stuck that way. There seemed no better place to be, not with Raven under his hands, her blood hot for him.

Even still, he didn't want the name on her lips to matter, but matter it did.

*Know me. Know ME. KNOW ME!*

The welcome baptism of her orgasm had him drenched, but he didn't care. He hogged it all, the delicious flavor of her honey, the stolen laps at her inner walls as his fingers teased her. He could tease her forever. He could remain here forever. He could.

Only nothing could prevent the truth from separating them.

How much time passed, he didn't know. Nicholas found his cheek pressed against the warmth of her belly, her fingers curled lovingly through his hair as the cool breeze of night settled down upon them.

"I know who you are," Raven whispered at last, her voice hoarse. "I really do."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

"You've changed. We both have." Her fingers continued to drift through his hair, and while he felt torn inside, there burned peace with her that he'd never found before.

He might be only a visage of what she wanted, but it seemed closer than he'd ever come to perfection. He'd be a dolt to give it up on the case of mistaken identity.

No matter how much he wanted to be Nicolai. Because from the sound of things, Nicolai had it pretty great before he ran off and got himself killed.

"Raven..."

"I know who you are, Nicholas."

"But this isn't what you want."

He flinched inwardly. There were times when his thoughts and his actions really didn't agree.

"No, it—"

"I'm not what you want. I'm not Nicolai. I'm just..." He trembled. "I'm drawn to you. God knows I am. Always have had a thing for your kind. And it's different with you. I don't know if it has anything to do with what you've told me—"

"Nicholas—"

"My life's gone lopsided, you hear? I came here to kill you and now..."

He felt her humorless chuckle. "We're two-for-two."

"Raven, I'm serious."

"So am I. It's kinda funny when you think about it."

"A laugh riot for those who get the joke, I'm sure." He pulled back and met her eyes, willing her to see inside him. "You might've loved this guy, sweetheart, but I'm not him."

"Yes, you are."

"No, kitten, I'm not. And if we do this, it can't be about...*him*. It has to be you and me. You and *me*. If you can't love me for not being him or—"

"But I—"

Nicholas held up a hand. "You can't love me. If I'm not him, there's nothing but a pipe dream. And someday you'll realize it."

Raven stared at him for a long time but said nothing.

He'd never seen joy melt into sorrow so quickly.

He'd never seen anyone look so haunted.

Nicholas sighed and tugged her down before he could stop himself, folding her small, perfect body in the welcoming protection of his arms. He didn't know what to do anymore and he honestly didn't know if he cared. All he did know was his reality had mucked up beyond repair. The girl he'd meant to destroy was suddenly the one thing worth living for.

He didn't know what it meant, and he felt too blasted tired to try to figure it out now.

Right now, he wanted to hold her in the quiet and have a few stolen moments with his night angel.

## Chapter 15

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

He would absolutely wring her neck when he got a hold of her. After, of course, he got his fill of caressing her skin and kissing her lips and feeling the steady beat of her heart beneath his fingertips. After he felt certain, once and for all, she was all right.

Then he would kill her for making him worry.

Nicolai had never felt such a starving pang of desperate panic as when he awoke that morning and found himself in an empty bed and his arms still tingling with the warmth his beloved left saturated in his skin. He didn't know how long ago she'd left—her heavenly aroma still lingered in the air. But she had gone, and he remained trapped by sunlight.

He had no doubt as to where she'd gone, especially after listening to the heartbreaking ring of her sobs all night after Kenneth and his merry troop had given up their search. For the few, blissful months they'd been together, Ravenna had lived under a shadow of paralyzing fear that their happiness would eventually meet the business end of a stake. She'd never been quiet about what kept her up at night or her worries that Kenneth would take Nicolai away from her, as though, in Kenneth's mind, he was a possession—a toy his pseudo-daughter enjoyed but couldn't have for keeps.

Ravenna hadn't heard the implication in her words when relaying her fears, but Nicolai had. It outraged him. Not for the way she spoke, rather for the way Kenneth had taught her to view herself. She referred to herself as the property of the High Council, as though she hadn't the faculties, the free will or the components of a true human being. In that sense, she meant nothing more to the world than a weapon with arms and legs.

It maddened and devastated him. His precious girl had lived under this presumption for so long. She'd believed herself to be less than human because of the nature of her calling.

Nicolai supposed that it remained a way for the High Council kept the Few in line. The old buggers knew a thing or two about the balance of power. If they let the Few live under the delusion that they were human and entitled to everything inherent in their nature, they might eventually wise up to the fact that they were not only human, but damned strong.

They had strength men feared.

It seemed human nature to belittle and demean what it did not understand. After all, if the Few ever got to a point where they realized they were only as weak as their Guardians made them believe, there would be all hell to pay.

A cold thought paralyzed his insides. God, could it be he was to blame? Had Nicolai fed Ravenna with too much animosity toward Kenneth and his Machiavellian rule over her that she'd decided to go and end it in person? Or had she gone with only Nicolai's welfare at heart? Had she truly been so blind as to not realize that Kenneth meant for her to share whatever fate he had in store for her vampire mate?

Ravenna had too much faith in the will of human goodness, whereas Nicolai had lived too long to believe anything could ever be so black and white. He'd seen evil that would make the darkest of dark creatures cower in the shadows, evil no demon could fathom, produced by the hand of man. Man wasn't a just or moral creature, rather one that craved blood and domination, often at the expense of others. There existed no superior inner good, only a bedtime story mothers told children to justify acts of horrific violence. Man lived to control and destroy, and there stood no better example than Kenneth Mal.

Though to be fair, Nicolai knew that forms of human goodness did exist, despite his cynicism. He'd seen more than his fair share of warmth and compassion between and among God's favored creation. Most vampires silently lamented its loss after they were born into the night. It was the sort of love that held civilizations together. No, not all was black, gruesome death in the human world. Love existed. Love many demons never touched, and therefore resented above all else.

It was a love Nicolai had somehow found, and one Kenneth Mal would not deny him. If one hair on Ravenna's precious head were harmed, Nicolai would give the tragedians something to write about. He would rip the arms off every miserable soul in the village. He would shred flesh with his teeth, make husbands watch the slaughter of their wives. He would make the world feel the pain it had inflicted upon him. He would redefine his species so that vampires became more than the damned. They would be called Lucifer's own children, and even then, he doubted his agony-inspired blood thirst would be avenged.

Kenneth better pray that no harm came to Ravenna, else the world pay with blood.

As it stood, the only thing keeping Nicolai from completely losing his head was the knowledge that the old man wouldn't be satisfied with Ravenna's death alone. No matter how disgusted Mal felt by her actions, his revulsion paled in comparison for how he viewed her vampire corruptor. Any action taken against Ravenna would therefore be molded to draw Nicolai out of the shadows and into open territory. Kenneth knew as well as he did that live bait always captured the bigger fish.

Ravenna *had* to be alive. She *had* to be.

At least until he got his hands on her and shook her gorgeous self for doing the impossible, for making an immortal man age with anxiety.

She lived. She did. Beyond logic, beyond understanding, he felt her. He felt her richly. The claim's call could not be denied. He felt the gentle pulse of her life, weaker than usual but very much there. She felt frail through their connection. She felt small. She felt like anything but what she was.

She felt *drugged*.

Nicolai snarled in victory as the last of sunlight dipped under the horizon. His beloved remained out there. Her Guardian had pumped toxins into her blood, and for him there would be no mercy.

There were only a handful of instances when Nicolai had been drawn into the heart of the village. Once or twice when he needed food and couldn't find any witless stragglers on whom to feed, and a few times before he admitted his love for Ravenna and could do nothing but watch her from a distance, coveting something he didn't wish to name. Most older vampires felt it wiser, especially when living in solitude in under-populated areas, to live as far from the public eye as possible. The Americas had one or two

actual cities, but none with the booming population of London or other choice European destinations. In smaller villages, creatures of the night often drew unwanted attention.

Most of the older generation knew the rules, or had at least devised a system for living that kept their presence unnoticed.

Now, if they lived in Paris, circumstances would differ entirely. So many people, so much distraction...so much good eating.

Nicolai supposed he should count his blessings. Had Ravenna lived anywhere else, she likely would have killed him well before they had the opportunity to discover how desperately they loved each other. He made note to thank the good Lord later. Right now he felt too starved for her touch and at too much of a loss to know where to aim his feet.

He didn't remain indecisive for long. Another perk of small villages was it seemed easy to pick out the angry mobs, especially when they wielded torches.

*Torches.*

A sharp breath caught in Nicolai's throat, and at once he knew.

He *knew*.

"Christ," he breathed.

He hadn't seen a burning in ages. The only one he'd attended had taken place outside St. Salvator's Chapel, a religious execution of God-fearing men who didn't fear God enough to keep them from setting so-called heretics on fire. A century and a half had passed since then. It had been so long that Nicolai had thought the practice very much outdated. However, one didn't forget the signs of a burning after having seen human savagery at its best.

They planned to burn Ravenna.

His inner monster roared in fury and suddenly fell blind to logistics and rationality. The demon didn't care that raging into a sea of men with torches would not only ensure his death but confirm Ravenna's sentence as well. The demon just knew his mate dangled in danger, and his nerves felt split. He didn't give a righteous damn about himself. He just needed to get her to safety.

Something he couldn't well do if he died.

Thankfully, the demon soon felt overpowered by the man's sense of reason. Nicolai's options were minimal at best. He had super-strength on his

side but little else. He hadn't a legion of loyal followers ready to take the village by storm, and even if he did get to Ravenna without managing to get himself killed in the process, the chances of escape for either of them were weighed against grim odds. While he didn't rightly care too much about the safety of his own hide, he knew his girl.

He knew her. She embodied his equal in every way. Just as he wanted to rip the world apart now, if something happened to *him*, she wouldn't think straight. The world would quiver at her rage.

"Balls," Nicolai cursed, the screaming components of his brain beating through the walls of reason. "Think, you moron. Think."

The claim stirred, and he felt her emerging slowly from unconsciousness. With the first pang of fear which raced through her heart, he gave way to panic without further consideration. He had no time to stand around and devise some grand plan. He needed to think something up *fast*, something to create a few minutes. Ninety seconds would do. Whatever could get him to Ravenna without the eyes of a crowd to witness her escape.

What he needed was a diversion.

The word alone sparked something in his brain. A diversion. He could create a diversion. It shouldn't be too difficult. Just get the angry mob to shift their focus from Point A to Point B. Diversions were simple. People in groups were daft by default. If one pointed at something, the masses would look. He'd need nothing else but a quick diversion, something monumental enough to distract them from the burning.

Something like another burning.

Nicolai drew in a sharp breath, his legs breaking into a run as the clockwork of his mind cranked and churned and formed the outline of what would have to be his plan. He hadn't time for anything else. By the time he reached the outskirts of the riot, he'd convinced himself it was solid enough to accomplish what he needed accomplished.

It had to be. He had nothing else.

"Oi, you!" he called to the first one he saw—a kid of about nineteen, maybe twenty, holding a torch and migrating slowly to the heat of the commotion. The kid turned around, a look of unbridled eagerness on his face. Nicolai forced his temper down. "What's the ruckus?"

The kid blinked and pinned him with a plainly incredulous look. “You mean you haven’t heard? Town’s got us a witch. There’s gonna be a burning t’night.”

Nicolai arched a brow. “A witch?”

“Ole Man Mal confirmed it. His girl, Ravie. Know Ravie?”

He gritted his teeth and did his best to keep his demon at bay. He just needed that torch. “I’ve heard of her.”

“Pretty girl. It’s a shame, is what it is. I’ve always wanted a peek up her skirt. If she weren’t a damned witch...” The kid broke off and shook his head heavily. Then, belatedly, a frown marred his brow and he glanced up, his eyes narrowing as he took Nicolai in. “Wait. What’d you say your name was?”

It was the last thing the kid would have a chance to say. In a blink, he’d collapsed in a heap, his neck snapped, and his torch in Nicolai’s possession.

“Someone oughta teach youngsters not to talk to strangers,” he muttered.

He felt truly fortunate that people in mobs were so stupid.

It made them so much easier to kill.

\* \* \* \*

The sky seemed on fire.

Every muscle in her body felt too weak to be her own. Her wrists were bound behind her back, and she discovered herself propped against a wooden pole. Straw, planks of wood, and a gathering of sticks surrounded her feet. The air thickened with the scent of smoke. She ached. She hurt. She thirsted.

She would die.

Ravenna fought to open her eyes.

*Oh God.*

The sky was indeed on fire.

Her throat was scratchy. Her eyes were dry, and her skin felt rubbed raw.

A memory surfaced then. She recalled falling to the floor of the Mal cottage. She remembered seeing the broken shards of the poisoned drink Kenneth had brewed for her. She remembered defeat. She’d gone to

Kenneth, but damn all if she remembered why. She only knew it had seemed important at the time.

*I am such a fool.*

Ravenna closed her eyes again. She stretched her arms against her bonds to little avail. Whatever Kenneth had put in her drink had rendered her with the strength of a kitten. Every pull against the ropes left her winded and weaker than she'd known possible.

She'd never been weak. Never. Not as a child, not as a young woman, and definitely not as One of the Few.

Kenneth had made her weak.

Now he would kill her.

*Nicolai.*

Ravenna's heart collapsed. Oh God. Nicolai. Nicolai hadn't known where she'd gone. She'd left him without a word, without a note, without any indication as to her intention. She'd left the solace of his bedside and walked willingly into a death trap.

She'd left Nicolai without saying goodbye.

"I'm so sorry, Nicolai," she whispered, tears prickling her eyes. "Forgive me."

"We'll talk about forgiveness later," came a voice she felt at once certain she'd dreamt up. "After I've tanned your pretty hide."

A gasp seized her throat, and her eyes flew open just as she felt the gentle touch of her lover's hands at her sore wrists. In less than an instant she tumbled free and nothing existed but Nicolai's arms around her, the firmness of his shoulder against her cheek and his chest pressed hard against hers.

"I mean it," he continued, pressing a fierce kiss against her brow. "You're not gonna be able to sit on your glorious rear for weeks. And not for the fun reason."

"Nicolai, how—"

"Later, darling. Just hold onto me."

Ravenna immediately complied. She would never again hesitate to do whatever he asked. Never.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again. "I didn't mean—"

"Not the time for sorrys. Save them for when we're in the clear."

In the next second, he lifted her entirely into his arms and then they were moving, the flames of hell licking her heels. They kept onward fast through a thicket of trees. She heard screams in the distance but didn't care to see their cause.

Nicolai had come after her.

"Of course I came after you," he said shortly, not breaking his furious stride. "I love you, no matter how stupid you get."

"Nicolai..."

"Don't *ever* think I won't come for you. Death couldn't stop me."

Her heart skipped a beat. "How did you get them—"

"Let's just say torch-wielding villagers don't seem to like fire so much when it touches their houses." Nicolai flashed her an ironic grin. "Figured those bastards deserved a—"

A sound she knew well whistled through the air, though for a few tragic seconds, a wall in her mind refused to connect knowledge with understanding. It wasn't until the arrow tore through layers of clothing, dampened with her lover's blood and veiled thinly with chunks of torn flesh that comprehension arrived.

"Oh God!"

"It's nothing," Nicolai barked, not slowing down.

He was wrong. Kenneth was behind them, chasing them, and he always would. There would never be a moment's rest.

"Nicolai—"

"It's *nothing*."

Tears scaled down her cheeks. Say what he might, she had made him bleed. Everything seemed her fault. He would heal, but they would always feel this knowledge that she had nearly cost them everything.

*Everything.*

If she lived a thousand years, Ravenna was certain she would never forgive herself.

## Chapter 16

### *Present Day*

The spare room of their shared home often served as sparring or training space when Dexter felt Raven needed to perfect a certain attack or have a quiet space in which to study. Very rarely did Raven willingly volunteer time, but this morning, she felt like burning steam, and Dexter had quickly obliged.

“He confirmed it then.”

Raven nodded as she stepped back, lowering her sword. “He even had a reason for everything. For making me forget. For making Nico...Nicholas forget. For listing Nicolai as my killer,” she said bitterly, shaking the ache that lingered in her arm away. “You know that line in *The Exorcist*...he lies with the truth?”

Dexter blinked hard, looking about three seconds away from falling over. There were times during their training sessions when she forgot to go slow so as to not give him a heart attack at a tragically young age. Now that she had her memories from her first life back, it seemed doubly hard to keep her compounded knowledge at bay.

“I don’t...remember,” the Guardian panted, digging the tip of the sword into the floor so he could lean on the hilt. “Was that...line in the movie?”

She made a face. “Maybe not. But it would’ve been a good line.”

“I’m sure.”

“Point being that Paimon didn’t lie to me. I just...” Raven broke off again and shook her head. “It took me all night to admit that, and it still sounds very wrong. He took everything. He did it...”

“For gain, I’d think,” Dexter agreed, doing his best to look dignified even with sweat dripping down his brow.

“Have I mentioned how much I really hate demons?”

A soft, poignant smile crossed the Guardian's face. "It will make you think twice before striking a bargain with one in the future," he observed. "I imagine it wasn't a coincidence."

"What?"

"Paimon seeking you out like this, after you've discovered the true nature of your history."

Raven lowered her eyes, a fresh rush of shame spilling through her veins. Dexter had acted very cautious with her, very brotherly in trying to help her disclose as much information as she felt comfortable giving. He hadn't asked again what her debt to Paimon was since she first confessed the deal. Though she knew she lacked time to be secretive, the idea of admitting her sin made it more tangible. It made the price she had to pay something concrete rather than just an abstract idea.

How was she supposed to tell the man who had instilled in her more sense of self than anyone, the man who had driven home the importance of her duties, that three hundred years prior she'd given up the very powers that made her unique?

That in a few days, if Paimon got his way, she would no longer be One of the Few?

Funny. What she'd bargained had seemed something she would never miss, especially during her first life. She'd bemoaned the duties of being One of the Few for so long that the idea that it might all be ripped away had often come in thoughts surrounded by white fluff rather than crisp ashes.

It seemed that even her subconscious leaned toward the perils of Hell nowadays.

"You're not wrong," she confessed. "It's payment time. He says I have a week before I have to pay up."

Dexter nodded solemnly and though she could see words pressing against his lips, he didn't make a sound. She knew he wouldn't ask unless they were down to the wire, and even then he might hesitate. The foundation of their relationship, the glue of their *friendship*, stood soundly on the issue of trust, which was, admittedly, part of the problem. Until recently, they had confided everything in each other. Now, the issue of her true past and relationship with Nicolai was wedged between them. Though she knew she hadn't intended to hurt her Guardian, Dexter had to feel betrayed on some level.

Yet he'd never punish her for it, and he'd let her come to him in her own time.

Then suddenly, Raven felt she couldn't stand silent any longer. She couldn't rely only on herself, especially when Dexter was so supportive. Not once had he admonished her for the decisions she made, past or present. It didn't seem a startling revelation on Raven's part, but it was revelation enough. Dexter had come through for her in a big way. He appeared the anti-Kenneth, and if anything, he'd proven he wouldn't judge her.

It didn't matter to him that she'd essentially destroyed his career. The High Council had trusted him with her, and though the events tearing them apart had been set in motion centuries before, she couldn't help the rush of guilt that she'd destroyed everything her Guardian had worked toward. His reputation, his future, lay in her hands. She'd shattered everything and she hadn't even known it.

Hurting Dexter made her hate herself. However, she owed him an explanation. He had to know what to expect.

"It's me, Dex. My place as One of the Few, and everything that comes with it. It'll be gone."

He blinked rapidly in astonishment. She didn't blame him. The announcement came without preamble, though its meaning was easily deciphered. He clearly hadn't expected her to forfeit anything without a fight.

Thus, his reaction was not altogether surprising. In fact, it provided her with an odd surge of reassurance.

"What?"

"That's what I gave him. I asked him to name his price, and that was what it was. Me. I gave him my strength." Raven tore her eyes away, her heart racketing hard against her chest. "It sounded harmless. Or maybe it didn't. I was prepared to do anything to get Nicolai back. The price didn't matter to me. I would've given him my soul if he'd asked for it."

A long beat. "And he did not?"

Dexter didn't sound like the Dexter she knew. He sounded very much like just-saw-a-ghost-Dexter, and she'd done that to him.

Raven glanced up. At the very least she could own up to her crime and look him in the eye. Hiding wouldn't solve a damn thing. "No," she replied softly. "According to Paimon, souls of the Few are no good. As the warriors

of the peace, or whatever, we get this nifty little no touchy, no torture pass from the good side of the High Council. Even if he had taken my soul, I would've been off-limits."

"So he asked for you instead. Your power." She nodded as Dexter's eyes narrowed. "The thing guarding your soul. He asked for that, and you gave it to him."

The world froze around her, and Raven's eyes went wide. "Oh God."

"Raven..."

"Oh my God."

Dexter held up a hand. "I didn't mean to scare you—"

"Well, you're a bit late for that."

"Demons are bound to their word. As long as you consented to give him only your strength." He paused and cleared his throat. "Your strength...As long as the language allowed no room for the removal of your soul as an additional or penalty clause—"

"I didn't. This predates fine print, Dexter."

"Obviously not."

Raven swallowed hard. "I meant the literal sort of fine print. The trade was pretty even. Me and Nicolai for my strength."

He nodded numbly. "And only your strength? The warrior part of you?"

"Yeah. And don't get me wrong, because I'm kinda loving the lack of screaming at me, but why aren't you more worried than this?" Raven worried a lip between her teeth and shuffled her weight from one leg to the other. "I kinda figured you'd pull a major spaz and go all Rambo Dexter on me."

A ghost of what could have been a smile crossed his lips. He nodded and glanced down. "I think I was prepared for the price to be your soul. Your strength...Don't get me wrong, Raven, this is very serious. It's unprecedented and it could throw the whole cosmos out of balance."

This seemed more of what she'd expected.

"However," Dexter continued, clearing his throat. "I think I'm relieved."

"Relieved?"

"Torn between losing your strength and losing your soul, well, yes would be the short answer." A still sober beat passed between them. "I should consult the High Council or books or whatever you consult for these things. While I'm certain a demon of Paimon's notoriety wouldn't make a

mistake, there is the question of the possibility of any such removal in the first place.”

Raven frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The High Council has selected warriors. They always have. It brings balance and order to the world. I’m not sure if there...” Dexter trailed off thoughtfully. “I suppose the removal of your power would be seen, in essence, as your death.”

“And what happens to you?”

He shrugged. “I suppose I check the want ads.”

“No...”

“I’ve only been your Guardian for five years. That’s five years longer than some, but I doubt the High Council would forgive something this monstrously huge, regardless of circumstances.”

“No, Dex. God, everything you sacrificed—”

“Don’t worry about that,” he said softly. “You’re what matters to me.”

The words, coupled with the tender look in his eyes, nearly rendered her to tears. “But working for the High Council is your life.”

He grinned, which surprised her. It didn’t seem appropriate. “I’d like to think I have a bit more of a life than that. Anyway, Raven, as I said...you’re much more important to me than the High Council. Whatever happens happens, all right?”

She fell quiet for a long minute. “It was because I was the One of the Few that Nicolai was killed, Dexter,” she said, knowing explanations weren’t required but feeling she owed him one nonetheless. “If I hadn’t been—”

“You and Nicolai would have never crossed paths,” he supplied softly.

“No, we would have. It just would’ve been different.”

Of that she felt certain. No matter what lives they led or what bodies they inhabited, Raven remained convinced she and Nicolai had been meant to live a part of one another’s lives in some revolutionary, significant fashion. In her past life it had been a mere accident of fortune that brought them together, but had she not been One of the Few he would have found her anyway. Now Nicolai had found her again, this time in the form of Nicholas. Even if the history between them didn’t exist, she had no doubt that they would have created a new history together. Had there been no bargain, had they merely belonged to this world without having lived before,

their paths would have crossed in the same fashion. They would have fought, laughed, bled, made love, cried, and everything in between. But they would have known each other.

They were meant to know each other.

"It's a romantic notion," Dexter said.

"It's the truth."

"I know better than to argue with you." He heaved a long, burdened sigh. "The debt you owe is to forsake your birthright, to no longer be One of the Few."

"I didn't know you when I made this deal, Dexter."

His eyes bore no condemnation. "I am not accusing you of anything."

"I still feel like I should..." A heavy sigh lifted off her shoulders, directing her eyes downward once more. "I know I've always talked about wanting a normal life and how much easier it would be on me if I weren't One of the Few. I never wanted this, though. Never. It was all talk, you know? Just stupid things you say...like *I wish I'd never been born* or something like that."

Dexter smiled faintly. "Believe it or not, Raven, I know."

"I just wish I'd been better...for you."

"You keep talking as though the world is ending." He paused. "Though I suppose if it was, we'd know how to face it."

"I just never appreciated how good I have it. Compared to Kenneth..." A dark shudder ran through her. "I haven't been grateful enough."

He held up a hand. "And as much as I'm owed the apologies I have coming for the countless times you've shaved years off my life, I don't want you to assume that this bargain you made with Paimon is the final word in anything."

Raven's eyes narrowed. "Do the words *unbreakable stone tablet* mean anything to you?"

"Not really."

"How about *signed in blood*? Or hey, we can put them all together. I signed an *unbreakable stone tablet in my blood*. There's no way—"

The Guardian shook his head. "There are always loopholes."

"Dexter—"

"I know, I know. Paimon is an old and clever Hell King. Some of the stories I've read of his account credit him with things that would keep you

up nights. He would've made sure the deal was legitimate. He would have made it foolproof." Dexter's gentle smile grew wider, not with happiness, rather with hope. "But you and I, despite appearances, are not fools. There are always loopholes."

"I don't want you getting involved in this," Raven protested. "If something happened to you because of this mess I created, I don't—"

"Don't worry about me."

Irritation nagged at her nerves. It seemed impossible to hear those words without recalling a certain vampire some three hundred years ago who had said the same thing. Only now the enemy wasn't a human man with human faults. Now the enemy stood a creature of Hell itself who held the power to make her see the source of Dante's *Inferno*. A creature that made good on his promises, depending on how he wished to interpret them.

Still, she couldn't deny the warmth that might cushion the impending fall. She could say nothing to Dexter to keep him from doing something stupid on her behalf, because he loved her. He remained her keeper, her brother, her mentor, everything she'd needed for three centuries. No matter what it cost him, no matter what came, he would not let her face the end alone.

He would stand with her because he loved her. For some wonderful, unknown reason, he likewise understood.

"I don't suppose," Dexter continued a few minutes later. He heaved himself back to his feet and raised his sword to indicate that she should do the same, "that Nicholas has attempted to contact you since your birthday?"

Heat kissed her cheeks, and Raven glanced down. "Um...I must've skipped that part."

The Guardian's eyes widened. "He *has* attempted contact?"

"About three seconds after Paimon vanished, Nicholas was very much there." Then he'd done things to her body that made her heart sing and inspired tears to her achingly tired eyes. For a man who didn't remember her at all, he certainly knew how she liked to be touched. Granted, Nicolai remained the only other man who had ever gotten so close and he'd introduced Raven to what she liked. Since Nicholas was Nicolai sans the recollection, it made sense that he would do the exact same.

After all, she thought darkly, he'd had a buttload of time to practice on his girlfriend.

“Since you neglected to mention this upon arriving, I suspect the visit was not altogether a good one.”

She hadn’t mentioned meeting Nicholas in the cemetery because she didn’t want to provide her surrogate brother with any more X-rated images than she already had. The thought alone felt too awkward.

“Well, he showed up all grumpy, if that’s what you mean,” Raven said, still refusing to meet his eyes. “He was mad because Octavia had tossed him out, and he thought it was my fault. Or something. But the fight didn’t last long.”

Dexter was quiet.

“He doesn’t remember.”

“Right now?”

Raven shook her head. “I don’t think he will. Paimon said the claim was what kept our memories guarded. For me, at least...it was what—”

“You were *claimed*?” Dexter demanded, his normally-quiet voice quite possibly rocking the Richter-Scale. “You and Nicolai were *mates*?”

The suddenness of the outburst had her jumping. “I didn’t tell you?”

“I think this is something I would’ve been inclined to remember.”

“We were mated, yeah. We did the claimy thing.” Raven worried a lip between her teeth, her heart suddenly thundering hard against her chest. “He was all I had, Dexter.”

It seemed a thousand years passed before the tension in her Guardian’s body at last relaxed, before he offered a gentle nod, his mouth forming a resolved line. “I do not begrudge you—”

“Really? ‘Cause the yelling sounded like a helping of *grudge* with a side of *be*.”

“It’s just unprecedented, is all. Of course it makes perfect sense how your memories would become unlocked when you were at your most vulnerable. But it’s never done, Raven.”

“We’ve studied it,” she replied. “I remember it being something we talked about before going before the High Council.”

“Because it’s an incredibly potent bond, considered sacred. That’s very true. But it’s never done.” He shook his head in amazement. “The practice of claiming mates is almost as ancient as the old paradigm of caveman bashing his choice of mate with a club before tossing her over his shoulder. I don’t believe there are *any* modern examples of vampires who have been

mated, or even gave the ritual any sort of thought. A vampiric claim is the oldest sort of blood-bond in known history, more powerful than the deepest magicks and more respected than, God, anything I can think of.” He paused, and the air seemed to pause with him. “And unbreakable. Blood is binding, eternal, everlasting. Blood links you. To assume the blood of another is to assert that life as being your own. It places so much power into the hands of another. Since vampires are duplicitous in nature, many would utilize that power to an ugly personal advantage. If Nicolai wanted to mate with you like that...”

“It wasn’t to use me, Dexter,” Raven snapped. “It *wasn’t*. And I don’t care how wonderful you’re being, if you even suggest—”

“I wasn’t suggesting anything of the sort,” he replied calmly. “Rather, I was merely going to point out how very much he must have loved you. To place the entirety of his being into your hands, regardless of the fact that he got yours in turn...”

The gate of emotions she’d opened on her birthday kept growing wider. Raven found herself overwhelmed with another potent wave of tears, her body crippled with the weight of recollection. Memories of tender, loving smiles, of his hands framing her face as his lips explored hers or caressing her body when he thought she slept.

In essence, Dexter hadn’t told her anything she didn’t already know. But to hear it from someone else who hadn’t even known them then but understood what they had based on the simple disclosure that they’d been mated meant the world.

Especially since, even with as magical as her night with Nicholas had been, it had brought with it an ugly revelation.

Nicholas would never remember. Never. He knew her well enough because of the claim, but she hadn’t hope for them to pick up where they’d left off. His memories would remain buried in history. And while what she’d told him remained the truth, she loved him—*Nicholas*—because she knew him. He might not remember his life before, but he remained the same man. He remained exactly whom he had been before. Circumstances hadn’t molded them into different people, even if they had taken them down different paths. She knew Nicholas and she would eventually know the parts she didn’t know already.

It still ached that he didn't remember her. He didn't remember loving her as he had. Though she knew it didn't mean he wouldn't love her in the future, the thought of times she knew to be precious carrying no value for him whatsoever couldn't help but hurt.

"A part of him will always remember, even if the rest of him does not," Dexter told her, as if reading her thoughts. "The claim won't allow him to forget. Not everything. And it likely explains the reasoning for his off-again-on-again violent tendencies."

"Other than him being a vampire?" Raven offered wryly.

"Of course. He's at battle with himself and he doesn't know why. And chances are he has been for a long, long while. Perhaps since he was sired. Perhaps even before that." Dexter sighed. "Blood never changes, ergo, claims cannot be eradicated. They are older than all magicks and ingrained in nature as well as sorcery."

Raven's mood darkened. "It didn't stop him from getting all naked with another woman."

Dexter flushed and cleared his throat but did not protest. "Uh, well," he said, coughing into his hand. "It is possible that with death the claim went into remission. After all, you've only been alive in this world twenty-one years. Your blood remains connected, of course, but..."

"In remission," she repeated skeptically. "Isn't that what we usually call cancer when it goes away?"

"Raven, please. I'm not trying to downplay the significance—"

She held up a hand, nodding tiredly. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. It's just, imagine dying, selling yourself, getting reborn, and going through the emotional rollercoaster I've been on in the past couple of days for a man—or, in your case woman—you loved more than anything in this or any other world, and he already has a girlfriend."

Dexter shrugged. "Chances are the demon inside him was just waiting to be reunited with you and formed, in the meantime, a connection to the next strongest blood-link available."

"I don't want him forming blood-links with anyone but me."

"And since the demon obviously recognizes you as his mate, it's likely making Nicholas's life rather difficult, which would explain his tendency to react to you with violence before his mood changes." Her Guardian turned

pink again. "Before he becomes, well, amorous. I suspect he's been waiting for you for a long, long time, Raven. He just doesn't know it."

The thought ended with the clearing of a very familiar throat. Raven about jumped out of her skin, whirling around and immediately finding herself lost in the endless blue of his ocean eyes. Nicholas was *here*. How? She hadn't even heard the door open.

*They eavesdrop.*

Oh God, he'd heard everything.

Her nerves sung, and heat rushed through her body. She would never know how she hadn't heard his approach. Only now he stood there. Very there.

He looked at her as though seeing her for the first time.

"You have no idea," Nicholas said, his voice reverent, familiar eyes bathing her in awe. "We were *mates*?"

The pink in Dexter's cheeks deepened into bright red, mortification plastered across his face. "Nice to see you again, Nicholas." Then, under his breath, he murmured. "I knew I should have locked that door."

The vampire nodded numbly, his gaze not moving from hers. "Raven..."

Death could not stop the way her name rolled off his lips.

It was an odd thought, but for the ringing in her ears, she could summon nothing more.

## Chapter 17

Mated to One of the Few. Life sure seemed funny at times.

Strangely enough, Nicholas didn't laugh. He appreciated good humor as much as the next guy, but he didn't see anything particularly amusing about that revelation. He didn't laugh and he didn't scream. He merely felt at a loss, not to mention that he currently followed Raven Rayne, the warrior in question, down a hallway and across the threshold into what he assumed was her bedroom.

Mated to One of the Few. Not just any one: *this* one.

The girl who haunted his dreams.

His night angel.

Was it truly possible he'd gone through his entire life with the memory of a woman he'd apparently loved so deeply he'd united their lifelines for an eternity? Nicholas no longer felt certain of the answer. Sometime in the night, after parting with Raven and that delicious pussy of hers, he'd confessed himself more open to the gamble that this *Nicolai* she'd dreamt up might not be a pipe-dream after all. While he didn't understand how, it was growing increasingly difficult to fight the wealth of affection blossoming within his chest for the girl—this little twig of a thing who stalked after him in dreams and whispered love for him that she couldn't possibly feel.

Only if it were true—if she had lived as One of the Few from the pages of history, mated to an incarnation of himself he didn't remember—he knew one thing beyond any shred of uncertainty.

She belonged to him. This girl belonged to him. Nicholas knew himself well enough to understand he would never have even dreamt of biting a girl he was sleeping with unless there was something beyond fleshly pleasures between them. Biting during sex, for vampires, was intimate on a level the simple union of bodies couldn't accomplish. If a vampire's emotions ran especially high, it could pave the way down a series of simple, however

binding, rituals which decreed blood and words as necessity to make them permanent.

Claiming was *the* one. Claiming bound the demon eternally. He'd read about it. He'd thought once or twice about claiming Octavia, but never seriously. And while he'd always told himself that a claim between him and Octavia wouldn't work because his attachment seemed greater than hers, it had less to do with that than the hysteric screaming in his head and the rampant waves of nausea seizing his insides. The demon rebelled violently every time he gave thought to biting anyone for sexual gratification, and while it hadn't stopped him, he definitely hadn't made habit out of it.

All because he'd claimed One of the Few? Because their blood was forever linked?

Because in the world of which Raven spoke, he'd lived entirely for *her*?

If that were the case, were the feelings he now had for her simply residual or were they real? Did he truly want Raven or did his demon just recognize her?

Then again, if he had claimed her, it had to have been out of the strongest love. Love stronger than anything he'd ever felt before—well, in this life, anyway. If he'd truly loved Octavia, he would have found a way around his hang-ups about biting and claiming her. He would have fought the disgust which diseased his bones at the very thought. He would have *tried* if she was the one he truly loved.

Nicholas knew himself, though apparently not as well as Raven did. Raven truly knew him *better* than he knew himself.

A cliché come to life.

What an odd sensation.

"We were mated?" he asked hoarsely, staring at her glorious backside. She stood facing her armoire, trembling hard and curiously surrounded with the thick scent of tears. "Funny enough, you seemed to leave that part out."

She remained quiet for a long minute. "You didn't believe any of the rest of it," she said softly. "I didn't think it was—"

"You didn't think it was important?"

"I didn't think it changed anything."

Nicholas stared at her incredulously. For a beautiful warrior, she really seemed a bit thick. "How can you—"

"I'm sorry, okay?"

“Sorry doesn’t quite cover it.” He took a step forward, breath ragged, his nerves dancing dangerously near the end of anything resembling control. “Claims change everything.”

A pause, then, at last, she turned to face him. Christ, she moved like poetry. Warm. Vibrant. *Alive*. He felt her pulsing with energy, burning him up even with meters of space between them. Tears glistened in her emerald eyes, sending a sharp pang to his heart and making his demon howl with the need to comfort her. She truly did look like a girl who had lost everything and leapt through centuries only to find the light at the end of her tunnel in someone else’s possession. It was amazing. God, it nearly drove him to his knees in awe.

This girl loved him. She truly loved him.

He had never known love like this. For too long he’d felt isolated, imprisoned by his own emotions. He’d been completely alone even when in the company of others and he’d felt nothing of the love he tried to give.

Now he practically swam in love beyond love that transcended time and reason.

*God.*

“I can’t take it back, *Nicholas*,” Raven whispered, her voice making a particularly forced emphasis on his name. For one blindly insane moment, he wished he hadn’t made such a fuss about not calling him Nicolai. While he knew the distinction felt important, he found her lack of hope crippling.

She didn’t think he could love her if he didn’t remember her.

“I can’t take it back,” she repeated, wiping at her eyes. “And even if I could, I wouldn’t. And you wouldn’t want me to. Not if you remembered. God, if you knew...”

“I believe you.”

Nicholas froze and Raven froze with him. He hadn’t realized it was the truth until the words breathed air. It was out there, and he wouldn’t take it back. He believed her. There seemed little sense fighting the odds or trying to decode his confused feelings.

If he’d loved her enough to claim her in some former life, he knew he’d love her again and for the right reasons. His memories didn’t matter. Not that he didn’t fancy the idea of knowing how glorious they’d fit together, or the wealth of living he’d done before running into her the first time. It

gnawed at him, but he didn't mind so much. Apparently the only thing he'd found worth living for currently stood before him.

It looked as though his admission would inspire a new shower of tears.

"You do?" she whispered. Then her eyes narrowed with skepticism and she shook her head, stepping back. "No. No, you don't."

"Raven—"

"Last night—"

"Was an epiphany revelation. Not so much as the one I'm having now, but high up there as far as epiphanies go."

"Nicholas, you don't have to—"

"I don't remember anything. I'm sorry, but I don't." He inhaled sharply and braved another step forward. "I wish there was something more tangible that I could give you. All I know is my life is about as crazy as it's ever been, and that's saying something. I look at you and I see the answer. I see the answer for everything, and I don't even know the question." A pause. "You've been with me for so long."

Raven drew in a quick breath. "What?"

"Since I can remember, really. Always at night, little images fighting to get to me. A woman, well, she's you. I know that now. The images got stronger as I got older. Then Octavia turned me and I thought she was it, but the dreams kept coming, and I knew Octavia wasn't her." Nicholas smiled gently. "My night angel was too pure. Light where there's only darkness, you know? Warmth where there was cold. Gentle when it was harsh. And love. I felt that, too. All from my night angel."

She swallowed hard. "N-night angel?"

Nicholas's lips drew upward in a tender smile. "It's what I called you. To myself, at least. My night angel."

A breath trembled through her gorgeous mouth. She looked again as though tears might consume her. "Oh Nicolai..."

She caught her mistake immediately and flashed him an apologetic look, but all he could do was smile. Strangely enough, it didn't seem to bother him so much today.

"I don't remember anything."

"I don't think you ever will," she replied.

"Never say never."

"It was a mistake, my remembering, a random happenstance of my birthday plus the mystical number thing. The demon I bartered with admitted as much." She hesitated. "He said so."

Nicholas arched a brow. "When?"

"Last night. He was there right before you showed up in the cemetery." Raven turned her eyes downward. "He showed up. Talked to me. Pretty much confirmed—"

"The bastard was *there*?" he demanded anxiously. "The demon you—"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She inhaled. "I didn't think you'd believe me. Or you'd just think it was symptomatic of the Raven's-lost-her-mind theory."

"I don't think you've lost—"

"Yeah, but you thought I'd fallen on something heavy," she interrupted.

Nicholas released a breath and raised a hand. "Sweetheart, you know me, right?"

Raven licked her lips and said nothing. Her eyes told him she feared becoming the pun of a trick question. The answer wasn't a stumper. She knew him. She could likely tell him painfully accurate truths he'd attempted to bury. Things no one else—not even Octavia—would know about him.

"Yeah," he continued. "It's what I thought. So you know, then, that if I'm running hard in the other direction, it's usually—"

"To avoid something you know is true."

The words were simple but they astounded him. The world was often divided into two realms: knowledge and understanding. Knowledge was simply a collection of admitted facts without comprehension of what said facts meant when grouped together. Nicholas found himself shoved across the threshold dividing the realms in a blink.

She *did* understand him. Christ, she *did*.

"My God," Nicholas murmured. "My...Raven..."

Her cheeks flushed prettily. He wanted to soak up her warmth, take her in his arms and hold her close enough so that their memories became one. In an instant, he felt consumed with a crushing sense of loss. How had he not seen this before? How had he remained so blind these past few days when the answer was plain as plain could be?

This woman belonged to him. She had crossed time to find him. She had essentially breathed life into his scattered ashes. She'd defied convention, defied immortality, defied the security of her very soul to find him. Out of love.

He didn't remember one blessed thing.

He didn't remember it, but it was there. He saw it in her eyes. He saw every stolen moment, every sinful caress, every kiss of her lips and hug of her body. He saw laughter and tears, heated arguments and even more heated reconciliations. It was an entire life lived—a history beyond his days. It was a time when he had been his own keeper.

It was a time when he'd tracked down this warrior and somehow ended up head over heels for her.

No. That was unfair. There was no *somehow* about this. He could see how. For God's sake, a blind man could see how.

He wanted those memories unlocked. He wanted that part of himself reclaimed. That sort of passion, selflessness, and love was something he'd craved since infancy. To know he'd had it all along was both wonderful and infuriating.

How could the cosmos keep him from such an essential part of himself? Something so monumental? So important? So unprecedented?

How could the cosmos keep him from his mate? From Raven?

"You run from whatever you don't want to face," Raven said again, a small smile tickling her mouth. "Or...no, that's not right. You don't run from it. You just have the opposite reaction. You always said you loved me, and that's why you tried to kill me. The night we first...you'd come to kill me."

Nicholas nodded and took another step forward, a trembling breath rocking off his lips. "You told me last night."

"We ended up...um...making love against a tree."

He loved the way she phrased it. *Making love*. It was something he never heard, something he rarely said. It made her look even purer than she was. Her language was tame, but there was no mistaking the passion in her voice, inspired by a simple memory.

God, they must have set the world on fire.

"Wish I could remember it," Nicholas murmured. "Can just imagine how amazing you were."

Raven swallowed hard, and he was suddenly slammed with a potent wave of her desire, the richness of her heavenly aroma nearly sending him to his knees. "I wish you could remember, too," she replied hoarsely. "But I don't think either one of us was meant to remember, Nicholas."

"You did."

"It was a fluke."

"There could be another fluke." He stood close to her now. The hard pebbles of her nipples rubbed tantalizingly against his chest, even with layers of clothing between them. "We can fluke it up real nice, kitten."

"I don't know how," Raven said, ignoring his innuendo.

"We'll find out how." Nicholas closed his eyes, his lips brushing hers as he spoke. He wanted so badly to kiss her. He wanted to lose himself in the endless warmth of her arms, crush her against him and revel in the feel of her heart beating soundly against his chest. He wanted to occupy the time between now and the return of his coveted memories by creating new ones.

She belonged to him.

"Raven..."

"I'm so sorry, Nicholas..."

"Don't apologize."

He brushed his lips against hers again, this time with deliberate intent. Then he couldn't help himself. He was lost and he didn't give a lick if he ever found himself again. With a long moan, he surrendered. God help him, she shone with such pure radiance—a ray of wholesome light spearing through the storm clouds of his existence. She felt hot and wet, a tropical paradise which blinked away the cold desert of his past.

Her taste electrified him.

"Oh," Raven gasped, cupping his cheeks and anchoring him into her kiss. "I've missed you."

The starved desperation in her voice made him ache. "Raven..."

"I know," she replied between kisses, her hips moving in a manner against his that had to be subconscious. "I know. You don't remember, but I do."

Nicholas nipped at her lips, the growl of his demon suddenly making itself known, startling him. His demon never emerged when lips and tongues came into play. Never. While the stirring felt small enough to almost escape

notice, the fact that it stirred at all had him dumbfounded. “I want to,” he murmured heatedly. “Those are my memories, too.”

A strangled half-sob, half-gasp tore through her lips. “Nicholas...”

He couldn’t help but grin. An unprompted moan of his name during a moment of unbridled passion did a lot to a man’s ego, but this especially took the cake. She whimpered for *him*. Perhaps it was a fluke. He wanted to believe that the vampire she remembered and the vampire kissing her now were simply growing closer. Perhaps if they merged completely in her mind, his own would open and fill in the achingly hollow gaps.

“I love that,” he murmured, nudging her brow with his. At some point his fangs had descended. He didn’t know when. He hadn’t felt it occur—it just had. Perhaps this was nature’s way of directing his blood home. Raven was his mate and his destiny. While he didn’t feel sure he loved her yet, there was no doubt that he eventually would.

If he loved her once, he would again. He just needed to get to know her beyond what he already knew—the little things which made and unmade people. He needed to know that as well.

“Love what?” she asked.

“You called me Nicholas.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks reddened even further, and his heart swelled with affection. “I’ll try to keep doing that.”

Nicholas grinned and claimed her lips again, his eager tongue pressing into her mouth to taste her sinful richness again. He loved the way her tongue stroked his, the way she whimpered and moved her lips against his mouth, and the way she attempted to both swallow and crawl up inside him. She embodied passion. In every sweep of her delicate lips, he felt her desperation.

Desperation for him.

It was the most potent aphrodisiac he’d ever known.

“Raven...”

The tip of his fangs pricked her tongue by accident, of that he felt certain. What followed, however, was completely intentional. Nicholas growled and slammed her against the nearest wall, sucking her tongue desperately between lips and drawing her coppery essence into his throat with hunger unlike anything the world had experienced before. Her legs wound around his waist, the moist center of her sweat pants rubbing against

his hard cock in ways that would make the devil blush. She was so hot. God, so hot, so alive, so fucking vibrant.

And *his*. Raven belonged to him. He had her blood now. No going back. Not after this. Tasting her blood brought him completion. Tasting her blood had brought all of him home.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, a previously dead-bolted door crashed open, courtesy of her blood.

*Oh God.*

There it was. Figments, fragments, fractions—swirling and colliding with a history he already knew. Contradicting scenes with a parallel version of events he'd already lived. It happened in no particular order. The face of Octavia vanished, his maker replaced with the whiff of a woman's perfume and the painfully sweet sensation of death. He saw flames and heard screams of victims who had died well before this life had taken shape. At once, he sat in a theatre, watching Hamlet slay Claudius as Fortinbras drew nearer to Denmark. He sat in a pub, chatting with a toothy whore and lamenting the lack of warmth of his own existence. He sat on a ship bound for the Americas, dreaming up ludicrous first-meeting scenarios and entertaining himself by gambling with another migrating vamp over which crewman would next drop with smallpox.

He moved through a thicket trees. He saw her. She slayed three vampires before his eyes and offered a wave in his direction. Just a simple, open, non-confrontational wave to let him know he hadn't seemed as sneaky as he thought. It was almost as though she had been performing for him.

He had her shoved against a tree, her molten pussy clamped tight around his cock, her cries muffled in his shoulder as he explored the only paradise a creature such as himself would ever know. Her arms were around him. He fell back.

Fell back onto a bed. She was grinning, her fingers tickling his stomach, her infectious laughter coloring the air, her beautiful face brought to life in ways no poet could describe.

Now he stood in the underground—the makeshift basement. She had pressed herself against him. Trembling and terrified, and he didn't know how to help her.

She stood tied to a stake.

Then he felt pain. An arrow pierced his flesh. It seemed to happen so quickly, the scene around him melting until he lay on a bed, watching her sob. He wanted to tell her so badly not to cry. He regretted nothing. It seemed his fault, really. He had pushed her to an end she hadn't been ready to face. He shouldn't have pushed her.

Then blackness.

A gut-consuming gasp tore at his throat. Nicholas seized her arms and shoved her back, his body crippled with the weight of realization. He hunched over and rested his palms against his knees, harsh, cruel gasps scratching their way toward freedom.

He felt her tremble but didn't look up. He couldn't.

The pain of knowledge felt too great. He knew everything. He knew *everything* and he couldn't look up.

## Chapter 18

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

For the first time since they'd sealed their blood together, he fought himself to keep from sharing every wretched feeling tearing through his body with her. He didn't want her to feel this. What he experienced physically seemed inconsequential. If Ravenna knew of it, she would spend the rest of her days haunted by his pain. He wouldn't allow that. He couldn't.

The arrow had been tipped with holy water. There seemed no other explanation for the slow way his insides melted away or the agony searing his veins. It was a technique popular among vampire hunters, a special blend of poison holding no cure...except one.

Blood of the Few.

He honestly didn't know where that rumor had begun, that the warrior blood would cure him. It simply existed, floating around among some of vampiric society's higher circles. Whether or not it had been proven was another matter. In any regard, he'd made up his mind within an instant of recognition that he would keep the alleged miracle cure to himself.

Whether or not it mirrored truth seemed a different matter, and he wouldn't risk his girl's life. Not for anything.

Nicolai did his best to smile as Ravenna knelt down beside him, pressing a damp cloth to his brow. He hated the look in her eyes, the guilt-contorted devastation she couldn't hope to hide from him. It consumed her and saturated every move of her glorious body. He hated the small breaths she took when he knew she tried to keep herself composed.

His beautiful girl. His Raven.

He hated seeing her cry.

He hated knowing he was the reason.

"Is this good?" she asked gently, her shaking hands pampering his brow. They had managed to find shelter in an empty cottage, one not too far from the settlement they'd left behind. Nicolai suspected the family had fallen ill, for outside sat three headstones guarding freshly disturbed soil. Disease was humanity's weakness.

However, an empty cottage provided a bed against his back, which was more than he felt he deserved. No matter how these last few months with Ravenna had been lived, he remained a creature of darkness, and creatures of darkness did not deserve humanly comforts.

"It's good?" Ravenna asked again, sitting back in the wooden rocker she'd dragged from the front living area. "Not too warm?"

"It's perfect."

"I'll get you some more blood."

Nicolai shook his head weakly and grasped her wrist, holding her soundly beside him. She'd been pouring blood down his throat ever since they'd stopped, whatever blood she could get her hands on. Mainly it was animal, taken perhaps from the barn, but there had been a few mouthfuls which tasted suspiciously human. He felt certain she hadn't harmed anyone. His girl didn't have it in her.

He didn't have it in him to tell her that no amount of blood would help him. He couldn't.

"Don't go," Nicolai murmured. "Stay with me."

Ravenna's eyes glistened with tears, and he felt his heart rip again. "I was going to ask you the same thing," she whispered, pressing a tear-drenched kiss against his lips. "Oh Nicolai..."

"I'm...not...going anywhere."

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for everything." She shook her head hard, large liquid crystals sketching rivers down her gorgeous cheeks. "I was such a fool. God, I was so blind."

"Hush, sweetheart."

"I thought...I don't even know what I thought." Ravenna shuddered and kissed his mouth again. Even soaked in tears, she tasted wonderful. "I wanted to..."

Nicolai squeezed her hand tenderly. "You wanted...to cut...ties."

She nodded.

"It's...what I...I wanted, too."

“But I didn’t need to *go* there!” she protested. “God, why did I go there?”

His smile grew wider. He felt a sentimental, lovesick fool with a clouded mind, but even as he lay there dying, he knew he would rather lie nowhere else.

Nicolai had long heard that people who knew they were about to die grew peaceful in the last throes. He hadn’t believed it, and he’d definitely never thought it could be applied to vampires. Resting under Ravenna’s tear-filled eyes, her love for him brimming so brightly the stars would bow out in shame, not even the imminence of death could make him regret a lick of what he’d experienced.

“You...went there...” he murmured tenderly, raising her hand to his mouth so he could feel her skin against his lips. “...because you...have faith.”

She shook her head. “My faith is killing you.”

“The arrow’s...what’s killing me,” Nicolai retorted. “You didn’t shoot me, did you?”

Ravenna choked a sob and lowered her eyes.

“Don’t...take on...blame for what...others have done.”

“If I hadn’t gone there—”

“It would’ve...happened...eventually. Your Guardian...really wanted me dead.” His smile melted away. “You...warned me, Raven. You...warned me every...day.”

“I brought him to us!”

Nicolai shook his head, or rather tried. His body didn’t want to move. It felt hard enough doing the little things like smile at her, kiss her hand, speak. All these things he felt determined to do because they were the moments which would follow him into Hell. If his eternal torment for being a killer waited at the end of the road, he wanted memories of soft, healing light to counteract the harshness of flames.

He wouldn’t sit passively during his last minutes with the only woman he’d ever loved. He wouldn’t let her watch him die without knowing how much she meant to him, how he only existed for her, that he could live this life a thousand times but would never be satisfied if Fate denied him her kiss.

These last few months with her had been the only ones wherein he'd actually lived. Everything else had been a stagnant walk through time. He'd *felt* so much, felt a world beyond cold and the starving pangs of demonhood and the curse of his eternal condition. He'd felt. He'd loved.

These last few months meant more to him than anything else in this world could hope to mean.

He felt no regret, only the sorrow of parting.

Alone. No Guardian. No father. No Nicolai.

He wanted to believe in the Christian tradition that some part of him would be able to remain with her and watch over her. He wanted to believe he could soothe her when she wept and hold her when she couldn't sleep, perhaps even whisper that all would eventually be all right. He wanted to believe demons had that luxury, but Nicolai could not fool himself.

Though there seemed nothing to regret in the choices he'd made for himself, there remained a world of remorse for what he'd done to her. He'd been a cruel bastard, demanding so much of her. Demanding *her* at all. Taking her from the world she knew and introducing her to this only to rip the shade of happiness away from her. Not only that, their blood would remain forever linked. She would feel the pain of his death every day. Every day she breathed, she would feel this.

Nicolai had done this to her, selfishly and without hesitation, all because he'd wanted her forever.

He had forever now.

It stood the unspoken reason why mating never took place, why claims were so unheard of. To lose one's mate remained figurative death of the soul.

Were it the other way around, Nicolai knew the Hell he would face would quiver at the whisper of what he'd put himself through at the gut-wrenching agony of losing his beloved.

A hell he'd condemned her to for the rest of her days.

"Have I told...I love you today?" he murmured, brushing a soft kiss against her hand again.

An anguished sob tore from her lips.

"I do, sweetheart. I...love you so much."

"I love you, too," she whispered, her voice cracked with tears. "I love you, Nicolai."

“That’s...all I need.”

She shook her head, bathing him in falling tears. “Let me get you more blood,” she said, rising to her feet. “I can’t sit here and do nothing. Please...aren’t you—”

“Blood won’t...help, darling. I just...need you.” Nicolai forced his weakened grip to tighten around her hand. “Stay here. I...don’t want to...to miss...”

“I refuse to do nothing,” she repeated.

“You’re here. All I need.”

Ravenna inhaled but obeyed, sitting again in the rocker, almost absently. “There must be something. Would my blood—”

“No.”

She blinked. “Nicolai...”

Nicolai’s head gently rocked back and forth. Were his heart in a position to beat, he remained certain she would have been deafened with its thundering. She couldn’t get that thought in her head. She *couldn’t*. His life wasn’t worth the sacrifice of hers. She was pure and innocent. He remained a damned creature who had evaded death far too long already. If she tried to give him her blood, he wouldn’t be able to resist. He wouldn’t have the strength to resist.

Instead, he needed to die. He *would* die. The demon slowly withered away. It yearned for strength, and nothing stronger existed in the world than the blood of One of the Few.

Should he get a taste, he would be completely lost. Perhaps the claim would ensure her safety, but he would not risk the world on a gamble. He couldn’t live with himself if his selfishness got her killed, not in this life and not in the next. The torments of Hell scared him not. The idea of losing his Raven and spending an eternity knowing he was the cause would break him the way no poison ever could.

There existed no proof her blood held the cure. He’d never seen One of the Few before he met Ravenna, thus all he knew about death by holy water came by word of mouth. His knowledge remained ingrained in myth.

He wouldn’t let Ravenna sacrifice herself.

“Blood...doesn’t...help.”

“Perhaps mine would,” she argued, her brow furrowing.

Nicolai’s head rocked again. “No.”

He felt relief at the splash of frustration that seized her pale, grief-stricken face. Good to see something other than the formation of tears. He wanted to remember her exactly as she was—a sizzling spitfire of a girl whose temper gave her strength, whose beauty thrived on the passion she inspired simply by breathing.

“Dammit, Nicolai!” she cried, her eyes bursting with life. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just...love me.”

“I *do*. And you’re *asking me to let you die!*” She shook her head hard, her anger dissolving quickly into sobs. “You’re asking me...to do *nothing*. To just sit here.”

“There’s nothing...that...can be done,” he replied softly. “I just...need you with...me.”

She caressed his hair, making his burning skin tingle with the promise of her touch. It had been so terribly long since any ill had afflicted him. The one fever he’d caught as a child had nearly scared his mother to death, as she’d feared losing another one of her children to illness. He’d overcome it, though. He’d promised her he would.

What an oddly timed memory, all for the fact that he felt sure he’d never felt so wretchedly warm in all his life.

“I’m here. I’m here,” Ravenna whispered, her hand still brushing hair from his brow. “I’m right here.”

He grinned again. He couldn’t help himself. The anger had vanished from her voice, replaced instead with longing he knew well. God, if only he’d known their last time together was truly their last. He would have made it special and as revolutionary as that first night had been. If Fate was truly something that could not be altered, and dying simply was the path he had to take no matter what he did differently, he would have taken advantage of every second they had.

He felt he’d taken her for granted. No matter how much he loved her, there seemed always something more he could’ve done.

God, he hated watching her cry.

“Love...you,” Nicolai whispered again. “So...much.”

“I love you, too,” she replied, her face a wet mess. She fell silent for a long minute, her right hand wrapped in his, her other hand stroking his brow with tenderness that would make angels weep. The quiet didn’t last. The air

rattled on another hard sob, and she lurched forward, her eyes finding the floor. "You can't do this. You can't leave me here. God Nicolai, you *can't* leave me here."

The heartbreak in her voice tore him apart. "I'm so...sorry."

"You *can't*."

"I should've been...more careful." His thumb slid across her hand. "Don't cry...sweet girl. Don't cry."

"You can't leave me. I can't do this alone." Ravenna shook her head, squeezing his hand tight enough to will life into his body, should she possess the power. "I can't do this alone."

"You're not alone."

The words constituted an empty promise. He wanted badly to tell her he wouldn't go anywhere, that the death of his body couldn't prevent him from lingering, from remaining with her for all time. He wanted to tell her it would be better. He wanted to tell her a thousand things he knew he should tell her but his mouth refused to speak. He felt certain he should say she would love again, but even now he felt too selfish to give the thought merit.

It was hardly his worst failing.

"Tell me..." Nicolai implored softly, his thoughts desperate to stray from these troublesome things. "Tell me...you don't regret it."

Her reply came immediately. She didn't ask for clarification. "I don't regret it."

"Me...either." He tried to raise her hand to his mouth again, but found he lacked the strength. He settled for favoring her with another soft squeeze. "For my life to come...I regret nothing."

Ravenna's body wracked with a hard sob. "Nicolai, please..."

"I love you."

The words were a mantra in his head, one which he felt determined to grant life with his dying breath. It seemed important that she hear it, over and over again if necessary, as many times as it took to get her to understand how much he meant it. He meant every word.

"Please, God," Ravenna whispered, not looking at him, trembling. "Do not take him..."

*God doesn't take mercy on creatures like me.*

He thought for a second the words had actually escaped his lips. The world around him grew fuzzy. Shapes blurred, colors blended without

prejudice, and sound began to drone in the long echoes of unintelligible melodies. He felt Ravenna resting her precious head against his chest, her small body rocking with sobs, her hand holding onto his so tightly that he wondered if she meant to keep the glove of Hell from grasping him, even if it meant she had to fight it herself.

“Please...do not leave me alone...”

Nicolai blinked hard, wetness stinging his eyes. He didn’t know if they were her tears or his own.

It didn’t matter, he supposed. Her tears *were* his, and his were hers.

They kept nothing from each other.

“Ra...”

Ravenna jerked upward, her tear-stained lips finding his. “I love you, Nicolai,” she whispered. “I love you.”

He hoped he could convey the words in a smile. He had not said them enough.

As it stood, his voice had abandoned him.

Her eyes were the last thing he saw. He watched her, trying hard to convey everything which remained unsaid. He watched her as his feet dissolved, followed by his legs, his torso and hands and as pieces of him were fragmented away into nothing but dust. But even as he crumbled, he couldn’t look away.

Instead, he kept his eyes on hers. He watched the color of horror and sorrow sweep across her gorgeous face, wanting desperately to reassure her of something.

Anything...

He tried to speak before his mouth faded into dust, but his voice wouldn’t come. Even as the world fell to shadows, he could still see emerald crystals. He supposed they would follow him forever.

Ravenna lit his way through darkness even now.

She always had.

## Chapter 19

### *Present Day*

Raven felt quite certain she would never forget the look on his face. How his eyes widened, the way his jaw had all but crashed to the floor, and the gasp which had seized his throat before he ripped himself from her arms completely. She had no idea what had happened or why. One second she was enjoying the cool sensuality of his mouth, ready to die in a sea of blissful wonders that he was with her, then he tore away from her as though she was made of fire. He'd barreled over and anchored his hands against his knees, his dead chest clamoring for air he didn't need.

Everything had changed. She didn't know how or why, but everything had changed.

Something monumental had happened. There had been an insanely hopeful beat wherein she'd allowed herself to dream the past had been returned to him and that he remembered everything. The notion died just as quickly. Nicholas bolted the second he seized a hold of himself.

Nicolai wouldn't have run from her.

Yet there was a ringing in her ears which begged to differ. A ringing time could not eradicate once its awful sound tainted the air.

*He might hate you. He might hate what you've done, what you've made him relive. He might wish you dead.*

Paimon's prophecy. Was it possible it had come true?

Had she really forsaken time and reason, nature and death? Had she really sacrificed herself only to have the man who had once loved her now look upon her with hate?

*Nicolai would never hate me.*

No. No, he wouldn't.

However, it seemed colored with his own past as well as Nicholas's, he might have reason to hate her.

Raven shivered hard and pushed into the living room. She knew that if she dwelled upon these unhappy thoughts, her mind would set up a ring of traps in which to fall. She couldn't allow herself to construct her own prison.

"Raven." Dexter took a step toward her. "Nicholas just tore out of here. What the hell happened?"

She licked her lips and shook her head. "I don't know. We were kissing—"

Dexter made a face. "Could've done without that visual."

"Well," she replied, ignoring the sickly twist of her stomach. "You asked. Maybe, for the moment, we focus on Paimon. Just to keep my mind off things."

"Raven—"

She held up a hand. "Dex, please? I need something to focus on."

He held her eyes a minute longer before nodding. "Yeah," he said, smiling. "We can. If you just... Ah..." His eyes fixed on something behind her. "Might have to hold that thought."

Raven inhaled sharply. She knew without needing to be told that Nicholas had returned. Her skin hummed with awareness, her blood warming, every fiber of her being aching for the solace of his embrace. Her heart, however, suddenly thundered and her mind had gone silly.

He hadn't just left, he'd bolted. He'd fled from her and she didn't know why.

"Had to come back," Nicholas said softly, his voice reaching her ears before her feet could fully pivot to face him and before her eyes saw his. "Could never stay away from you, could I?"

Awareness washed over her with all the courtesy of a cold shower. Just like that, she understood. Raven's breath caught in her throat. "Oh my God, Nicolai..."

Dexter took a step forward. "Does he..."

"I remember."

Everything fell deathly still. Even the dust in the air froze in astonishment. Raven found herself in mid-turn, her gaze locked with his, her brain ready to collapse. She saw him caught in that impenetrable stare of

realization. At once her heart felt like singing, even as the rest of her grew cold with dread that hadn't a name, but existed nonetheless.

He knew. He *knew*. He remembered.

Yet he'd run from her.

"Nicolai?" she asked softly, her voice cracking. God, she would dissolve right here and she didn't give a damn. She just wanted to hear his voice. He could say anything he liked. Hell, he could read her the morning paper and she'd be content. She just needed his arms around her. She needed these fears banished and his love for her whispered in her ears. "Oh..."

Nicholas didn't say anything. He seemed just as frozen as she, as though he didn't know if he was truly prepared to look at her.

"You can't know he speaks the truth," Dexter said. "It might be..."

"Stop it," Raven said. She had to believe.

"I remember," Nicholas repeated. "I remember."

Tears broke through her barrier and began making silent, steadfast rivers down her cheeks. "Nicolai...oh God..."

"Your Guardian wants proof?" he asked, taking a slow, methodical step forward. "Can't offer much, I guess. There's this: you painted the sunrise on our bedroom wall. You love dancing in the rain. Your left foot's ticklish, but your right one's not. You were with me when..." A heartbreakingly poignant smile split his face. "When it happened. Your eyes were the last thing I saw."

"Yes. That's right."

"I remember everything, darling. Everything."

If nothing else, that was the one thing that finally had her moving and breaking away from the glass prison where she'd trapped herself in her hopeful bewilderment. *Darling* was something Nicholas had never called her. Never. It was wholly a Nicolai expression, a call to a world apart, something spoken today often in jest, never mindful of how much it meant to others.

Meant to people like her.

It was real.

He was here.

"Nicol—"

Raven didn't realize she'd stepped forward until Nicholas stepped back, holding up a hand, his expression pained and wrought with emotions she didn't want to name. The world went cold around her.

*Oh God.*

"I..." He was breathing hard, his expression lost and conflicted. "Sorry, I thought I could, but I can't. I can't do this right now."

"Nicolai—"

"Nicholas," he corrected. "Still Nicholas." He glanced up, and she saw part of him break at the sight of her tears. "I can't do this now. I'm so sorry. I just can't. I'll...I just thought you oughta know...that I know."

"I don't—"

"Sorry for running out on you earlier. Didn't mean to like that. I just..." He broke off, shaking his head. "I need to think. All right? I need to think."

He turned then and as silently as he'd come, he began to walk away, his body lacking its usual confidence. He looked, for all the world, like a half-man.

She'd done that to him. Dear God.

Yet, unable to help herself, she knew she couldn't allow him to leave like this. Not like this. Not with the dreams of a lovers' reunion shattering around her. She had to let him know the one thing that had gotten them here. She knew he had no reason to not believe her, but knowledge only heightened the words' importance.

She had to tell him again.

"I love you."

Nicholas paused just as he reached the front door. "I love you, too."

How those words could sound so heartfelt but so distant at the same time she didn't know—only that they did.

Nicholas met her gaze over his shoulder. He meant it. He really did. He loved her.

God help her, it wasn't enough.

"I'll find you when I'm ready," he promised.

Then he was gone.

## Chapter 20

*Colonial New Hampshire, 1701*

Dead in her world didn't remain dead. They came back, often with a temper, and it was her job to stop them.

In her world, death meant little more than a break.

*There are always ways.*

Pain gnawed at every corner of her body, dulling the senses so horribly that she eventually felt nothing at all. And that was the worst—a feeling even more horrible than pain. For no matter how horrible her pain was, she knew she was human if she felt it. She knew she hadn't completely abandoned herself. She knew she wasn't so lost in grief that agony-riddled-fury had drowned out all capacity for love.

She didn't ever want to grow so barren that she forgot love. She knew well how grief could eat away at one's insides. She never wanted to lose herself like that. She refused to become a shadow of who she had been, the girl with whom Nicolai had fallen in love. She refused to damn herself for the sins of another.

She might not feel pain anymore, but Ravenna hadn't stopped weeping. She cried until she forgot how it felt not to cry.

She cried until she had no more tears. She cried so hard they came back.

It never ended. Sleep only worsened the pain because it wasn't purely physical and wouldn't will itself into nothing. No, sleep provided dreams, and dreams provided wishful remembrances of the past and mockingly cruel depictions of the present. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw him fade to dust. In the whispers between wakefulness and sleep, she would feel his lips caressing her brow, his calm, soothing voice promising her he was with her still. She would feel his hands on her at night, but when she rolled over

in her bed and reached for him, her fingers would brush the linens of an empty mattress.

No matter how often she felt him, he wasn't there. He wasn't with her.

Nicolai was truly gone.

*There are always ways.*

Ravenna remained enclosed with his ashes for two days straight. She couldn't bear the thought of leaving the room without him. The room into which they'd walked side-by-side, where he'd last touched her hand, caressed her cheek, and graced her lips with his kiss.

The room where he'd given her the last *I love you* she would ever hear him voice.

*Oh God.*

She felt locked within her sorrow, unable to move from the place where he'd last lain. She had his dust collected and placed in a vase stolen from the front parlor, if only to ensure that no bit of him went lost.

The pain in her body might have numbed, but her heart still screamed. Her heart never stopped screaming, her blood rushing so hot she was sure she would eventually boil and melt. Her stomach couldn't tolerate food, and she similarly refused drink though her throat was parched.

Her body wasn't suited for life anymore.

*There are always ways.*

Intellectually, Ravenna knew she had to snap out of it. She was strong. She wasn't a wilting flower, nor was she a child born of innocence. She wasn't one to give up just because the one she loved was dead. Even though she couldn't stop weeping, even though her soul would continue screaming, she knew she couldn't give in.

She knew this. Her heart did not.

Her heart was determined to know an end to pain. Her heart wanted rest.

And to never beat again.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered into her tear-stained pillow. "I'm so sorry. It should've been me, Nicolai. You tried to get me out. You tried so hard to free me of it."

God, he had. He had so desperately. Every night, he would lie beside her, running his hands down her arms and through her hair, stroking her cheek with curled fingers and begging her sweetly to let this be the night she

didn't return to her prison. He'd beg her to let him hold her for a little while longer, to watch the sun hit the canvas she'd made out of their wall.

He'd asked her every night, and he'd never gotten impatient with her need for time. In such a short while he had defied her conventional knowledge of vampires. She'd been raised by a man who thought vampires were nothing more than Satan's messengers, and while that sort of radicalism had never seeped into her blood, the backwards mentality was there all the same.

Then Nicolai had come along and redefined her. He'd made her into a human.

She hadn't been human before.

How was it that it had taken a vampire to show her how to live? What would happen if she forgot now that he was gone? Ravenna's insides hardened. The man who was supposed to be her father had taken away the one thing which had made her human. The man she loved had been ripped away from her by the person supposed to be her father.

Kenneth had taught her to hate.

Nicolai had taught her to love.

Here she was. Alone.

*There are always ways.*

Nicolai had freed her and died for it.

Ravenna sucked in a deep breath, but no amount of wishing could keep away the incursion of tears. She couldn't will away the pain consuming her insides. She couldn't bring Nicolai back.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again into the pillow, tears ribboning down her cheeks. "Oh Nicolai..."

There was no answer. There was nothing.

She'd killed him. She hadn't listened. She hadn't left when she had the chance.

He'd saved her life and she'd gotten him killed.

*There are always ways.*

Her voice cracked uselessly against the muted air. "Please," she begged, her body breaking into tremors. The walls around the numb collapsed, and all at once, pain laced through every vein in her tortured body. She couldn't do this. God, she couldn't do this. Her body was ripping itself to shreds and nothing save Nicolai could ease the pain.

She'd condemned the man she loved.

"Oh God, please." Sobs wrenched through her throat, squeezing her windpipe until she couldn't breathe. "Please. I'll do anything. *Please!*" Another wave crashed over her. "Please..."

There could be no living like this. No living, no dying, no in between.

She'd cost them everything.

*There are always ways.*

The voice would not leave her alone. Ravenna knew what it meant. She knew what it was asking of her, what it wanted her to do.

She'd been raised by a man who knew dark magicks, even if he never shared their trade. She knew what the voice wanted her to do.

She knew because it was her own.

Nicolai had sacrificed everything to save her.

Perhaps, then, it was time to sacrifice everything to save him back.

\* \* \* \*

The Mal cabin was empty when she arrived. If a part of her was surprised, she didn't feel it. She didn't feel *anything* upon moving through the halls which had seen her upbringing. She walked past the room that had housed her through her earliest years, and felt nothing but apathy. She didn't shiver. She didn't draw in a significant breath as her chin wobbled, not even when her eyes fell upon the porcelain doll which sat in a small wooden rocker Kenneth had carved for her fourth birthday. It was the last genuine thing she remembered him doing.

She wasn't here to reminisce. She was here for one reason.

Kenneth's room had always been off limits to her. Not once had she walked across the forbidden threshold. Not once had she had the desire to do so. Even as a child she'd known enough of her surrogate father's wrath not to test him. She'd been obedient and studious. She'd done everything she was told from *wash the dishes* to *take out the nest by the Black Lake*. She'd done everything. *Everything*.

Here she was, moving through her once-home, and doing her best to ignore the shrill ringing in her ears and the thundering of her heart. It took all she had not to break down for the knowledge of what the cottage's inhabitant had taken from her.

Ravenna swallowed hard and pushed into Kenneth's room without hesitation. She didn't know what she'd expected, but strangely she wasn't surprised to feel nothing. It wasn't as though she raided the Quirinal Palace. It was just a room like any other, but home to a loathsome creature.

She hoped he did not return while she was here. Her hands trembled, and her body threatened to give way just at the knowledge that she stood in the air that belonged to Nicolai's killer. If she saw him—if her eyes fell upon his hideous face—she didn't know what she would do. God, she didn't know if she could trust herself not to do something horrible.

The call for justice was overbearing. Her tears had long since crusted dry on her cheeks, but there was no end to the pain which saturated her every nerve. No end to her mind's screams and the agonizing ache diseasing her heart. If she slowed down, if she allowed herself to know exactly what was lost and what would never be hers again if her spell didn't take, grief would be consumed with fury—fury which would bring this damned village to its knees.

"Keep a straight mind," she whispered, her eyes immediately landing on the training crossbow Kenneth kept mounted on the wall. It seemed years had passed since she'd last seen it. Before she could stop herself, she'd removed it from its seeming place of honor and had it in her arms, its pack of arrows slung over her shoulder. Better, she supposed, to be armed in enemy territory than to be taken completely off guard.

Ravenna was rather surprised to find his belongings visible to the naked eye rather than under guard of lock and key. He had a large, hand-carved shelf dedicated to his assorted weapons aligning one wall, and a perfect duplicate along the parallel wall filled with books which would potentially unlock the gates of Hell and return Nicolai to her side.

The idea of her love being trapped in a world of eternal torment had her dried-eyes dampening all over again. Demon or not, he was not made for Hell.

He might have been a monster before meeting her, but he'd been a man every second thereafter. Perhaps not at first, but he had. She'd touched him. She'd tasted him. She knew him.

A man such as he didn't belong to Hell.

He belonged to *her*. She would save him no matter what it cost her.

Ravenna sucked in a deep breath and paced forward, her eager eyes falling over the dusty covers of Kenneth's collection. There were many titles and many volumes she'd seen before. There were books as old as her, as old as her Guardian, and all for the purpose of study or preparation. Thankfully, her familiarity with his library gave her insight in the titles to avoid. If she'd seen it before, it served no use to her. While she'd never thumbed through his personal collection like this, Kenneth never concealed where he kept the books containing dark magic. A part of her had always wondered if she had been meant to seek them out.

Ravenna knelt to inspect the books with ominous black bindings along the bottom row. Upon feeling the spine of one, she knew she'd found the one she was searching for by the dark chill which seized her spine.

Of course, the dark chill could have been a delayed warning on part of her singed senses, for she felt *him* the next second.

Everything in her turned black.

"Ah, sweet Ravie," Kenneth clucked disapprovingly. "Thou hast thy father much offended."

A cold shudder claimed her shoulders. She did not reply.

"I didn't know which one of you to expect, but I confess myself unsurprised. After your lover's rather inventive diversion, it became most evident he would rather himself end up dust." He sighed wistfully. "A truly romantic notion, I suppose, for a creature so foul."

Ravenna closed her eyes, a silent mantra falling on her tongue. She couldn't allow herself to be provoked. She couldn't give in.

"He didn't tell you then?" Kenneth asked, before nodding his head to answer his own question. "No, of course he didn't. If he had, he would be here, searching for a way to bring *you* back rather than this. Granted, he wouldn't be allowed entrance to my home, but I suspect he would find a way. Not that I knew the fellow personally, but given his creativity—"

"What do you mean...he didn't tell me?" She hated the shake in her voice almost as much as she needed the answer.

"You really don't know? My dear, if you'd wanted, you could have cured him whenever you wished. Your blood works as a powerful antidote to any potent vampiric poison. Something I'm sure dear Nicolai knew and, for the tragic love of you, didn't disclose."

A dark shudder passed through her body. For a blind second, she feared losing whatever of herself she had left to lose. The tears she'd kept at bay came surging forward with a vengeance, and for a long minute, she thought she might be sick, though on what she didn't know. It had been days since she'd last eaten.

"How long did the holy water take?" Kenneth continued conversationally. "I've never seen it in action myself, and I admit I am quite curious."

It was an instinctive thing really. She didn't remember any blank spaces between hearing his repugnant voice and leaping into action, the crossbow in her arms coming up and firing as if controlled by a will of its own. It was either some moral strain or a last second firing of consciousness which kept her aim from his heart and rather directed at his arm.

The arrow pierced his skin and imbedded itself in the wall behind him, taking him with it. It was over before she could blink, before she even knew what had happened. Thus when her mind returned to her, she found herself holding a crossbow and her so-called surrogate father nailed to the wall, courtesy of her aim, pained moans ripping through his lips and murderous malice lighting his eyes.

"You little harlot!" he spat, pulling hard against the arrow to little avail.

Ravenna swallowed hard. "Words, words, words," she retorted, reloading an arrow into the crossbow's cavity and raising it again. The move effectively ceased Kenneth's struggles and had his eyes widening with astonishment. If anything, witnessing his fear only strengthened the force of her hatred. "Give me a reason not to do it, father *dear*. I beg of you."

"Ravie—"

She fired another arrow, this one spearing through the wooden frame above his head, showering him in splinters and dust. "Do not speak to me," she growled. "Do not even look at me, you befouled—"

"I am the befouled?"

"You killed him."

"No, my dear. It is you who did that." Kenneth's expression contorted in pain as he twisted under the force of the arrow, resuming his unsuccessful struggles. "I raised you—"

"I do not want to *hear* of how you raised me!" Ravenna barked. Her eyes welled again as her eager hands loaded another arrow into her weapon.

"I don't want to hear of how I've failed your many expectations or how I've tainted the damned line by...how did you put it? Rolling in filth every night. I will not—"

"Ravie—"

"—I am *not yours!*"

"You are the High Council's."

"The High Council ordered this, then?" Ravenna asked erratically, the paces between them closing rapidly. "The High Council contacted you? Demanded you to kill my—"

"Ravie—"

"Do *not* lie to me!" The crossbow lowered so she could hit him properly and soak in the sensation of her flesh smacking his, even if her hand stung from the impact of the blow. She watched greedily as his head rocked with impact, as his gaze widened in surprise and the flash of fear returned with a vengeance. "The High Council couldn't give a damn, could it?"

A few seconds passed before he could reply. "You know well they care a great deal."

"Enough to kill him?"

"A villain might speak pretty words to you, my dear, but it doesn't make him any less a villain."

"A lesson you have personified, thank you." Ravenna drew an arrow out of her pack and shoved its point against the fleshy part below his jaw. "Answer me truthfully," she all but snarled, fire blazing her veins. "Your actions were your own. The High Council—"

"Trusts nature will take its course. If not him killed by you, then you killed by him. I didn't have the same faith."

The screaming in her head threatened to drown out all semblance of sound. Her arm pushed forward without her mind's permission, and she felt the tip of the arrow tear through his skin. God, it felt so good she wanted to do it again, deeper and deeper until the old man's tongue was completely forked.

"Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord!" Kenneth gasped. Gone was the contemptuous gleam of seconds before. There was only fear now, for something he'd seen in her eyes, perhaps, or for something else entirely. She didn't know. She didn't care. "You cannot kill me, Ravie," he continued. "Your soul—"

“Is not yours to lose, so I wouldn’t worry over it.”

“Do you really wish to kill me?”

That was the ultimate question, the one waging war in her conscience against the demands of something she couldn’t name. Her claim with Nicolai perhaps drew primal urges forward in lieu of human rationality. Did she want to kill Kenneth? Yes. By God, she did. She wanted to seize back what was taken, and while the books she’d discovered would lead her wherever she wanted to go, the darkest part of her wouldn’t be satisfied until this man was gone and lay at her feet, revenged for what he took from her.

After all, he was the one who had taught her to hate, how it felt to hate, and what to do to those one hated.

He would have killed her. He would have let the town burn her, all because she’d wandered from hate and fallen in love.

She loved, so he killed.

Ravenna knew it wasn’t black and white as all that. Nicolai was a vampire, and she was One of the Few. They lived in opposite worlds and they were, by nature’s decree, an abomination.

If to be natural was to be without Nicolai and the freedom he’d given her, she didn’t care to ever again embody the world in appearance or action.

Yes, she wanted to kill Kenneth. She wanted to give him back the pain he’d caused. She wanted to adhere to Old Testament law. She wanted blood for blood.

*An eye for an eye.*

Yet, her human conscience wouldn’t allow her to kill him in cold blood, not even out of revenge.

That sort of act would lead her down a path from which she could not return. It would open a door of eternal darkness. It would contort her, turn her into something black and twisted, something she wasn’t.

She replied steadily, drawing the arrow out between the flaps of torn flesh, ignoring the pool of blood which ran down the narrow cylinder and spilled onto her fingers. “Death is too gracious a punishment for you.”

The relief on his face was tangible. It made her stomach turn.

“Good girl,” he said.

Then his free arm moved, and the next thing she saw was the silver of a blade lunging toward her face. There was no time to think or second-guess herself. She had nothing left but instinct. Ravenna stumbled back in shock,

the crossbow coming up again. Her finger caressed the trigger before she could help herself, and with a crushing gasp, she felt the arrow discharge.

It seemed the world was born and divided in that instant. Ravenna's wide eyes took in his and the sight of the arrow protruding from his chest, his free arm outstretched, and his hands clamped around the handle of the blade he'd produced. The one he always kept on him. The one she'd forgotten.

The one he'd reached for without her notice.

"Too gracious," Ravenna repeated, expelling a deep breath. "Somehow I'll manage to get over that."

"You..." Kenneth glanced down in wide-eyed horror at the arrow. "You...killed...me."

Ravenna couldn't breathe, move, or look away. The walls of her mind were realigning. Truths were defined and banished. What was canon suddenly became heretical. What she knew was overwhelmed by what she didn't.

"The Lord hath accomplished his wrath," she murmured. "He hath poured out his fierce anger and he hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof."

"You...quote...scripture...to *me*?" Kenneth's eyes blazed, and his arm made an angry arc, swiping at her with the blade. He hit nothing but air. "You...damned little..."

"I am not damned," Ravenna replied, her voice shaking but certain. "I am not damned for loving." Her eyes fell upon the blade in his hand, which clamored noisily to the floor without further overture. "Nor am I damned for saving myself."

He tried to speak but words eluded him, gurgling in his throat as his eyes widened, a twisted rage contorting his face. For all the death she'd crafted and tasted, Ravenna had never seen a human die, and she'd never given thought to how it would feel. Standing just out of reach of the man who had brought her up, raised her, smiled at her when she was young, instructed her when she aged. He'd taught her everything she'd known about herself, and now he gasped for air, blood leaking out of his mouth and life draining from his eyes. The man who had been her father.

She hadn't been prepared for this, or the cold that followed. She hadn't been prepared to not give a damn about taking a human life.

She was changed in that moment, but never more determined.

The books waited for her, as did Nicolai. Somewhere, he waited for her.

She was changed, but not damned.

Rather, she felt she had the strength to save him, even if it meant bargaining herself.

## Chapter 21

### *Present Day*

Remembering death was a strange sensation.

The act of being dead was something Nicholas had never considered. The gap that fell between the moments Octavia sank her fangs into his throat and clawing out of his coffin was filled with blackness and granted little need for speculation. There was no telling glance of the afterlife, no puffy white clouds or hellish screams of eternal damnation. There was nothing but the awareness of falling and rising again.

His mind was all a tangle of colors, visions, images. It contained things he knew, things he'd always known, and things he couldn't believe his mind had kept from him. He saw her, of course...but then, he'd always seen her. Ever since infancy, it seemed his mind was a shrine for Ravenna, for his Raven, even if he hadn't known her. He hadn't known anything, really...only a part of him had. A part of him, a very real part, had wanted her, wanted something he didn't know and couldn't remember, before he'd known what wanting meant. That confused part of him had spent a century unknowingly turning over every rock in his path in search of her, though he hadn't realized it at the time. Every time he caught a whiff of something which smelled like her, his head would whip up, and his eyes would scour the scene before him, trying to pinpoint the source and trying to figure out for what he searched in the first place. Looking for something that elapsed his memory had been hard enough, and rationalizing it hadn't come any easier. Still, his breath always caught when he saw girls of her height and stature, with her hair or eyes. He would blink at them in wonder, then dismiss them just as quickly. He didn't know what he wanted to find, he couldn't remember that he'd lost anything at all, and that didn't matter because for years it remained lost.

That was, until he came here and saw her at Club Intensity.

His Raven. He'd found her. His search had ended the night he first laid eyes on her. His double-takes at other girls had ended that night. The demon had centered its sights on Raven.

Only he'd been fool enough to think it was because she was One of the Few.

He hadn't recognized her. Not the way he should have.

She was here because *he* was here. He was here because of a deal she'd made.

It felt overwhelming. The past century and a half of his life had only been so because she'd wished it. The lot of it—getting the stuffing kicked out of him at school, watching his father and sister fall into poor health, and his never-ending obsession with the Few. Every time he heard the word, his heart clenched and his still-veins rushed with the promise of something he couldn't name. All he'd known was how important it was that he get to the Few, as many as possible. Meeting Raven had only intensified the hunger. He'd needed to see her, touch her, take in her face. He'd needed to see if she was *something*—if she was the one for whom he searched, even if he'd had no idea how or why...

At night she was there, always. Caressing his face, whispering sweetly into his ear, and promising things he never remembered upon awakening.

Not until he arrived here and found her again.

He hadn't remembered her. Christ, why hadn't he remembered her?

He felt infinitely stuck in a T.S Eliot poem, grasping a peach in one hand and demanding if he dared disturb the universe.

Only he hadn't. Raven had. Raven had disturbed the universe to rescue him from Hell, from the place he hadn't remembered until his fang sliced her tongue and her blood ran into his mouth.

Raven had sacrificed herself to save him. She'd made a trade.

And he hadn't remembered the woman he loved beyond recognition or understanding. Not only had he not remembered her, he'd turned himself heads and tails over a woman he couldn't fathom touching now. Not when he remembered what he'd had, what he'd always had without knowing it.

He didn't begrudge Octavia for anything. It seemed she'd known from the beginning—known in her special way that guaranteed a certain amount of understanding when events around her began to unfold, but similarly kept

her from voicing her secret knowledge. He couldn't hate her now, not for the century of not loving him, not for her numerous affairs, not for regarding him more as a favored son than a lover. He couldn't hate her.

He hated himself.

He'd touched someone else. He'd had perfection in his Raven and he'd fallen so far from it that he didn't know if he could ever be clean.

Raven had given up everything for him, and he hadn't remembered her. Her precious lips had graced his, and he'd shoved her aside. She'd wept crystal tears and whispered a thousand apologies, begging him for forgiveness he hadn't known to grant.

He'd lived a century-and-a-half wanting to belong, and not knowing he did already. All he had to do was wait. He would have waited. Years, decades, millennia, all of it would be worth it just to feel like he was a part of something.

The demon now wailed, mourning something he couldn't name. While the rest of his mind overran with conflicting memories, he felt nothing beyond golden understanding. He'd died at Raven's side, watching as she wept for him, begging him to never leave her. Her eyes were the last he remembered of that life before whatever was left of him was banished to the special Hell reserved for demons.

Raven had done everything to save him.

Just as he would have done for her. God, if he'd watched Raven die, he would have torn apart this and every world between them to get her back.

She'd begged him for forgiveness on her birthday. Begged *him*.

He was the one who had made her watch him die. Whatever came after—the years of emptiness, enduring rejection after rejection—the lot of it would never make up for what he'd made her suffer.

His thoughts finally cleared. He felt he could see at last.

It didn't mean the years behind him were down the pisser, but it certainly put things in perspective. Now, knowing what he did about himself, he felt completely whole at last. As though the life he'd lived these last decades was *Nicolai: Abridged*. He was a vampire older than time now.

He'd seen and tasted worse fates than many could imagine. For once, he felt in control. It didn't matter how moon-eyed he was for the warrior. He was a predator, and he always had been. He'd tempered himself as best he could for his girl the first time around, but he hadn't quit cold turkey, and

she'd never asked it of him. It was, perhaps, the only thing her bastard of a Guardian had pounded into her head that wasn't complete rubbish.

Ravenna had understood she was there only to protect the human race. She'd viewed him as a thing from Hell at first, of course, but she hadn't blamed him for being what he was, nor had she ever attempted to hold him to her moral code. It was a tacit understanding between them. He wasn't human. He couldn't be blamed for not acting human.

Just as he couldn't blame her for *being* human, for caring about the pissants she protected, even if they cared less than a damn about her.

He couldn't blame her for wanting to see the good in everyone, no matter how ill-advised.

He couldn't blame her for anything because all of it made up who she was.

Nicholas wasn't thick enough to think the fight had ended. His head might be clearing, the fog dissipating, but he knew there would always be questions. He would likely spend the rest of his days trying to reconcile with what he'd *thought* was true versus what actually was. He'd lived a good chunk of life not knowing his true identity, and try as he might, he couldn't simply bounce back from that.

He couldn't go on without seeing her. Lord knows why he'd even tried.

It had seemed important to distance himself and give himself time to think and mull over how her blood had opened his mind to an endless storm of new possibilities. It had provided the return of who he was, or who he had been before. While he'd told her to not call him *Nicolai* anymore, a part of him couldn't help but sway with awe.

She'd known him. She always had.

Nicholas had been in the cemetery for God-knows-how-long now, waiting because he knew she'd be here. After what had happened back home, she'd need to pour her confusion and her fears into stalking something to kill. She'd be here.

He needed her to be here and know he wasn't turning away from her. He might still need time to reconcile the question marks running rampant through his mind, but he needed *her* above all else.

Christ knows he always had. He'd needed her for two hundred years until he'd stumbled across her in that shithole of a village, and almost another two hundred before finding her again.

He'd spent nearly half a millennia completely lost for a girl he hadn't known until the end.

Only this time it *wouldn't* be the end. He wouldn't let history repeat itself. Not now. Not ever.

Raven had sacrificed herself to save him. How, he didn't know, but he would find out. After, of course, he found her, bathed her face with kisses, shagged her rotten, and begged for forgiveness for both dying on her and not remembering her sweet face.

Then he'd let her have it for bartering with a demon. Truly, he'd wring her neck, kiss it better, and wring it all over again.

Whatever the payment was, it would never be made. He'd find a way around it.

Then perhaps—just perhaps—they could have a go at the future.

\* \* \* \*

*How all occasions do inform against me.*

Raven laughed, an aching empty sound which echoed through her tired, emotionally crippled body and left her feeling even more lost than she had before.

The fates had given her what she'd desperately wanted since awakening and realizing who she was. Since realizing she was alone, because Nicholas didn't remember her.

She'd wanted nothing else since that night *but* to be remembered.

Paimon was right. The son of a bitch was right. She should have been careful for what she asked. He'd warned her, after all, that Nicolai could know life again only to hate her.

The idea of Nicolai ever hating her had been laughable then.

God, she was such a blind, arrogant fool.

There was one thing, though, which kept her from melting into despair. He loved her. He'd said so. He might have walked away but he loved her.

How much could she rely on love?

Everything felt so blundered and so completely up in the air. She wanted to do something but didn't know what. Every cell in her body commanded her to run and find him, but he'd asked her for time and she wasn't about to deny him *whatever* he asked. She'd been living under the

illusion that everything would somehow sort itself out once he remembered, not complicate itself right back up again. She'd believed it because she wanted it to be true. She wanted it.

"All right," she murmured gently to herself, kicking at a stone, her gaze trailing its movements as it bounced across the ground. "Well, let's list the good things. Dexter is still totally on your side, not looking to be setting you up to get burned at the stake. I know what I'm up against now." She paused meaningfully, stopping at the stone she'd kicked. "And Nicholas remembers."

"He remembers."

For the umpteenth time tonight, Raven froze, and her mind immediately went into recovery mode. She was prepared to resuscitate her heart if need be, To breathe back into life every part of her which was numb in despair. She wasn't ready for this. She wasn't ready to look him in the eyes and see the damage her selfish wish had inflicted. She wasn't ready to have his love only out of obligation.

*Oh God.*

What if that was it, then? What if it boiled down to obligation or the claim? God, there were so many things she hadn't considered—either out of idiocy or fear where such revelations would lead her.

Raven swallowed hard and turned. "Nicholas..."

He nodded solemnly, his dark eyes a storm of unreadable emotion.

"I thought you needed time," she said.

"How long's it been?"

"About ninety minutes."

"It's about all I needed." Nicholas drew in a deep breath and took a step forward. And another. And another. "You all right, sweetness?"

The question sounded so bizarre against the night air she almost laughed again. "All right?" she repeated. "Oh yeah. I'm fine. Real swell."

A pained look flashed across his face. "Raven—"

"I mean I've just gone and made a royal mess of everything, haven't I? Can't save you for anything. Can't make foolproof deals with demons. Can't tell you how sorry I am for making you...come back, 'cause honestly? Not so much with the sorry as I am with the Raven's-a-moron thing." She shrugged and released another high-pitched, slightly maniacal laugh. "So

yes. The world is one big lemon ready to be made into lemonade. That's pretty much how I am."

"I'm sorry."

His word lent her pause. Raven's heart skipped. "You're sorry?" she repeated. "I made you relive—"

"Yeah? My life's an entertaining circus. It was a laugh. Really."

If the strain in his voice wasn't enough, the tell in his eyes betrayed him completely. It always did.

"I don't blame you if you hate me, Nicholas."

Thick silence spread between them, his eyes widening in astonishment and deepening in something she hadn't seen in what felt like a millennia. "Hate you?" he repeated, his voice hoarse, the storm of emotion nearly taking her to her knees. "You think I even have the wiring for that?"

Raven blinked. "I...he...Paimon told me you might...a-and with what happened earlier—"

A growl rumbled through his throat, and he tore forward, his hands clamping around her forearms and walking her backward until her back collided with the harsh bark of a tree. Always against trees, they were. It was nice to have something solid on which to depend. "You daft little twig," he snarled. "You—"

"Nicholas—"

"Have I ever given you any reason? Any?" He shook her hard. "Not talking now, of course, but then. You knew me then, didn't you? *Didn't you?* How could you think I'd hate you if you knew me? How thick do I have to paint it for you?"

Raven shook her head. It was all she could do.

"You really think I wouldn't have done the same thing?" he snarled. "If I'd known there was a way? *Any* way? You think I would have let that stupid arse *take* you from me? Do you have any idea what I would give up for you?"

"I thought you—"

"I told you I love you," Nicholas barked, shaking her again. "I always have, even when I didn't know you." His face fell at that, the anger retreating and directing itself inward. His eyes went wide with grieved-awe, his head swooping downward as though he thought himself unworthy. "I didn't know you. God, Raven, how could I not know you?"

“The demon—”

“The demon made me forget you?” he snarled, the tornado in his eyes seizing hold of his entire being. “It shouldn’t have been possible. Making me forget anything about you should’ve been *impossible* with one touch of your skin. One kiss...” His gaze dropped to her mouth. “A thousand demons shouldn’t have had the power to make me forget. Not *you*, Raven, not *you*. Anything else—*everything* else—but not you. I could’ve...God, kill me over and over again, just don’t take the memory of you away.”

She didn’t realize she was crying until he reached up to brush away her tears. “I didn’t think...”

“You didn’t think what?” His breathing was ragged, his hazy eyes wandering covetously over her face as though trying to convince himself she was real. “That I would do as much—”

“That you would ever remember.”

Nicholas’s eyes flashed, and his grip on her arms tightened, his hips moving against hers. It took all of her not to simply gasp and thrust herself against his denim-clad erection. Hormones battled intellect. She needed to hear this. She needed to hear everything.

“And if I didn’t, what then?” he asked. “Are you really so dippy that you don’t know I’m gonna be hopeless for you no matter *what* I do or don’t remember? You know what I was thinking right before we kissed and I got myself a taste of your blood? Before I *remembered*?”

Raven shook her head, choking back a sob.

“That you’re mine.” Nicholas’s lips just barely brushed hers, his eyes fluttering shut before focusing on her again. “Now I know you always have been.”

Then his mouth was on her, massaging her lips so sweetly there was nothing to do but collapse against him, relief beyond recognition blistering her worn body. His hands slipped up her arms, brushing the sides of her neck and finally resting when he had her cheeks cupped in each palm. He moaned when she moaned into him, her lips parting to welcome the eager strokes of his tongue. He tasted just as she remembered—like Nicolai, but now flavored with a rush of danger and alcohol, combined with the thrilling air of him which was wholly and distinctively male and that was Nicolai as he would have been in this century had they lived.

Her fingers wove through his hair, her ravenous mouth consuming everything he had to give. Every stroke of his lips sent fiery sparks down her middle. Her panties were drenched. Her heart thundered. Her pulse raced. She was in such need and terrified the world would blink itself away, that she would awake to find this nothing but a dream. “Nicholas...” she gasped.

He grinned against her mouth, thrusting his clad cock against her drenched center. “God, I love that.”

Raven sucked hard on his bottom lip, eliciting a long groan. “Nicholas,” she said, cheekily this time, fingers massaging his scalp. “You don’t mind if I...slip every now and then? I’m gonna try to remember—”

“Sweetness, you knew me as Nicolai for a long time. I’d hope you wouldn’t be able to forget that in a blink. Not after what we had.”

“Have,” she corrected breathlessly. “What we *have*.”

“Yes, God yes,” Nicholas agreed, kissing her again. “What we have.”

“But I’ll try to remember. I’ll try.” Raven grinned, a thrill racing up her spine, a thrill she hadn’t felt in a long, long time. “I like Nicholas, though.”

“Yeah?” he murmured, nudging his lips with hers. “Nicholas likes you, too.”

“It fits you.”

Raven’s mouth found his, her hips gyrating against his with need she barely recognized. It had been so long since she’d been touched. Even with what he’d done to her the previous night, her heart hadn’t quite sung like it sung now. For the first time since she could remember, every bit of her was at peace.

“Nicholas...”

He pulled back only slightly, his eyes burning into hers with need she knew well. “I know.” His left hand dropping to cup her backside, anchoring her forward into the eager thrusts of his hips. “It’s been forever.”

“Literally.”

A grin tugged at his mouth. “You brought me home. I’ll never thank you enough for that.” He stole another kiss, trembling hard against her lips. “I’m at your mercy. Do what you will with me.” He paused and pressed himself forward, capturing her well and truly between the hard planes of his body and the tree at her back. “Just do it before I bust a nut.”

Raven’s nose wrinkled. “You were almost poetic there.”

He chuckled and nipped at her lips. “Story of my life.”

“Not out here, Nicholas.”

“No?”

“We’re in the cemetery.”

“Yeah? And we were last night, too.” The hand at her ass slipped over her hip, traveling upward until his fingers were barely grazing the fabric protecting her center. “Let me have you?”

Raven gasped and arched under his gentle touch. “You have me. I just...” She forced her eyes open to focus beyond the sea of his gaze. She forced the screaming nerves in her body to calm so that her surroundings solidified again and she could survey their options.

A mausoleum waited over his shoulder.

“There.”

Nicholas didn’t even turn around. The next instant he had his arms linked around her waist and was pulling her forward until the ground beneath her feet vanished and her weight became entirely dependent on his. “Wrap your legs around me,” he murmured. “And hold on.”

Were her need not as great as his, she might have laughed at how quickly he carted her through the ornate doors. As it was, she couldn’t praise his speed enough. The wind whipped against her face, and she lost her stomach at some point, but before she could blink, she found herself seated upon a large stone sarcophagus with Nicholas perched attentively between her thighs.

“Need you,” he gasped, shedding his shirt so fast it might as well have been a mirage. “So much.”

Raven nodded, gulping down air as though to keep herself from drowning. Her arms shot upward when his hands fisted the cotton of her tank-top, dragging the material over her head. She hadn’t had the chance to change from her standard training-attire, not that Nicholas seemed to mind, but she took a second to identify the irony.

It would be twice, now, that he’d taken her virginity.

How many girls could say that?

“You’re wearing a bra,” Nicholas said, his wide, nearly-dumbfounded eyes taking in the gray fabric concealing her small breasts. “You never wore bras.”

Raven rolled her eyes. “They didn’t have sports-bras in the eighteenth century. It’s not exactly easy to fight baddies while wearing a corset.”

“Yeah, but those buggers were sexy as hell.”

“Not to mention guaranteed anti-breathing or your money back.”

Nicholas smirked, his hands skimming up her belly until he had her breasts in his hands. “Well, I like it,” he purred, his thumbs caressing her hardened nipples. “It’s so...soft.”

“Helps with the...fighting.” Raven drew her arms up again as he dragged the sports-bra over her head. “Keeps me from...bouncing.” She paused and glanced down sheepishly. “What little I have to bounce, anyway.”

“Bite your tongue. These here are perfect.”

“You have to think so or I’ll kick your ass.”

Nicholas glanced up, an impish gleam in his eyes. “Kinky,” he purred, taking her bare breasts in his hands, the mischief just as easily fading into reverence. “God...Raven...” His head came forward as though magnetized, his eager mouth sucking a nipple between his teeth. He released her just as quickly, licking his lips. “Your taste...”

Raven whimpered and arched her hips off the sarcophagus. “Nicolai...”

He glanced up, a soft smile tugging at his mouth. “I do like that,” he murmured. “Can’t really explain it. It’s like I knew all along. Just a part of me was fighting to get out so the rest of me would stop being such an idiot.” He flicked her nipples with his thumbs, his lips stealing another kiss from hers. Then his left hand had abandoned her again, skimming down her bare abdomen, his touch feather-light but unmistakable in intent. “Gotta get you outta these.”

Raven snapped upward at the same time, her hands seizing fistfuls of his tee. “No fair,” she pouted, lifting her hips to help him drag her sweats down her legs. “You got a...head start.”

“You’re just outta practice.”

Nicholas froze the second the words escaped his lips, his eyes immediately going wide with contrition, searching her face for forgiveness. While his reaction aided in calming the inner hysterical screaming, Raven couldn’t help the cold shudder which commanded her system at the practically-screamed implication. Now that he remembered—God, now more than ever—the thought of him with anyone else made her want to do very violent things.

A long sigh rolled through his lips as he dropped to his knees. He'd managed to rid her of her sweats and her sneakers—though the latter, she didn't know when—leaving her clad only in her thoroughly unremarkable white cotton panties, a twin to the pair he'd seen the night before. She was slick with desire but suddenly cold with jealousy.

She wasn't angry with him for Octavia, though she couldn't help feeling hurt and irritated with herself. It made no sense, she knew, but emotions like jealousy rarely did. She couldn't begrudge him for being with someone else, and she knew that.

Yet, at the same time, she couldn't help it.

"She wasn't you," Nicholas murmured, hooking his thumbs under the elastic of her panties and slowly slipping them down her legs. "Not one piece of her was you."

"I don't want to hear this."

"You need to. I don't want you thinking..." His eyes fell to her exposed flesh. "Christ, you're so pretty." He tenderly ran his fingers over her shaven mound. "I won't pretend she didn't mean anything to me," Nicholas said finally. "But fuck if I know how I was able to touch anyone after you, even if I didn't remember. You were always with me. I told you that. My night angel."

"It's okay—"

"No, it's not. I don't want you developing some silly complex." His index finger slipped between her pussy lips, tenderly rubbing a lap up and down, the pad of his finger striking her clit with every stroke. It was subtle but the slightest touch had her drenching his flesh as the rest of her burned with need. "I told you a long time ago...I didn't know love until I knew you."

Raven's vision fogged and she nodded. "I remember," she gasped, thrusting herself wantonly against his touch. "Nicolai, please."

"I need to explain this first."

"I believe you."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"Really, I—"

"It's true. All of it. I've *never* known love until I knew you. Not the first time. Not this time." Nicholas broke off and shook his head hard, his fingers, almost subconsciously, slipping inside her wet channel and

wringing a desperate gasp from her throat. “I’ll always be grateful to her for finding me. But Raven...trust me. Will you trust me?”

Raven met his eyes reluctantly. It was a very odd sensation. Her nerves blazed, his fingers locked inside her body, and she burned with such envy she felt liable to scream.

“I was always lost, see. Always. I thought I was complacent—or I tried to be. But every night, *every* fucking night, I dreamed of you. Didn’t know it was you, of course, till I got here. Didn’t know what it meant till tonight.” Nicholas dipped his head toward her center, hesitated, then took a long lick of her clit, his fingers curling inside her. “It’s always been you, Raven. Always. Even when I didn’t know you, it was you. She just led me here. She led me to you.”

His words broke her heart, and without warning, pieces came flying together in a pristine collage of absolute understanding. God, how could she be so stupid?

Whatever she felt—despite how sick it made her—was in the past. It was gone. It was something that had happened because he hadn’t known her. They hadn’t known each other. There was no indiscretion and no reason for apologies. He didn’t need to tell her he hated Octavia. He didn’t need to explain anything, no matter how much she knew he wanted to.

“Nicholas...”

He licked her clit again and glanced up.

“I don’t want our future to be based on the past,” she said, her hand finding his cheek. “You didn’t know me.”

“I still loved you. All my life. You’ve always been what I want.”

“I’m not going to be all Psycho Raven because there was this time when you didn’t remember me and were with someone else.” She smiled gently and coaxed him to his feet, her eager hands immediately going to his belt. “You still love me.”

“Always,” Nicholas said again, and if his voice wasn’t enough to sell her, the glaze of tears in his eyes had her thoroughly convinced. “I’ve never loved anyone else.”

The sound of the belt buckle hitting the stone floor reverberated through the still walls, but not as much as the definitive sound of his zipper being lowered. Raven kept her eyes on him, even when his cock sprang eagerly

into her grip. He whimpered, his eyes fluttering closed even as they fought to stay with her.

"I've been thinking a lot about the first time we did this," Raven murmured. "You took me by such surprise."

"You had no idea what I was doing," Nicholas agreed, his voice strained. "I had to walk you through it. Best night of my life."

She grinned, her thumb caressing his swollen head as her other hand skimmed up the inside of his thighs, resting his balls against her palm. "Which one?" she asked.

"Both. Either. Though this one's gaining speed." Suddenly her head was captured between his hands, his grip directing her southward until his cock was caressing the pursed line of her mouth, begging entrance. "Please...just for a minute."

Her lips parted without a fight, and she suckled him eagerly into her mouth, moaning around him when he whimpered and thrust himself deeper down her throat. It was funny the way so much time could seem to have passed, yet all of this remained so fresh in her mind. If she closed her eyes, she could easily see herself back at their cottage on the outskirts of the village, laughing and battling each other for dominance. She almost always won, but she'd long assumed it was because he liked seeing her on top.

His taste was the same, as were the little noises he made. He still purred when she squeezed his testicles and whimpered when she suckled his head. Her name still spilled through his lips with deference, and she felt his love through every needless breath. It was all the same. It was as though not a day had passed.

Yet here they were.

"So hot," he moaned. "Raven..."

He pushed her away without warning, leaving her to blink in confusion until he gently guided her up his body and stole her lips in a kiss. Then his cock slipped across her slick flesh, moved between her spread pussy lips and drove her out of what little mind she had left.

"I need to be inside you," he whispered against her lips.

"I'm not stopping you."

"Might sting a bit."

Raven grinned. "Didn't the first time."

Something dangerous flashed across his face. “You haven’t touched any man here, have you?” he demanded. “You’re mine. All of you. I—”

“Aren’t we the hypocrite?”

“Raven...”

“I meant *our* first time,” she assured him, wiggling her hips in a vain attempt to capture him. “It didn’t hurt then.”

“But this time—”

She pressed her index finger to his lips, her other hand slipping between them. “You’ve always been my only,” she whispered, wrapping her fingers around his cock and nudging him down to her aching entrance. “Love me, Nicholas.”

There were no words. She expected him to whisper something in her ear or against her lips. She expected him to hold her to his chest. She expected a thousand things.

Nicholas surprised her. Instead, he buried his head in her shoulder and wrapped his arms around her middle, and she was the one holding him. Holding him as his cock began to push inside her, as her body tightened, her vaginal muscles clenching in a bizarre tug of war to both reject his invasion and draw him in deeper. It was strange and wonderful, feeling something she already knew for the first time. She relaxed with a long sigh, her eyes burning again, her arms tightly wound around his neck until the slight sting of discomfort abated and her body welcomed him completely. Her muscles clamped around him, drenching him with her desire and holding him inside—the piece of her which, for so long, had gone missing. She was remade in that moment, split between something so new yet so familiar. She knew him—every ragged breath he stole, every inch of his skin, and every tremble of his body.

She knew him.

“I do,” Nicholas whispered, “love you.”

“I know.”

“You all right?” he asked softly, hugging her tighter. “Any pain?”

She shook her head. “No pain.”

Nicholas’s chest rumbled against her when he chuckled. “High kicks and horseback?” he murmured hoarsely.

A rush of warmth filled her veins. In a blink the gap of her experience sealed, and she was made whole. “Must be it.”

“Raven...” He pulled back just slightly so he could see her eyes and watch her as he pulled back and slipped out of her pussy before sinking in again. He watched her watch him, and the flash of his gaze spoke for everything he could not.

“I want to tell you things,” Nicholas murmured, his movements slow and tempered. “I wanna tell you how hot you are.”

“So tell me,” she replied, her hips nudging forward to reclaim him as he pulled away again. The absence of him from within her left her achingly aware of a void time had somehow forgotten. “Tell...me...”

“There aren’t words. Not for this.”

“Nicholas...faster...”

He blinked in surprise. “You’re not hurting?”

Raven shook her head. “No. No. Please. Not hurt.”

His lips claimed hers as his body conceded. This was a dance they’d performed well, performed often, yet while sitting on the brink of knowledge, she couldn’t seem to remember her moves. She wanted to please him and wanted to rid Nicholas’s mind of every wayward thought of the moments they hadn’t spent together. She wanted to mark him as he’d never before been marked, a mark which wouldn’t fade if time and death forced them apart a second time, a mark which would tattoo more than just her face in his memory. She wanted him so desperately, and even though she had him, his hard length pumping into her aching body, it never seemed to be enough.

“I missed you,” Nicholas panted against her, his voice rising as his thrusts grew quicker. He was still going slow, his pace increasing in fragments. He gave her the time to ask him to stop or tell him she hurt. Need strained every corner, but he fought it. He fought it while giving in. He was the only man who could. “I missed you so much. Even when I...didn’t know you...I missed you.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Never. Never be sorry for it.” A kiss burned her lips. “Never be sorry.”

Raven couldn’t help what she felt. No amount of wishful thinking could make it otherwise. Similarly, she remained true to what she’d told him just minutes before. This wasn’t about the past. This was about their future. Death had ripped them apart, but time pieced them back together.

“Look at us, baby,” Nicholas moaned, directing her attention downward, his hips crashing harder against hers. “Watch us dance.”

She did as she was told, taking in the sight of his cock, glistening with her juices, pushing in and out of her warm body. She watched her feminine folds mold around him and welcome him inside her. She fought him whenever he tried to leave. It was the most erotic thing she’d ever seen, and at first glance, she found she was mesmerized. She didn’t want to look away. She didn’t think she could.

In all the times they’d been together before, she’d never watched, only felt. Now she watched and felt, and every time his length disappeared inside her pussy, a new, previously undiscovered bundle of nerves erupted, and she felt herself break into tremors.

“Raven,” Nicholas moaned into her hair. “My Raven.”

She nodded hard. “Your Raven.”

“Faster. Need...”

“Yes.”

“Don’t...wanna hurt...”

“Don’t care. Just need.”

His pace heightened in intensity so rapidly that it took a few seconds to reconcile the bolts of ecstasy shooting through her veins with the glances of his cock plunging ruthlessly into her wet flesh. Ecstasy laced with pain. Pain she grasped. Pain she didn’t mind. And without warning, it became too fast to watch, too fast to merge together the bliss of sensation with what her eyes were telling her. Raven blinked hard and glanced up, and found herself instantly absorbed in his gaze.

“You feel it?” he asked thickly. One of his hands somehow managed to worm between their battling bodies, finding her clit with ease that nearly seemed unfair. The smack of their flesh stung the air around them, melting into the foreground of his voice until she nearly heard naught but a distant ringing. It took a few seemingly endless seconds to work her way back to herself. “You feel it building inside you?”

Raven mewled and nodded before her brain could even process the question.

“Tell...me,” he gasped, massaging her clit with tenderness offsetting the sudden fury of his body’s assault. How they had gone from slow to fast so quickly she didn’t know or care. This was what she needed, what she knew,

despite this body's inexperience. His quick reclaiming of everything that was his, if only so she could do the same. "Tell me...how I feel."

"Hot."

"That's...you, sweetness."

"You feel hot." She paused for emphasis—or possibly for air. It didn't matter. "I...feel...hot."

"Raven, Raven, Raven..."

Then suddenly, the proverbial light switch flicked upwards, and she remembered something important. And without warning, she began contracting her inner muscles with every plunge of his cock, squeezing around him so tightly that something closely resembling a howl tore through his throat and his hips bucked against her with maddened desperation.

"Oh fuck. Oh yes. Oh yes oh yes yes yes. Raven. *Raven Raven Raven*..."

He rubbed her clit so hard and striking into her pussy with ferocity that dissolved her knowledge of the line between pleasure and pain. Somehow it had ceased to matter. All she knew was she was crying and whispering a thousand things into his skin, battling him for custody of his cock every time he tried to leave her. When they kissed, it was all teeth and tongue. She tasted blood, but she didn't know whose. At some point, the crystal blue of his eyes melted into the burning yellow of a demon's, and just when the pressure mounting her insides became too much to bear, his fangs sliced into her neck and the world around her exploded.

She fell, but he caught her, thrusting desperately into her still as she spasmed and trembled into orgasm. The name she screamed was Nicholas.

"Mine!" he growled against her bloodied flesh, and somewhere deep inside her, a raging pain at last fell to peace.

This was what she needed, what she'd always needed.

"Yours," she sobbed eagerly, clinging to him madly.

"Take me," he demanded.

She did. Her blunt teeth sank hard into his neck and she felt him spill inside her, cooling the fire but starting a new one in the same stroke. "Mine," she whispered.

Something within her locked and held.

"Yours. Oh God, Raven, *always*."

The inner screaming stopped, and every inch of her burned with light.

The last thought before consciousness left her completely was a reminder to herself.

He'd asked her what he felt like. She hadn't had the words then. Not to articulate what she really wanted to say or what she felt he truly needed to hear.

She'd have to remember when she awoke. He needed to know.

He needed to know that he felt like home.

He always had.

## Chapter 22

He loved the way she felt against him. Curled sweetly at his chest, her right leg hooked over his hip and the drum of her heartbeat thumping lightly against him. If he closed his eyes, he could almost believe they were a thousand miles and a couple centuries away. He could see them lying together in the cottage they'd once shared. The place he last remembered being truly happy.

Except now. This topped everything.

It was odd, knowing he'd once been truly happy. After generations of feigning bliss, he truly had it. He had all along. In some closed off corner of his mind were memories of absolute perfection. Now that he was here, it boggled him that he'd ever gotten so thoroughly lost.

"Mmm..." Raven murmured, her fingernails drawing soft, tantalizing patterns across his chest. "I never knew the floors of tombs could be so comfy."

Nicholas grinned and brushed his lips across her brow. "You're not lying on the floor."

An adorable pout depressed her mouth. "I kinda am," she argued, wiggling against him. "The frozen cheek of my ass will testify as much."

He was assaulted with lavish images involving his teeth and said ass, images his cock very much appreciated. "I could warm it up for you if you like," he purred, trailing his fingers down her spine until he had her perfect flesh cradled against his palm.

"Bad," she scolded.

"The baddest."

Her fingers danced around his chest. "You have the most perfect man-nipples," she said, leaning upward to tease his indicated nipple with her tongue. "I don't think I ever told you that before."

Nicholas tried to listen to her. He really did. However, at the first caress of her mouth, his head slammed into the floor so hard he was sure he would see stars for a week. “Fuck,” he gasped, digging his fingers into her skin. “Raven...”

“Just saying. They’re all with the...yummy.” She emphasized her point with another lick.

He grinned and kissed her brow again, the hand at her ass making a steady trek up her perfectly firm body until he held her breast. “I don’t remember you being so forward.”

“I was all virginal before. And it *was* a different century.” She grinned, resting her chin against his chest. “Don’t tell me you don’t like forward-Raven.”

“I love all incarnations of Raven.”

“Yeah, you better.”

Nicholas smiled gently and raised his head, suddenly starved for her lips, as though he hadn’t spent the past few hours kissing her as much and as often as possible. “Guess I’ll just have to double my efforts when I wanna see you blush, then,” he said. “Used to be I could just comment on how much I enjoy nibbling on your pussy and—”

While the thwap of her hand against his chest felt oddly comforting, it was the pink in her cheeks that had him grinning like an idiot. A lesser creature would have missed her flushed skin in the dark, but there was little she could hide from his heightened senses. No matter how hot he found being on the receiving end of a slightly more adventurous Raven, he absolutely adored her innocence. The way she blushed and looked away whenever he said something teetering on the side of lewd, the way the slightest innuendo had her wiggling in embarrassment, was a part of what made her Raven. His Raven. He adored it all.

God, he loved her so much it made his nerves tingle. Even when left in doubt, when mourning how alone the world made him feel, he’d known she was out there.

He’d known he belonged.

“It’s weird,” Raven mused thoughtfully once her self-conscious blushes abated. “I feel like I’ve missed this all my life.”

“I know what you mean, kitten.”

“But I’ve only known...” She drew in a deep breath and shook her head, again resting her cheek against him. He loved the feel of her resting against his chest and the warmth of her pressed into his side. He waited for her to complete her thought but silence settled instead. It was for the best, he supposed. If they started musing over lost time, it would eventually drive them crazy.

He much preferred focusing on the future they had now, the one certain thing in his life. Everything was in the air, but he felt more or less accustomed to a complete lack of direction. He’d never really lived a day knowing where he’d sleep tomorrow. He could live with uncertainty. He always had.

The only thing he’d ever been certain about was currently snuggled in his arms.

“I don’t know what I would’ve done,” Raven murmured gently.

Nicholas frowned and squeezed her shoulder. “What is it?”

“If you hadn’t remembered.” There was a long silence. “I mean I prepared myself for it. I did. Up until it happened, I told myself you were likely never going to, but a part of me was clinging. I needed you to remember.”

He arched a brow. “I thought we covered this already, kitten.”

“We did.”

“Yeah, and you still don’t get it. You really think I couldn’t have loved you without my memories?”

“That’s not it.”

“Good, because that’s rubbish.” He smiled gently when she glanced up at him in question, clutching her ass again and gently coaxing her to straddle his waist. He was too starved for her to not feel her flesh against his; he couldn’t lay naked with her without touching her or feeling her wet pussy pulsing around his cock. He loved the way she looked astride him, a shy, however wanton goddess. She was sheer perfection and she didn’t know it. “How could I not love you?” he whispered, eager fingers pinching her nipples, loving the way she gasped and gyrated against him. “I don’t give a damn what I do or don’t remember. Well, no, that’s not true, but even if I hadn’t—”

She nodded, her eyes heavy with arousal. “I know, Nicolai.”

He couldn't imagine why the name had inspired such anger a short twenty-four hours ago. Then again, forever had passed in a matter of a day. He was older now than he ever had been, with even more experience under his belt. While Nicholas had never entertained thoughts of his own mortality, especially as an immortal being, a part of him had similarly never expected to get this far in life. To have seen all he'd seen and done all he'd done.

Now the future seemed limitless.

Raven drew in a gentle breath. "I guess the idea of being the only one who knew, who remembered, was a bit much."

This he understood. Had it been the other way around, had he recognized Raven before she recognized him, he would have felt devastated at the history lost between them. Even if lightning struck twice and he managed to win her love a second time, he doubted he would ever completely recover from having lost such an essential part of who they were.

Now he felt whole.

"You know how it happened, right?" he asked her, abandoning one of her breasts to explore the renewed claim mark on her throat. A small thrill raced through his body the second his fingertips brushed the sacred skin. "This..."

"I know. You bit my tongue."

"Sorry about that."

"I'm not."

Nicholas grinned. "Neither am I. I just fancy warning you before I'm about to bite."

Raven arched a perfect brow. "I don't seem to remember that."

"Sometimes my warnings are the nonverbal sort. I figure if you see fangs, you know what's coming."

She gently ran her nails over one of his nipples, and he jerked slightly, eyes blazing with excitement. "And if I don't wanna be bitten?"

"Tough."

She pinched him, and he yelped, his hips bucking upward, his cock rigid and demanding attention. "Christ, Raven..." He didn't realize his eyes were closed until he felt her lean forward. until her breasts pressed against his chest, and her wet, heavenly tongue licked the mark she'd given him.

There was definitely something to be said for forward-Raven. He could easily learn to love this.

He thought for a minute she might raise herself above him and lock him inside her body again, and he honestly didn't know whether or not to be disappointed when she instead resumed resting against him.

Well, the demon knew what it wanted. It wanted its mate over and over and over again. The demon wanted the solace of her body. The demon wanted her drenching his cock with her cream while he drowned in her eyes. While Nicholas shared a good part of that sentiment, there remained sweet comfort in simply lying with her. It was comfort that sex couldn't provide, no matter how he hungered for it.

Furthermore, there were too many things in the air they needed to discuss before they lost themselves to carnal pleasure.

Something told him Raven was on the same page. After everything she'd been through in the past couple of days, she likely needed verbal comfort more than anything.

"We think your history hunting down the Few was claim-linked," Raven said. "It was something I kicked around for a while. Dexter pretty much confirmed it."

There was no condemnation in her voice, nothing like he would have expected. He was a vampire lying naked with One of the Few—a vampire who had the blood of her brethren warriors on his hands—and she wasn't angry. Not in her voice, and not in what she subconsciously sent him through their blood link.

Furthermore, her conclusion was one Nicholas had already reached, but he felt some measure of gratitude in hearing it confirmed. "Yeah?" he murmured, brushing her hair over her shoulder.

"Your...your inner vamp, the demon, I mean. We think it knew it was supposed to look for me."

He shrugged. This explanation seemed reasonable enough. "The demon's linked to you. No shame in saying it." Nicholas kissed her brow again. He wanted to kiss every inch of her golden body, but he felt satisfied with her brow for now. "Your Guardian seems to be a big help."

"I know. Weird, huh?"

"It's a nice change." He paused, a dark thought shuddering through him. "Don't suppose you know what happened to Mal, do you? I'd fancy an ending full of pain and suffering, but I guess it's too much to hope."

There was a long, deadly pause, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Raven?"

Nicholas waited a long beat. Still nothing.

And then, seconds later, he felt it.

Trembling.

"Sweetheart..."

"I killed him."

Strange how one could feel the world stop moving, even while lying down. Every living component of his body seemed to freeze at once, and for one who considered himself more or less dead, it was a rather bizarre sensation.

Raven couldn't hurt anyone, not a living, breathing being of her own species. He'd seen her. The light in her soul was what had drawn him to her. It was one of the many reasons he'd fallen in love with her—her purity, her innocence, her...glow.

Now this unreality of reality. He ached to think of it.

"Oh God," he murmured, his arms tightening around her. "Raven..."

"It's okay."

"The claim's what did it. Fuck—"

"No. It wasn't like that." Raven shifted, resting her chin against his chest, her green eyes swallowing him whole. "I didn't go after him or anything. It was an accident. After you..." There was a long pause, and when he felt her tremble again some part of his heart broke. "After you were gone I stayed in the room a long time. I couldn't leave."

"Oh God..."

"But I did. There was this...my mind kept dragging me back to the books in Kenneth's library and the things I'd read. There were ways to get around it, and I had to get you back. And Kenneth was the only connection I had. Well, the only *immediate* connection. I know I could've found something else, someone else, but I couldn't wait. I knew he had access. I knew he had books. So I went back and I found them, and he came in."

She paused again, and Nicholas waited. There was nothing to do or say. He wanted to reassure her, but he didn't know about what. It seemed natural

that his death was what came to mind, and what she'd gone through. The circumstances had been outside of his control, but considering the place he'd left her, she'd been without option.

These were things he remembered thinking as he watched her weep for him, his heart too full of love for her to feel fear. What Raven had gone through in the time following was something he didn't wish to consider.

"There were...words. Let's just say he pissed me off, and considering I was a woman on the edge, it was a stupid move on his part." Raven sighed and inched upward, brushing a tender kiss across his lips. "Oh, and by the way, he told me what you did."

Nicholas frowned. "What's that?"

"Yeah. The whole dying thing. When I could have saved you."

He winced, and his guilt intensified. "Oh right. That."

"Jerk."

It was a tempered insult compared to what he felt was coming, so tempered that it made him nervous. Her tone lacked even malice, holding only a slight pout one might hear from a child. "Raven...I couldn't let you die for me."

"But dying for me was cool?"

"Kitten, I—"

She pressed her index finger to his lips, a sad smile tugging across hers. "No. It's okay. I understand."

"I'm sorry—"

"No, you're not. And I wouldn't be, either. If it'd been me, I would've done the same thing." Raven kissed him again before resting her cheek against his chest once more. "So you're off the hook. I did most of the cursing of your name between burying Kenneth and finding the right book to use. It didn't make me love you any less. If anything, I think it ultimately had the reverse effect."

"You love me more for making you suffer?"

A short, humorless laugh bubbled off her lips. "In a weird way, yeah."

"But I—"

"Devastated me? Kinda. But hey, I bounced back. I bounced all the way to Kenneth's, where I wanted to kill him, but I didn't. Not at first, at least." She swallowed hard. "I had him at my mercy, then he started laying the guilt and so I let up...and he tried to kill me, but he wasn't fast enough."

Nicholas had never gone from one emotion to another so rapidly. One minute he felt saturated in guilt, and the next he was ready to beat his chest and rip the stuffing out of the first jackass he came across with even a passing resemblance for Kenneth Mal. At this point, pretty much anyone would do.

“I swear to—”

“Swear to no one. I killed him dead.”

“That bastard tried to *kill*—”

“—me. I know. Twice. He’s dead as in way dead, and he doesn’t need to be killed again.”

“I think I’ll be the judge.”

“Nicolai—”

“He—”

Raven silenced him with her lips. “Is dead,” she whispered again. “Very. And we’re here.”

It amazed him what she could do to him with that mouth of hers. “We’re here,” he murmured.

“And despite whatever tricks Paimon tried to pull—”

Nicholas blinked and pulled back, his brow furrowing. “Paimon?”

“The demon. The one I made a deal with.” She lowered her eyes and wiggled against him in a way he knew she didn’t mean to be sensual. His cock didn’t get the message. “Heard of him?”

At that moment, he really wished he had. “Sorry.”

A dark shudder rippled through her body. “He’s an ass.”

“Demons tend to be.”

“He tried to keep us apart. I gave him something huge, and he tried to keep us apart.”

Nicholas shrugged. “Didn’t take. I’ve loved you all my life.”

She arched a brow. “You only remembered that you loved me four hours ago.”

“Semantics,” he argued. “I still loved you, my night angel. You got me through the disaster that was this life. I was miserable, but at night I was loved. You were always with me, and you loved me.”

He loved the way her eyes brightened when she smiled. “I’ve always loved you,” Raven whispered.

“Loved you first.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Nuh uh.”

A wide grin split his lips, and his hands suddenly itched to feel her warmth. “Yeah huh,” he argued, coaxing her upward so he could tease her breasts.

Her hands wasted no time exploring him the second they were free, roaming over his skin, eliciting little shivers in their wake. Nicholas sighed happily, then caught a sinister gleam in her eye that melted his smile away in a heartbeat.

“Need I remind you how ticklish you are?” she asked.

“It’s a chance I’m willing to—”

Wrong choice of words. The tomb bellowed with the piercing ring of his giggle, and if he remembered anything, once the onslaught began, it didn’t stop. In seconds, he was bucking hard beneath her merciless fingers, his hands abandoning her breasts and fighting to find her wrists.

“You—” Giggle. “—little—” Squirm. “—wench.”

“Oooh! Scary.”

“I’ll scare you...all right.”

“I can’t wait.”

With the way she moved over him, waiting wasn’t an issue. With a triumphant growl, he found her wrists and utilized his grip to tug her to his chest, shutting up that gorgeous mouth of hers with a kiss that would put the stars to shame. He didn’t know how he’d survived this long without the feel of her tongue caressing his or her moans ringing in his ears. He didn’t know how he’d lived without her warmth.

He didn’t know how he’d made it this far without piecing together the love exploding in his heart, the same love he’d always known didn’t belong to Octavia. He’d never comprehend how he’d gone so long without knowing *this*—the wholeness of Raven. He’d never understand why it had taken tasting her blood to return the world to him, but he remained bound in more gratitude than he’d ever experienced.

Raven had risked everything to save him, and she had.

He only hoped he could save her in return.

“What was it?” he asked between hungry kisses, loathing to deprive his mouth of hers even for something he knew to be important.

She whimpered and made a sound which he decoded as, “Huh?”

“What did you bargain?”

Nicholas didn't know what he expected; an evasion, a fight, a pun. He didn't expect her to fork over the answer so quickly.

She looked at him with her green eyes and licked her lips. "It was me," she explained. A chill seized his veins. "I mean, my power. Not all of me, obviously, but the power center part. The demon wanted that, I wanted you, and so I gave it."

His ears rang as though trying to piece the words together so they formed a different sentence. It was the way she said it, the cavalier way her voice wrapped around syllables and sound. She had no idea. She had no idea what she'd done.

*Oh God.*

It seemed the night was full of surprises.

## Chapter 23

He didn't tell her why they ran or where they were headed. He didn't tell her anything. One minute she'd been lying in his arms and the next Nicholas had tossed her to her feet and started screaming things that made no sense.

It wasn't the reaction she'd expected from him. No, this was more on the level of what she'd expected from Dexter: screaming, yelling, fear-stricken eyes and the demands of how *stupid* she could be. Her mind had all but spun off its axis.

Now, with her wrist in Nicholas's ironclad grip and her eyes on his backside, Raven did her best not to stumble as he sprinted toward a very familiar neighborhood.

He'd led her home.

"Nicholas—"

The hand gripped around her wrist tightened and pulled her into a faster jog. "Quiet," he said.

"I—"

"I'll throw you over my shoulder if I need to."

"I'm—"

Okay, so it wasn't an empty threat. The next thing she knew, Nicholas had jerked her to a quick halt and then she was in the air, bouncing against his shoulder with every speedy stride his legs made against the ground.

"Well," she huffed, "this was uncalled for."

Nicholas didn't *respond* so much as *run*. He ran so hard it amazed her when he didn't break stride. He ran until the shapes around her materialized into the familiar drive leading to her and Dexter's front door. He ran until they stood on the doorstep, and even then, it was likely only the presence of a door that convinced his feet to stop.

“When your Guardian hears about this...” Nicholas growled, bouncing impatiently. “I swear, this time, I’m not gonna risk life and limb to stop a campfire.”

“He already knows,” Raven said, wiggling to no avail. She didn’t want to acknowledge her rising surge of panic. It was better to remain irritated, if not slightly put off. Her very logical mind refused to tear itself to shreds over something her incredibly smart and anxiety-prone Guardian hadn’t made hay over. “Nicholas, he already—”

Either she was invisible, or Nicholas was too wound up to think logically when she spoke. He ignored her completely, instead tightening his hold on her leg with his left hand and administering thunderous pounds to Dexter’s door with this right.

“You in there!” he screamed through the door. “Open up!”

Her heart skipped, and her pulse raced. “Yeah,” she said, her voice somewhat strained. “’Cause this isn’t gonna make him panic.”

“Raven, sweetheart, I love you but if you don’t shut your trap, I might do something I’ll regret.”

“What did I do?”

Nicholas scoffed as though she knew perfectly well what she’d done and didn’t answer. Instead, he again pounded on the door. “Dexter!”

Raven wished she could see Dexter’s face when he opened the door. It would certainly be one for the books. However, from her vantage point all she could see was her vampire’s jean-clad ass.

“Wh-what the hell?” Dexter stammered, his voice aghast. “Raven?”

“Your girl’s a dolt, you know that?” Nicholas barked, thundering over the threshold.

Raven quickly found herself tossed onto the familiar settee in their shared living room. Her surroundings barely had time to stop spinning before she focused on Nicholas as he made laps across the floor.

She glanced to Dexter, who watched her lover warily. He looked torn between reaching for the nearest weapon and comforting the poor guy. At the moment, Raven could really sympathize.

“Did you know?” Nicholas asked finally, startling them both when he broke out of his pace. “Did you know what she did?”

Dexter blinked in confusion. “Excuse me?”

"The bargain," Raven explained quickly. She would be lying if she said her heart didn't slow with relief when Dexter's face relaxed and tension rolled off his shoulders. He'd obviously expected something new and dangerous and worse than what they already knew. At least she wasn't insane. "The powers-go-bye-bye bargain."

Dexter nodded, turning his eyes to Nicholas and favoring him with his best glare. "Yes," he said calmly. "Raven told me everything. Earlier tonight, actually, before you showed up and things became even more interesting."

Nicholas blinked. "And?"

"And?"

"I'm sorry, but are we talking about the same thing?"

"I thought we covered that with the powers-go-bye-bye thing," Raven muttered, lowering her eyes. Her fingers occupied themselves with the fabric of Nicholas's tee. She frowned. Since when did she wear Nicholas's clothes?

He must have dressed her in the hazed blur between their conversation and his mad dash home. She didn't remember.

When she looked up, she noted, for the first time, that Nicholas only wore his jeans. Nothing more.

God, how this must look.

"Am I really the only one here who knows what that means?" Nicholas asked, his voice uncommonly shrill.

Dexter cleared his throat. "Your concern being what it is, the removal of Raven's powers will—"

"Kill her."

In that instant, all sound faded, fizzed out by the theatric and purposeful beats of her heart. Then her ears started to ring. Her throat swelled. Her skin burned. Every nerve in her body pricked with life. She could almost hear her blood rushing through her veins, and it sounded, strangely, much like standing in the ocean. For a fraction of a second, she felt sand between her toes, the sun on her face. She heard waves crash against a pearly shoreline as clouds feathered the sky and heat blistered her moon-kissed skin. She found herself torn indefinitely between two worlds.

Only her oasis didn't exist. She sat in her home, surrounded by sound but deafened to everything but the noise her own body made—the thunder, the ocean, the emptiness.

The *nothing*.

She must have passed out, for the next thing she knew, she blinked her eyes open and found her head was in Nicholas's lap.

"I'm so sorry," her vampire whispered, anguished. "I just lost my head."

"What happened?"

There was a deathly silence, then she remembered. She was home. She was on the couch. She'd just learned she was going to die.

*Oh God.*

"It won't happen, kitten," Nicholas promised her softly, his fingers gently stroking her temple. "I won't let it happen."

"I don't..."

A very familiar throat cleared. Raven closed her eyes. She knew what the sound meant. Years under Dexter's guidance had taught her how to read the signs.

"I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner," Dexter said softly. "I'm so sorry, Raven."

"Will you guys please stop apologizing to me?" she muttered, wincing as she sat up. "I just need—"

"Nicholas is right," Dexter confirmed. God, she'd never heard him sound so haunted, nor had she ever seen the hollowed circles of his eyes. It was as though life had been stripped away. "He's right." There was a long pause. She felt she should say something, but she didn't know what so she didn't try. Dexter exhaled slowly, then finally looked up. "The Few are intimately linked with vampires, more so than any other demons. They are of the same mold. The same fabric, if you will. As the laws of life govern vampires, there are some shared traits with the Few."

Raven swallowed hard. Her skin was cold and clammy. Sweat lined her brow. Still, she didn't speak.

"I suppose the best way to explain it would be to understand where your power comes from." Dexter rose to his feet. "Raven, you are, and you always have been part demon."

Her head started ringing again. "What?"

"It is simply the way—"

“What?”

Nicholas kissed her temple. “It’s not so bad, kitten.”

“How? I don’t...” Her skin went numb. “I...can’t...”

“This doesn’t change anything,” Dexter said quickly. “You are *still* completely human. Only with this added. It doesn’t change *anything*, nothing about your birthright or your heritage or anything, really.”

“Except the part where I’m a demon.”

“Except that.”

Raven sighed heavily. “I think I have a headache.”

Dexter shook his head. “It’s not like it sounds. I had to learn this, too, in order to guide you. The High Council has many volumes in their collection explaining the origin of the Few, and they stress that the demon inside is...well, normal and largely misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood...how?”

“Semantics, mostly. The Latin derivative of *demon* is the word *daimon*. And by tradition, *daimons* are neither evil nor good. There are some who are good, whose roles are to balance the scales between the virtuous and the malevolent.” He paused as though trying to find words. “I remember Plato describing daimons as being supernatural beings between mortals and gods, or something like that. As you know well, there are a number of non-human creatures, vampires and other demons alike, who pose no threat to humanity and, by and large, live *normal* lives. The confusion comes in the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the word, which characterizes all demons as something inherently wicked.”

Raven swallowed hard. She felt only marginally better. “Okay...”

“And for every great power, there exists its equal and opposite counterpart,” Dexter continued. “This is true in every living thing, Raven, from human souls to demons. Vampires represent the evil of the demon that lurks inside them. The Few represent the good.” He paused. “The Few are also given immeasurable advantages in strength and authority, at least in the form of the High Council and yours truly. But there are many questions that remain unanswered.”

“Imagine my surprise,” Nicholas drawled.

Feeling slowly returned her to veins, but too slowly. She feared she might pass out again if Dexter didn’t hurry to the point. “Okay, so I’m a

demon.” The words felt strange in her mouth. “Anything else you’re keeping from me?”

“Yes, you’re part demon but you are also human,” Dexter argued. “As are vampires. That’s what makes you unique. You are living. They are dead. Your human side is dominant, your demon recessive. Their demon side is dominant, their human recessive. You tap your power from your demon side, and some vampires, such as Nicholas...”

The vampire at her side squeezed her shoulder and kissed her brow. She barely felt it.

“...maintain their humanity. Arguably, some have more access than others. Just as some of the Few go drunk with the power of their inner demon, some vampires feel more than others, which is why we encounter those who see it as their duty to protect humanity, while others feel nothing at all.” Dexter cleared his throat again. “It depends on the vampire or the Few in question, I suppose. However, the point being—”

Raven nodded numbly. “I’m getting it.”

“You cannot simply *remove* the demon from a vampire. To do so would render the vampire nothing more than an empty shell.”

“A corpse,” Nicholas supplied, shuddering. “The demon’s the only thing keeping us alive after we’re killed. Take it away and we’re toast.”

“But I’m not dead,” Raven argued. “Vampires need their demons in order to survive, but I—”

“You are no different. Without your demon counterpart to sustain your human self, you will wither into nothing,” Dexter explained solemnly. “The Few are predestined for their fate. Vampires are not. And since the Few are predestined, they are immediately molded to be dependent on the inner daimon. Without the daimon, the human part of the Few cannot survive. They are two halves, you see. They need each other.” There was a heavy pause. “Raven, Paimon could not touch your soul, but he has access to your power. And unless we have the means to stop him, you will—”

“I’ll die.”

Dexter swallowed hard and nodded again. “I’m afraid so.”

It was strange. The note in his voice seemed distant, as though he’d never seen her before, as though they hadn’t been each other’s family since she was a child. She’d placed her life in his hands over and over again, and in a horrific second, it almost felt he hadn’t truly seen her until now.

It wasn't intentional, and it didn't last long. She knew his tone held no indication of his feelings. His eyes alone were enough to feed her the truth, but it still haunted her. At that moment, he seemed so far away and so out of reach.

This was it. The golden catch she'd always known lurked in Paimon's words. Beyond his attempt to keep her and Nicholas apart, beyond denying her the memories that belonged to her and always had, this was it—the catch.

"I didn't want my power," Raven whispered, her throat dry. "I didn't want it."

"I know," Dexter replied softly. "I'm so sorry, Raven. I..."

"How did you know?" she asked, but her question was directed to the vampire at her side, his face a tortured mess of contemplation. "I told Dexter and I told you, and you knew immediately. I don't understand. The High Council...they don't—"

"I've done my homework."

Nicholas's voice sounded even further away than her Guardian's.

"What?"

"The obsession with the Few, right? I buried my nose in every book I could find. The sort of stuff the higher-ups eventually put under lock and key." He favored Dexter with a scathing glare. "Your Guardian must've skipped that day in class. It's just one of those things, huh, Dex?"

"My studies on the Few and their origin are nearly ten years old. It was never something we were supposed to memorize." Dexter frowned. "It was simply there. An explanation. The purpose. It made sense and I accepted it. But I've never viewed any of our warriors...I've never viewed Raven as..." He sighed heavily, his eyes weighed with guilt and self-condemnation. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner. It just wasn't a part of my training. I was meant to work in the field. My duty was to protect you, prepare you. Understanding the basics of your powers is something I knew but nothing truly *important* to the task."

Nicholas snorted. "Yeah. Knowing where your girl's power comes from isn't important at all."

Raven elbowed him. "Nicolai, shut up."

A ghost of a smile tugged on Dexter's lips. It was humorless and sad, but there nonetheless. "The demonology behind the Few is the concern of

the High Council, not us mere mortals. There isn't anything about the Few, their power, or the truth of their nature that the High Council doesn't know. But there is quite a bit the High Council doesn't share with Guardians simply because we are so close to our wards." He grew silent again. "I'm so sorry, Raven. I should've known."

She swallowed hard, her eyes finally misting. "It wouldn't have mattered. We either knew this now or a few hours ago. When doesn't really seem to matter." Raven breathed deeply and raised her gaze to Dexter's. "I did it willingly, Dex. I signed it because I wanted to. Hell, I think I would've done it even if I'd known."

Nicholas's grip on her tightened. "Don't say that."

"Why not? It's the truth."

"I'm not worth it."

"And yet that wouldn't have changed my mind." She offered a watery smile and kissed his lips. "I would've given Paimon anything. You would've, too."

His eyes widened in protest. "Well...yeah, but you shouldn't have..."

When his thought failed to conclude, Raven forced a laugh. "Compelling argument."

"Raven—"

"So I die. It's only fair. You got to die last time."

"You're *not* going anywhere."

"I think Paimon would beg to differ."

"I'll kill him if he tries."

"You can't."

"Raven," Nicholas said tightly, "you can't do this. You can't do this to me. I won't lose you. I *won't*. Not like—"

"Not like I lost you, you mean?" she replied, the mist in her eyes crystallizing into tears. "Not like I had to watch you die for me? Because hey, that was good enough for you. If it's not good enough for me, then I—"

"So you'll just let this happen to get back at me, is that it?"

"Oh, please!"

He tore himself from her side the next minute, falling to his knees in front of her. "You listen to me," he growled. "You can't do this. I don't care what you signed. I don't care if you dotted every 'i' and crossed every fucking 't.' I don't give a flying fuck if God himself couldn't smash this

stone of yours. You're *not* leaving me. You're *not*. Even if I have to follow you through Hell itself, I'm *not* giving you up."

Raven's eyes dropped to the ground. She couldn't watch him any longer, even though she just felt him—felt his pain, his sorrow, his worry over her, all over her. She couldn't say or do anything because it was already done. It was over.

She would fight. She would lose. She would die.

There was no miracle cure this time. There was nothing he could forfeit to save her. Nothing she would allow him to forfeit if he could.

She had five nights left to live.

They truly were even now.

## Chapter 24

There seemed a good reason why Paimon was the demon Raven had summoned. His name colored page after page, listing accomplishments and powers believed attributed to him that, had Dexter not been educated, he would have guessed to be the demonic equivalent of padding one's résumé. Entire chapters detailed the plagues, famine, wars, even people for whom Paimon was allegedly responsible. The demon had power beyond his means—there was no doubting that.

Now he held Raven's life in his hands. In less than a week, her power would be his, and she would be gone.

Dexter sighed heavily, resting his back against the wall. He sat on the living room floor. He hadn't moved since Raven and Nicholas retired into her bedroom. There had never been a time in all his years wherein he would have thought it *safer* to have a vampire around, but he likewise knew there was no longer any choice. His warrior and the vampire were bound now, and even though it had only been a few days, it bewildered him to consider that he hadn't seen it there before. Perhaps not what had transpired over the past few days, but something buried deeper within his surrogate sister's eyes and actions, something he should have seen or detected. More than the obvious affection between them, they just seemed to complement each other. Perhaps it was the claim he witnessed. He didn't know. All he knew was that it was powerful, and it made him very glad for Raven.

It made him glad that Nicholas was here and not elsewhere. Dexter was certain she was only being brave to keep them both from shattering.

No matter how comforting he found the vampire's presence, however, it didn't make the truth any prettier. It didn't make what was coming more bearable. For the past three hours, Dexter had been poring over his books, searching his own personal library for any and all information on Paimon. Each passage seemed grimmer than the last. The demon always acquired the

thing for which he bargained. There had never been any slick moves or loopholes to save the intended at the last minute. There had never been anything but the price, and Paimon took what he was rightly owed. He didn't need to stalk the innocent. They sold themselves willingly.

Most people didn't realize that evil was created by man. Demons just had a way of pointing and guiding the willing in the right direction.

Dexter couldn't save Raven.

The knowledge crippled beyond anything he'd ever known, but just because his options were at an all-time low didn't mean Dexter would throw in the towel. He wouldn't sit by idly and watch his girl wither into nothing.

No. This time, the battle wasn't hers. Raven had already died once. He wouldn't let her die again. Not for this demon, not for the world, not even for her precious Nicolai.

"We are all fools in love," he murmured wisely, climbing to his feet.

If he couldn't find a loophole in her bargain, he would simply create one.

No matter what it cost him.

\* \* \* \*

He remembered peace beyond recognition. He remembered soft light. He remembered the tragic beauty of her face breaking under the weight of sorrow. He remembered her apologizing a thousand times for initiating the events leading to his death. He remembered everything.

Nicholas couldn't sleep. His mind was stuck on repeat, on the night he'd last looked at her before he'd first set eyes on her in his new body. If he focused, he could almost taste her tears on his lips. He could hear her sweet voice pleading in his ear. He could reach out and touch her. Reassure her. Tell her everything would be all right.

He just got her back. After years of not knowing her, not remembering her, he'd gotten her back. She couldn't do this to him.

She couldn't make him watch her die.

A trembling breath pressed through Nicholas's lips. Raven was asleep. He didn't know how she could sleep, but sleep she did. Dressed only in his t-shirt, she was pressed against him intimately, her leg draped over his thigh, her hand resting on his bare chest. It was a mocking rendition of the way

they'd laid together just a few short hours ago. The way he'd held her after making love to her in the tomb, the way everything had seemed so immovably perfect then.

He'd known there was an evil to fight, of course. He'd known Raven had made a bargain and the price was heavier than she'd anticipated.

He just hadn't thought it would be like this.

Nicholas sighed again, his fingers curling around Raven's wrist. He lifted her arm delicately, inching away from her on the mattress, mindful of his movements and not wanting to wake her. Though he didn't want to leave her side, he knew he would drive himself out of his skull if he did nothing.

And he wasn't the only one.

"Evening, Dex," he said as he stepped into the living area.

Dexter made a sound which would have been funny under different circumstances, the matchbox in his hand shooting into the air. He whirled around quickly, eyes wide with alarm as his palm slapped itself across his chest. "Christ," he gasped. "What are you..."

"Couldn't sleep." Nicholas arched a brow, fighting off a grin as the Guardian was assaulted by a rainstorm of matches. "I'm guessing you couldn't, either."

"Sleep is a luxury I can't afford," Dexter replied, clearing his throat and doing his best to look dignified. He plucked a match off the floor and struck it against the wall. "Something wrong?"

The question was ridiculous, and they both knew it. However, Dexter's tone provided the guise of normalcy, a guise both resented and strangely needed. Nicholas didn't know Dexter particularly well and he didn't figure he ever would, but he saw immediately what the man was trying to do. And he appreciated it, failed that it was.

"Other than the fact that the woman I love is demon fodder in less than a week?" he replied. "No, nothing I can recall."

Dexter lit one of the three candles on the coffee table, then used the flame to strike another match to light the other two. "You didn't know you loved her before tonight," he argued weakly.

It was a statement based on fact and logic, but Nicholas couldn't help but feel irritated. Raven might not have been at his side every minute, but he'd always loved her. It was just a matter of rediscovering her and himself.

He might have fought the knowledge that he loved her, but he'd still loved her. He always had.

*Always.*

"She's always been mine, Guardian," Nicholas replied, his voice low and dangerous. "She's been mine longer than—"

"I know."

"You know and yet—"

"I don't. I thought it might help if..." Dexter inhaled sharply, cast his head downward, avoiding Nicholas's gaze. "I don't know what I thought."

Nicholas didn't say anything. There was nothing *to* say. Instead, he nodded numbly, his eyes taking in Dexter's disheveled appearance before wandering to the design on the ground made of salt. A protective circle. He'd read once or twice about how those who summon demons needed salt to ensure their safety. And without need for warning or confirmation, he knew what the Guardian aimed to do.

It must have been on his face, for the next thing Dexter said was an explanation of motive, as though he needed one.

"If there is something I can do," he said softly, "to negate Raven's bargain, I will do it."

Nicholas inclined his head, at once humbled with respect and gratitude. "She won't like it."

"Don't try to talk me out of it."

"I'm not. If it comes down to you or her, you know which way I'm swinging my axe."

Dexter's brow furrowed and his lips pursed, but he nodded with the same sense of quiet esteem. "And you know if it comes down to you or her..."

"You better aim for the heart. I had to die a long painful death once. Don't particularly want to do it again."

A ghost of a smile crossed the Guardian's face. "I believe we understand each other."

"Yeah. So is this a one-man-only summoning or can I—"

The air chilled and cut his words in half, a gale of icy wind whispering through his skin and making his bones rattle. He'd always thought it was an expression—the bones rattling bit—but no part of this sensation wasn't real. And without warning, he was visited by an image of Hell, the Hell he'd

known between dying and being rescued. There was fire, but it was cold. So much so that flames froze in mid-roar, screams shattered like glass, and shadows hardened into statues. It wasn't always cold in Hell. Sometimes it burned so fiercely he felt he might know death all over again. It kept him there on the boundary between existence and death, that horrible second before his body dissipated into nothing, when there was nothing but pain and the sensation of falling. He fell forever but never landed, and left instead branded with the permanent knowledge that death was coming, but denied the solace of rest.

The cold in the apartment was one no witch could replicate. This was the cold of Hell.

They were no longer alone.

The molecules surrounding them tugged steadfast in one direction, and there he stood. Standing a full seven feet, dressed immaculately in the finest Armani money could buy. His skin—if one could call it skin—was as colorless and pale as a slab of stone, his eyes naught but slates. A jeweled crown rested atop his head, buried in a nest of what one might call hair. The demon was the picture of elegance. He looked almost human but anyone who saw him would know better than to mistake him for one. The planes of his body were composed of shadows. He moved and the air around him rippled.

“While I appreciate the attention, I assure you, there is no need for theatrics.” Paimon raised his hand, his eyes indicating the circle of salt on the ground. “Or old wives’ tales.”

Nicholas couldn't remember a time in his life when he'd been paralyzed with fear. Fear wasn't something he was used to facing, at least fear not involving the welfare of another. He thought himself beyond fear, especially at the expense of other demons. He thought himself above many things.

One glance at Paimon and he remembered Hell. He remembered despair. He remembered pain. He remembered everything.

“Paimon,” Dexter said, his voice strained but strangely lacking in fear. Perhaps he didn't feel it. Perhaps he didn't feel *Hell*. Perhaps Nicholas was the only one who could.

“I prefer *King* Paimon, if you don't mind,” the demon replied, straightening his tie. “After all, if you had performed the ritual, I would have made you say my name several times just to make sure you dialed the right

number.” He tossed Nicholas a smirk. “You’d be surprised at how similar my summoning spell is to others.”

Nicholas’s jaw fell slack. He saw the words he wanted to form. He saw them clear as day, but they wouldn’t come.

His body wouldn’t let him speak.

“Paimon, King of Hell,” Dexter said calmly, nodding. “I am—”

“Guardian to Raven Rayne, please don’t insult me.” He nodded at Nicholas. “And this would be our girl’s Nicolai. I must admit, for someone who inspired such passion, I thought you’d be taller.”

A rush of outrage split Nicholas’s veins. He longed to scream. His feet wanted to rush forward. His body wanted to tackle the bastard to the ground and beat him within an inch of his existence. He wanted to empty his grief, his anxiety, and every strain against the fabric of his being into making Paimon beg for respite. He wanted to make Paimon suffer as he’d suffered in the last few hours. He wanted to give him the eternity of agony he was owed for even thinking about ripping Raven away from him. He wanted so many things, all of which paved the way for carnage and destruction.

He couldn’t move. It wasn’t about fear anymore. He didn’t know what it was.

“You’d amuse me if I didn’t know you were serious,” the demon mused. “For a creature who loves and feels all earthly things, you do have a passion for bloodshed that I can’t help but admire.”

Nicholas’s throat went dry. Had he read his mind?

Paimon arched what could have been a brow. “You really don’t know? Come now, Nicolai, I thought you had more wits about you than that.”

Dexter blinked in surprise but said nothing.

“That doesn’t matter,” Paimon responded, waving dismissively. “To answer your question, you can’t move because I don’t want you to. You are a thing of Hell. I am a *king* of Hell. In the hierarchy of the demon world, you are what we like to call...hmm...well, other than a cosmic joke, there really is no description. Nevertheless, you do exist as an Other in this world. Whatever thoughts you have, you cannot conceal from me. Nor can you move if I do not wish it. You are a thing of Hell, and you are looking at your monarch. Show some respect.”

“Nicholas is not why you are here,” Dexter said quickly. “I’m the one who—”

“Oh, isn’t he?” Paimon retorted. “Were it not for him, dear Ravenna never would have made her bargain. No, she would have died at the hand of some demon, and the Power would have lived on. You, Dexter Bartlett, would be the Guardian of another, and none of us would be here having this very timely conversation. I think it’s safe to conclude that *Nicholas* is very much the reason why I am here.”

“But I summoned you,” Dexter argued weakly.

“Again you are mistaken. I arrived of my own inclination. But I do appreciate the thought.” Paimon at last drew his gaze away from Nicholas, turning instead to fully face the Guardian. “This close to pay day, I don’t like to be too far from my bounty. After acquiring that which they want, people tend to get the idea that they don’t owe what they promised me. Your little warrior has fallen victim to the same sad, erroneous line of thinking.”

“You can’t have her,” Nicholas barked, nearly as surprised as Paimon when the words breathed life. His voice had fought for freedom and won. It was short-lived, but he’d take his victories where he could.

The Hell King held up a hand, his eyes flickering dangerously with flames Nicholas well remembered. “Oh, can’t I?” he replied. “She signed herself over to me.”

“She didn’t know what she was doing,” Dexter replied, his voice soft but deadly. “And I believe you know that.”

“I suppose I do, but I’m quite *sure* I don’t care.”

“You can’t have her,” Nicholas snarled again, pushing against the invisible restraints on his muscles, determined to tackle the fiend to the ground.

“I don’t see why you’re so upset with me,” Paimon replied with an apathetic shrug. “I went to great lengths to make sure you wouldn’t give a damn when I came to collect. It’s not my fault you had to feel the pangs of your hell-bound honey.”

The fact that words were no longer denied him gave Nicholas a sense of power, though the larger part of him recognized that the allowance was at Paimon’s discretion. He could take speech away from him again whenever he desired. “You would’ve kept us from each other?” he demanded. “Just because—”

“Yes. And wouldn’t that have been better? You would have your life back without being any the wiser to poor Ravenna’s foolish gamble.”

Rage purer than anything Nicholas had ever felt consumed his body, and for his part, Paimon must have realized he'd fanned the fire. Perhaps that was his intent. Either way, he again robbed Nicholas of the ability to move the next instant.

"Amore," he clucked. "It makes fools of us all, doesn't it?"

"I want a trade," Dexter said abruptly, shivering as though touched by a ghost at the demon's words.

There was a long, incredulous pause. "A trade?" Paimon repeated. "For what?"

"Raven. I don't know what, but I'll do anything. Just release her from the pact, and I'm at your command." Dexter drew in a deep breath and took a brave step forward. "Whatever you want. Whatever you feel is an adequate replacement for her debt. I—"

He didn't get any further. Paimon started to laugh.

He laughed *hard*, his chuckles sounding like thunder. His body shook and the walls seemed to shake with him. In an instant the world blackened, and Nicholas couldn't see or feel anything but the endless fall of his stomach. The realization that the secret cure for which he longed was nonexistent. This wasn't something they could defeat—this simply *was*.

Paimon couldn't be bought off. Not when he had the thing he wanted.

"You fool," the Hell King rasped. "Do you really think I deceived her just for the joy of claiming her life? For the thrill of holding the strength of the Few in my hand? Her strength is *nothing* compared to the legions I have at my command. I could crush her, you, this town...hell, the whole miserable state with a blink if I so wished. And honestly, Dexter, for all the knowledge you possess, all the otherworldly smarts you have lying at your feet, I confess myself...disappointed."

Dexter didn't move. Neither did Nicholas.

"You are, after all, a Guardian, are you not? You know as well as I do that the power of the Few, or *daimons*, if you prefer..." Paimon snickered at the word. "The daimon's power is connected through the generations. That is why the Few are *the Few*. They are linked at birth, joined the second they leave their mother's womb. They feel each other even if they don't know it. Their linked power is what weakens them, drains them, and stands to reason why they can't interact. The reason your High Council keeps them apart. Delightful, isn't it? And since they are linked by power, the removal of one

creates a neat little domino effect. If the connection is broken in one, all will fall as a consequence. Should a warrior willingly sacrifice that power before death, it removes not only her daimon, but the line as a whole. A warrior's power cannot be confiscated before death, not without her consent. Sweet Raven consented. And in doing so, she damned the world."

It was as though life itself was sucked from the room. If Dexter's heart had a beat to it, Nicholas couldn't hear it. He couldn't hear anything beyond the shrieking in his head.

"The..." Dexter swallowed very hard, and suddenly the silence around them shattered with the thundering of his chest and the heady rush of his pulse. Nicholas at once swam in human sensation. "The High Council wouldn't allow—"

"What the High Council doesn't know won't hurt them," Paimon replied. Then he frowned theatrically. "Or rather it will, but by the time they realize it, it'll already be over. Shame, isn't it? As long as little Raven lives, as long as she pumps her human blood and beats her human heart and lives her little human life, our agreement holds higher value than all the other Few walking the earth, and all the Few yet to come. The line will cease to exist, I'm sorry to say." A smile stretched his lipless mouth.

"Good God..."

"I suppose if one of you really wanted to, you could kill the girl to stop me," Paimon postulated. "But somehow, I don't think either of you have the gumption to make anything permanent. Not her precious brother..." He nodded to Dexter. "Which was why I chose you. You were perfect for her. The antithesis to Kenneth Mal, who would be cutting off her head right about now. And Nicolai..." He turned to Nicholas. "I suppose you might have it in you. Not that I advocate it by any means, but the betrayal on her face would almost be worth losing the world." The Hell King fell silent for a few long, pensive seconds. "So there you have it, gentlemen. No, I am not interested in selling my acquisition. Dear Raven's strength is not for sale." He paused even as his body began to melt into the shadows playing against the wall. "You know, I believe the world will be the embodiment of the old cliché the *devil's playground* by this time next week." He winked. "Should be fun. Hope to see you there."

Then he was gone. Nicholas felt it. Felt the release of his bones and the liberation of his voice, well and good now without the hint of a leash. He

felt it just as Paimon dematerialized, just as the cold abated and light entered the room again.

He wanted to lunge for the corner. He really did. He wanted to scream and roar and beat his chest and hide Raven so far away no demon would ever know where to find them. He wanted. He felt. He yearned.

But the second his will was his own again, all he could do was crash to his knees.

And weep.

## Chapter 25

“Don’t bogart the whisky.”

Dexter arched a brow. “It’s my whisky. I believe I’ll bogart as much as much as I please.”

“I want to get so sloshed I can’t feel anymore.” Nicholas pressed his palm hard against his brow, a long shudder tearing down his back. “Till all of this becomes nothing more than a fuzzy memory.” He sighed and tried, to little avail, to hide how hard he trembled. “Think they make anything that strong?”

Dexter smiled indulgently, poured a moderate amount of auburn-colored liquid into a tumbler and slid the serving down the length of his kitchen counter. “If they have, I haven’t found it yet,” he replied, taking a liberal swig directly from the bottle. A quiet minute passed between them. “Are you going to tell her?”

There was no question to what Dexter referred, but neither wanted to say it.

Nicholas tossed back his shot. Dexter refilled it. They drank.

“It seems too impossible that I was relieved when she told me,” the Guardian mused. “I was afraid it would be her soul.”

“Her soul?”

“The price. I thought her soul was the price. Apparently, though, souls of the Few hold little to no value in hell dimensions.” Dexter sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I was so relieved when she told me the price was her strength. I thought...”

“You thought the demon would smile and blink and be okay with something simple?” Nicholas drew in a breath. “This isn’t reincarnation, Dex. This isn’t just sticking my essence in a new body. Putting her soul in a new... It isn’t *that*. He took us right from where we were and shot us into the future.”

"I understand. And I knew there would be repercussions beyond the obvious. Of course there would be. But..." Dexter sighed again and shook his head. "I don't know what I thought. God, I don't know, but I should have. The instant she told me, I should've known."

He had nothing to say to that, nothing which would provide comfort, anyway, thus Nicholas remained silent. Truly, he didn't understand how the Guardian had missed it, either. He didn't know how anyone so close to Raven could be so oblivious as to her origins to keep from connecting the dots and realizing the obvious conclusion.

Raven's death...and the domino effect it would have on the world.

Nicholas scoffed. Bugger the world. He didn't care. If Raven died, he died. It was as simple as that.

If Paimon wouldn't release Raven from her debt or accept a different payment in her stead, their options stood at a dismal two. Either the world turned into hell and Raven died, or Raven died so the world could live.

Either way, Raven died. Either way, he lost her forever.

She'd gambled herself *for him*.

"Will the High Council try to kill her?" Nicholas asked solemnly.

Dexter blinked and glanced up. "What?"

"The High Council. They won't see her as a person, will they? They'll try to kill her so they can *save the world*." His demon roared at the thought. "I tell you now, they try to touch her, and—"

"The High Council doesn't know, nor will they." Dexter swallowed hard. "Whatever is decided will be decided by us. Your history and Raven's was erased from history books, Nicholas. The history didn't reappear until her memories were restored. And even so, the passages allude to nothing of an unnatural trade." Dexter snorted. "Paimon wanted the High Council left completely unaware of what had taken place."

The vampire swallowed hard. "Our history...it's there now?"

"It lists you as Raven's killer." Dexter held up a hand before Nicholas could object. "Kenneth Mal had nothing to do with that, though from what Raven has told me, I wouldn't have been surprised if he had. As it was, he was—"

"—dead," Nicholas agreed softly, his breath catching. "She..."

"It was self-defense."

"She told you?"

A sad, gentle smile stretched Dexter's mouth, his eyes distancing with a sort of brotherly love that increased the vampire's admiration for the Guardian by leaps and bounds. This was the sort of man she should have had all along, the kind of man who viewed Raven as a human first—a human with human thoughts, human feelings, and above all, human value. To him, she wasn't a disposable weapon with arms and legs. She was his sister.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been a cakewalk in the eighteenth century, but Nicholas had the hunch that, had Dexter been alive, things would have turned out differently.

"She's told me many things," Dexter said gently. "When she couldn't talk to you, she talked to me."

A dark shiver ran over him. "I wasted so much time," Nicholas murmured, closing his eyes as a powerful wave of self-hatred washing over his tired body. "I should've known her immediately."

"Paimon decreed it otherwise. You broke through. That much is a victory."

"I just found her again. This can't..." He swallowed hard. "This can't be it. I can't lose her. I *can't*."

"I was determined to find a loophole," Dexter murmured, taking another swig of the whisky. "I was so certain there was one. Otherwise...God, why go to the trouble?"

Nicholas glanced up. "What?"

"There's something we're missing. There has to be."

"How do you figure?"

"Paimon had nothing to personally gain from keeping you and Raven apart," Dexter explained. "And yet, he went to such lengths. He put you in the arms of another woman." Nicholas winced. Dexter ignored him, too engrossed in his revelation. "He ensured Raven had a good, secure upbringing...the best to his ability without bending the sacred decree of freewill. And he ensured I was her Guardian."

Nicholas nodded slowly, his brain hurting to piece together fact with knowledge, which proved difficult as his thoughts were muddled with grief-stricken outrage. It probably didn't help that he was planning on drinking Dexter under the table either. "Doesn't make sense," he agreed, though he had the hunch he just spoke to avoid the finality of silence.

Not that it worked.

Nicholas sighed heavily. Every fiber in his body commanded him to go upstairs and bury himself in Raven's arms. She'd traveled centuries, defied logic and reason, and she'd done so with the same sweet innocence with which she'd regarded everything she approached. If only he could run back to her—blink himself three centuries in the past and stop her before she made the fool's bargain. Beg her not to bring him back only to kill him all over again.

"We are all fools in love," Dexter said bitterly.

Nicholas glanced up. "What?"

"The bastard."

The vampire frowned in confusion but didn't say anything.

"That's what I said," Dexter continued, meeting Nicholas's inquisitive eyes. "Earlier tonight, before I tried summoning Paimon, before you came downstairs, the bastard threw it back at me."

The implication left Nicholas's insides frozen. "He's been lurking?"

"No, he's not. Paimon's not of this world. There's a reason he has to be summoned. He needs human blood to ground him."

"Then how'd he manage to drop in without the fancy words and all?"

Dexter frowned thoughtfully. "To make us believe he doesn't need it. I think he wants us to *think* he's lurking, to keep us from trying to find an answer. If we think he's listening, we'll be discouraged from trying to find an alternative solution for the knowledge that he'll know what we're doing and will stop it. He said he likes to keep close before collecting what he is owed, but he can't keep close. He's a thing of Hell. If he had the sort of power to keep constant vigilance on human dealings, the world would be lost in never-ending chaos."

"More so than it already is, you mean."

"Yes, more than anything we could ever imagine."

Nicholas's eyes darkened, his mind slowly prying open doors that wanted to stay closed. "All right," he said slowly. "The price is in the bag, yeah?"

Dexter nodded, though his expression was dark with confusion.

"Why even pretend to lurk? What's this bastard figure he has to gain from making ominous visits? He's learned I can't lose her...that I..." Nicholas's voice crackled, and his eyes misted again. He couldn't let his

thoughts take that path. He couldn't. If he started thinking about the weight of everything in the balance—the girl he loved whose body would be ripped in half in less than a week's time—he would shatter with grief. He couldn't stop. He couldn't concede the battle just yet.

He couldn't give up when the next few days meant *everything*.

"He wants us to choose," Dexter said slowly. "He put out an impossible solution. Kill Raven or the world dies."

"I don't get that."

"If Paimon collects Raven's power—"

"She and all the others kick it. I get *that*. I just don't understand *why*." Nicholas shook his head hard, blinking his eyes closed to fight off an incursion of tears. "If she learns that, you know what she's gonna ask me to do, don't you?"

Dexter's face drained of color. "It's something we should consider."

"Don't."

"Nicholas, I—"

"*Don't!*" he roared, knocking the tumbler to the floor. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to talk about *killing her* as though it's an option."

The Guardian drew in a sharp breath. "If Paimon collects her power—"

A shrill laugh tore through his lips. "Yeah. I got the memo, Dexter. Like a string of Christmas lights, yeah? Take Raven out and the whole line bites the dust. Can you imagine how much I care?"

"Without the Few as the Earth's protector, everything falls to chaos," Dexter said softly, his voice tempered though torn in that gray area between hysterics and reason.

"If Raven dies, I die, and I don't give a flying fuck about the rest of you."

"You would give up so easily?"

Nicholas scoffed again. "Easily?" he repeated. "I've already died once for her. I died so she *wouldn't*. Now we're here, and you're telling me that once she's gone, Earth becomes a demonic romp room and the ones who don't die will suffer. Sounds a lot like Hell. But I gotta tell you, if I'm gonna be in Hell, I want the real thing. Not some pansy-ass knock-off." He shrugged. "Nothing to keep me here, near as I can figure it."

There was a long pause. "Nicholas," Dexter said softly. "She wouldn't want to be the reason the world ends."

“And she’s not gonna be.”

“Nicholas—”

“You’re really doing it, aren’t you? You’re telling me I should *kill* the woman I love—”

“For the benefit of—”

The fuzzy feelings Nicholas had entertained for the Guardian just minutes before evaporated, and the demon tore forward with fury. He felt his fangs descend, a monster’s growl ripping through the air. “You gormless, yellow-bellied bastard,” he roared. “If you come near her, I’ll—”

And then Dexter burst into tears.

Nicholas didn’t know why it took him by such surprise. It wasn’t as though he knew the plonker well enough to peg his every emotion, but hard, bone-crushing sobs were possibly the last thing he expected. Yet here he was, standing awkwardly with his fangs itching for something to chew on, and his target had melted without forewarning.

“I-I-I can’t...” Dexter sputtered, his face falling into his hands. “I can’t...”

Nicholas exhaled slowly, his anger subsiding. “Dexter...”

“I can’t, but she...”

“I can’t either.”

“If we don’t, the world ends.”

“My world’s ending anyway. I don’t give a toss about what’s left over.” A meaningful beat passed. “Do you?”

A heartbreaking laugh wracked Dexter’s shoulders. “Honestly?” he repeated, speaking into his hands. “No.”

Nicholas offered a half-smile. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“There has to be a way. The world is not based on absolutes. There are *always* loopholes. *Always*.” Dexter wiped his nose miserably, his red-rimmed eyes slowly trailing upward. “There’s something we’re missing.”

“You said that already.”

“Well, it’s as true now as it was five minutes ago. Paimon went to so much trouble to keep you apart. He failed, obviously, but he did try. You with Octavia, and Raven without the misery of her apparent assface of a former Guardian.” The worry lines in his face deepened with thought. “There’s something about your proximity to each other that has him concerned.”

Nicholas swallowed hard but forced himself not to jump. “How do you figure?” he asked cautiously.

“He came to her only after she remembered. He told her the timing wasn’t what he wanted, but he was left without option.” There was a beat. “Because of you.”

Dexter met his eyes again, and logic faded away. The room fell silent once more, the air growing so thick Nicholas nearly choked. The Guardian spoke without words and the message nearly deafened. And in that fraction of a second, they understood each other.

“It’s never worked,” Nicholas said. “Never.”

“I know.”

“The Few can’t survive a turning.”

“I know.”

“It’ll kill her.”

“I know.” Dexter sighed heavily and wiped his eyes. “I just wanted to put it out there.”

Nicholas offered a numb nod but didn’t say anything. His mind was consumed with his own words.

*It’ll kill her.*

It was true. It *would* kill her, and even though Raven’s death lurked around every corner as it was, it wasn’t a risk he was willing to take. Just because Paimon had gone to such lengths to keep them apart, this couldn’t be the answer to saving her. The gamble wasn’t worth it—not worth her life. Not unless there were no other options.

While he knew he should banish the thought entirely, a lingering voice remained.

*It’ll kill her.*

Death remained behind every door. No matter what venue to take, it was still coming for them.

For her.

For Raven.

It was coming and nothing was going to alter its course.

\* \* \* \*

She'd been awake a long while when he finally returned. While she hadn't heard everything, she knew Nicholas and Dexter had been heatedly discussing her.

It amazed her that Nicholas could tell her he loved her when all she did was cause him misery. The first time with Kenneth and now *this*. She'd helped him find his memories when she should have let him live without the pain of knowing what they had. Instead, she'd given him a glimpse of the happiness they had once shared. She'd let him think it was for keeps.

It was a lie she'd believed as well, a lie grief had led her to believe.

*It was a long time ago*, she told herself.

Knowledge provided little solace. Yes, it was a long time ago. Nearly three centuries ago.

It might as well have been yesterday.

Raven didn't move when she felt him approach the threshold. She didn't move when he lingered in the doorway. She didn't move even as she felt his eyes soak her in. She didn't move.

She feared that if she moved, all she would do was sob. Nicholas didn't need that.

Not when she was the one who had wounded him.

It seemed forever passed before he exhaled and moved forward. She felt the dip in the bed, then his arms were around her. He pressed his lips against her shoulder, his chest at her back. She felt his breath tickle her hair as he entertained oxygen he didn't need.

For long seconds, she thought he would speak. He did not.

He just held her in his arms.

Though for the way he trembled, she knew it was she who was holding him.

## Chapter 26

The woman at the door was one Dexter had never seen before, but by the way her eyes landed on his neck the second he greeted her, he had no trouble finding a name. It didn't even bother him considering how Octavia had found them. The only thing he could muster at the moment was hope that he wasn't about to face the wrath of a woman scorned—not when they had other things to worry about.

"You must be the sire," Dexter said, trying to keep his voice steady. He wasn't one to face demons on a regular basis if he could avoid it. Lacking the strength of his charge made him one for bookkeeping. He much preferred balancing his checkbook to wielding swords.

"I'm not here to hurt you," Octavia said blandly, her eyes narrowing. Of course, she *would* sense his nervousness. One couldn't keep secrets from vampires.

"Sorry if I find that hard to believe." Dexter licked his lips, angling his feet toward Raven's room. If he screamed, she'd come running, and while it might not serve to make him any less dead should Octavia decide to use her fangs, it would at least give her a running start. "You're looking for Nicholas, I take it."

"If I were, I would've gone to the girl's bedroom window." Octavia made a face. "The underworld's been buzzing recently. Talk of the end of the Few, and all that rubbish. I thought I'd come here to make it easy."

Dexter swallowed hard. "For whom?"

"For Nicholas." She sighed, her shoulder's sagging, her gaze drifting to the hallway. "He was never mine, you know. I sensed it from the beginning. He always belonged to someone else. Maybe he can forgive me now."

"Forgive you?"

“For not being what he wanted.” Her deathly pale eyes made the slow trip back to Dexter’s, and then they were staring at each other. “She has to die to live.”

“What?”

“Your little warrior, Raven, or whatever her name is. She has to die in order to live. Nicholas will have to kill her.” Octavia licked her lips. “I don’t know if he has the stones to do it, but that’s the only option.”

Dexter inhaled sharply. “How do you know?”

“I just do.” She turned slowly, keeping her eyes on the quiet hallway as long as she could before turning to leave, the night at her face. “He’ll know what I mean. Tell him to kill her, then give her life.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“How you know any of this. How you can be so certain...how you even know what...” Dexter’s eyes narrowed. “It’s more than the underground talking, isn’t it? There has to be something more.”

She found Dexter’s gaze over her shoulder and offered a half-shrug. “Could’ve sworn Nicholas already covered this,” she muttered. “We lurk.”

Then she disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas came to consciousness slowly, aware but detached of his surroundings. He felt the curve of Raven’s scrumptious ass pressed intimately against his hard cock, felt the steady rise and fall of her chest, the small whispers of her breath, and the hum of her heartbeat beneath his fingers. He thought it strange that he couldn’t hear birds chirping, or any of the other telltale signs of morning. He wondered why his inner demon didn’t squirm with discomfort at the hint of sunlight, but quickly realized there was no sunlight. No sunlight to splash against the mural she’d painted on their bedroom wall. A shame, that was. He loved watching light play against the color. His girl had a natural eye, even if her modesty refused to acknowledge it.

There was no sunlight because there was no window.

This wasn’t a cottage in colonial America. This was Dexter’s home. They were in Ravenna’s bed, and the year wasn’t 1701.

Nicholas's eyes edged open, his head spinning with confusion.

*That was strange.*

Of all the side-effects he'd anticipated since the restoration of his memories, awaking in the mindset of a different century wasn't one of them. Though perhaps, given how nutty his life had become, it should have been. He had a lot more life behind him now—more experience under his belt, more seniority, more knowledge.

All in all, he'd lived more years as a man of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. He supposed it was only natural that he regressed.

Or perhaps it was his mind's way of protecting him from what the night couldn't banish. He didn't want to think about what would happen in a few days, or the knowledge that the goddess in his arms was slowly dying because of him.

Losing her would kill him all over again.

He remembered thinking that before he died. Hell was worth facing as long as he knew Raven was all right.

Perhaps it was his mistake confusing *all right* with *alive*. Perhaps he hadn't understood, truly, how much she loved him. It had never made a lick of sense to him. Having her love struck him more as blind luck rather than anything he deserved. She'd been with him and they had been happy, but the fact that her love was something he truly had had never fully pushed beyond the boundaries of knowledge and into understanding. He'd always *known* it, from the first second the words crossed her lips, and there was never any reason to doubt her. He'd always *known* it, but he'd never *understood*.

God, she'd given up so much for him.

He couldn't watch her die. He *couldn't*.

Nicholas sighed and brushed his lips across her cotton-clad shoulder. She still wore his tee. He'd never seen the woman he loved in his clothing, and while he'd heard other men found it to be one of the most potent aphrodisiacs on the planet, arousal was his secondary reaction.

She'd wrapped the tee around herself like a shield.

Nicholas's lips wandered upward from her shoulder until they brushed the bite mark he'd left on her throat.

"Mmm," Raven murmured, stretching languorously against him. "That tickles."

Nicholas swallowed hard. He wanted to bury himself in her arms and will the world away. He wanted to coerce her into promises she couldn't keep. He wanted to dissolve and have all dissolve with him.

"Sleep well?" he replied gently, his hand skimming down the length of her stomach. The question seemed ridiculous, but he didn't care. Right now they needed as much *ridiculous* as the world could afford. If these were the last days with her, he was going to make them count.

The first time he hadn't known death was coming. This time he did.

This time he was going to make the heavens weep for them. Perhaps then they would be kind and grant them more time.

"Like a baby," she retorted, and her tone told him full well that she knew he could hear the lie in her words. She was pretending too, for his sake.

Nicholas smiled indulgently, his fingers slipping between her thighs as they parted to accommodate him. "Least you slept. Wish I could say the same. Woke up a second ago and forgot what century it was."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "Pesky side effect of remembering everything, I guess. Did that happen to you?"

There was a short pause as she thought, her nose wrinkling in a manner too adorable for words. "I honestly don't remember. So much has happened."

He wouldn't argue.

"You didn't sleep well?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Maybe because you skipped out and went downstairs to get all chummy with the Guardian?"

A bittersweet chord struck his insides. God, were it only that. "Sorry sweetness," he murmured, his blunt teeth whispering across the claim mark as his fingers explored the wet flesh of her pussy, running slow, exploratory laps between her labia. "Should've known better than to have left you all by your lonesome."

"Yeah..."

He loved the breathy little sounds she made. The way her pulse quickened and her heartbeat steadily increased in tempo had never failed to enchant him in their former life. He remembered what that felt like.

Nicholas released a muffled moan into the tender skin at her throat, his middle and index fingers pushing into her wet softness, his thumb finding her clit. “You’re so warm,” he murmured. “So hot.”

A purely feminine whimper tickled the air. “Mmm. I try.”

Nicholas trembled. “I love the way you feel around me,” he whispered, adapting a steady rhythm. He wanted to go slowly to savor every second of this. He wanted to commit her every sound to memory while drenching himself in her scent and bathing his tongue in her taste.

He wanted to fill the next five days with all the memories the past three centuries had denied them.

“Are you sore, kitten?” he asked softly, his thumb manipulating her clit so softly, her erratic gasps nearly took him by surprise. More than his fingers pushing inside her body, the gentle flicks the pad of his thumb administered to her juicy little pearl had her trembling so hard he wished the claim would let him feel what she felt beyond the simple pleasure of feeling *her*.

“Not sore,” she replied breathlessly, her hips thrusting back to capture him every time his hand made to withdraw from her pussy.

“We were...I was rough with you last night.”

“I liked it.”

He grinned. “I should hope so. But...you were...”

“Virgin-but-not.” Raven hissed as his thumb pressed down, and she wiggled her hips to create friction. “I know. God...feels so good.”

“Yeah?”

“Nicholas...please.”

“Please what?”

She batted her eyes shyly. “Umm...your fingers feel wonderful.” Pink deepened every inch of her skin, and his heart about exploded with love. “I want...I want *you*.”

Nicholas blinked hard, willing himself not to cry. Christ, if the girl could be brave about this, so could he. He could pretend they were enjoying the morning after they’d never had before. Not the first time they made love so long ago, and not this time. He could pretend he wasn’t breaking at the thought of how his life would look in a week.

And how he would make the world suffer before he joined her.

“You have me,” he replied, his fingers driving deeper inside her. “You always have.”

“I want your...thing inside me.”

Her innocence, it seemed, stood in absolutely no danger at all. She was still his ray of purity. His sex goddess who sucked his cock while blushing at his crudity. Nicholas chuckled so hard the vibrations had her squirming and thrusting eagerly against his hand. “My thing?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

“What happened to Forward Raven?”

He felt rather than saw her pout. “You love all incarnations, remember?”

“I remember.”

“*Nicholas*, please...” She twisted slightly in his arms so that he could see her eyes. Then her hand cupped his cheek, and her soft lips caressed his. “Need you. And don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean, or I’ll get cranky.”

A shiver raced down his spine. He loved the way she murmured his name. “You sure you’re not sore?” he whispered, his wet fingers abandoning her pussy to free his cock.

“I swear to—”

“Swear to no one.”

Somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, Nicholas knew they should talk. He knew he should tell her how much he loved her again and again, if only to negate all the time he wasted. He should have told her the first time he saw her. He should have known then.

There were other things too. The weight of the bargain loomed above them, shadowing every caress, every kiss, every stolen glance. But as he sank inside her wet haven, there was a piece of Heaven the Hell King couldn’t sully. For now, Nicholas didn’t want to face the reality waiting for them downstairs. He didn’t want to meet the Guardian’s eyes and see nothing but despair. He didn’t want to think about anything but the wonderful feel of her warmth. The way her flesh molded around his cock, the way her body hummed, and the way she mewled and thrust back against him every time he withdrew.

“I love you,” he whispered into her hair, his hand slipping between her legs again, capturing her clit between his thumb and forefinger. “I love you, Raven.”

“I love you,” she replied breathlessly, thrusting back against him with need she couldn’t hide.

“It’ll be all right. We’ll make it all right.”

She whimpered and wrapped a hand around his wrist. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, squeezing him. “So—”

“Don’t—”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry.”

Nicholas nipped at the claim mark, a ragged breath hissing through his lips as his cock pushed deeper inside her. “Don’t be sorry,” he murmured. “Just don’t leave me.”

Raven gasped and squeezed his wrist again, but didn’t reply.

It was a promise she couldn’t make. And despite everything, she wouldn’t lie to him.

Even when he needed it.

## Chapter 27

Nicholas slept all day, and she was glad. He needed sleep. He'd spent the night pacing the floor and debating their blatantly fictional options, shaving centuries off his eternal lifeline over worry for her. They'd made love that morning, and sometime in the sweet aftermath, he'd finally found rest. He'd curled against her, murmuring incoherent words with every other breath, the arm around her tightening when his dreams took an ugly turn. It wasn't a peaceful sleep, but it was sleep. And it was what he needed.

Raven had lain with him a long time, convinced Dexter would knock if her presence was required. It eventually occurred to her that she'd had sex with a demon while her surrogate brother lingered just down the hall and had been rather unapologetically loud about it. Flushing with shame—which provided a nice distraction from fear—she grabbed Nicholas's t-shirt, double-checked her hair for adequate fluffiness and headed downstairs.

Raven inhaled sharply. She didn't know if she could face Dexter just yet, but she similarly knew she couldn't keep doing nothing.

Her aversion to doing nothing had always been a problem.

"Just a warning," she called as she turned to make her way down the hall. "I haven't showered, my hair's a mess, and I'm overall cranky."

"What else is new?" came the strained reply. Dexter became visible the next second, nursing a cup of coffee and looking over another endless anthology of demon factoids. "I was wondering when you'd awaken."

"What time is it?"

"Just past sunset."

Raven blinked in surprise. Past sunset? That didn't sound right. Only a few hours had passed since Nicholas had awakened. He hadn't been asleep all that long. It *couldn't* be past sunset. Had she really wasted an entire day in bed?

As though reading her mind, Dexter placed his coffee aside and rose to his feet. "Don't worry," he said, his voice kind and reassuring. "It was likely better that you rest."

Either Dexter was overly confident or he was throwing in the towel. Judging by the way he wasn't screaming and breaking things, she cast her bet in the former category and hoped her intuition paid off.

"I had a visitor last night," he said, motioning to the sofa with a quick nod of his head. "She had some information. I spent the day reading."

Raven frowned, walking in a haze to the indicated sofa and sitting her down. Just as well. Even after being off her feet all day, she felt this might be sit-worthy news. "Info?" she repeated, confused. "What's the what?"

Dexter paused. "Where's Nicholas?"

"Sleeping. And I'm not bothering him unless it's something important."

It seemed natural that the next thing she heard was the vampire-in-question's voice. Her life was a walking joke like that.

"Consider him bothered," Nicholas said, emerging from the bedroom. He stopped in the mouth of the hallway, stifling a yawn. "It's not nice to call a meeting and leave houseguests off the invite list."

Dexter met his gaze and took a sip of coffee. "This is about the loophole."

The vampire froze. "Didn't know we'd found one," he replied cautiously. "Unless you're talking about what you better *not* be talking about."

Raven frowned and raised her hand. "Did I miss something?"

"No," Nicholas said sharply.

"Look," Dexter interjected with a weary sigh, "I don't like it any more than you, but I've been doing my homework today."

"You want a gold star?"

Raven drew in a steady breath. This could get out of hand very fast. "Nicholas, knock it off."

"No, you don't even know what—"

"We have a major problem," she argued.

"Yes, but—"

"One I started. Hi, I'm the problem."

Nicholas looked wounded at that. "You're not the problem, kitten. You're—"

"The reason we're all here. The reason the world's in jeopardy. In my book, this spells problem." She held up a hand. "Yes, I know. It's hard to hear the entire the-world's-gonna-end thing when tempers are high."

"Sweetheart—"

She shook her head and waved again. "No. I don't...we don't need to get into that right now." She paused and expelled a deep breath and met Dexter's eyes, subconsciously shifting in her seat to make room for Nicholas. He was at her side in an instant, wrapping an arm protectively around her waist. "So," she said slowly. "What's the news?"

Dexter swallowed hard and nodded. "I had a visitor."

That meant nothing to her. "Um...good for you?"

"A mutual acquaintance," he continued, nodding at Nicholas. "It was Octavia."

The vampire's jaw tightened. "Was it?"

Dexter closed his eyes, and his face hardened. It was the look he always exuded when he was fighting for patience. "She said the only way for the Few to live was if Raven died."

Raven frowned, a cold wind blowing through her skin. "I see," she said. "And in the category of things we already knew—"

"I don't think she meant it like that," he replied softly. "I don't think she meant the line. I think she meant *you*."

The room fell deathly silent. Dexter and Nicholas traded furtive glances.

"I..." Raven didn't realize how hard she was trembling until her mate again brushed his lips across her temple, his fingers tightening around hers. The touch was brief, but it gave her strength. "I don't follow."

A long shudder ran down Dexter's spine. "Look, I don't like this, but I've been looking at it all day. I got what I could from the books based on what Octavia said before she left."

Nicholas breathed steadily but didn't say anything.

"I think she means..." Dexter blinked, glanced down, then back up again. "Raven, I think Octavia means in order for you to live, you have to be turned."

Her ears filled with a loud, piercing hum, and her eyes lost focus. "Turned?"

"No," Nicholas growled. For a minute, she thought she'd insulted him with her reaction. "You can't—"

Dexter frowned. "Look—"

"Turned?" Raven repeated, her voice ascending octaves. "I hope you mean into a frog or a...well, I don't know what else, but that's the only kind of turning I want on the table."

Dexter cleared his throat again. "Raven—"

She turned to Nicholas sharply, waving at her Guardian. "Tell him I'm not gonna be turned," she demanded.

"You're not gonna be," Nicholas whispered. "I wouldn't do that to you."

"You might not have a choice," Dexter snapped. "You'd rather sacrifice her than give *anything* a try?"

Nicholas snarled, his eyes blazing yellow, a ripple of fierce possessiveness and rage spearing through his body so potently that Raven rocked with the aftermath. "What you're talking about isn't a try. It's *murder*." He tore himself from her side and leapt to his feet. "You'd really risk her life over something that might well *kill* her?"

"Her life is going to *end* if we don't do something!" Dexter shot back. "Nothing can stop that, Nicholas. Believe me, I've looked."

"You spent a *day* looking over those books—"

"I could spend the rest of this century and most of the next searching for a different way. There isn't one. What's more, you *know* it." It was a rare day when Dexter got so worked up with any emotion that his chest actually heaved with gasps and his eyes burned with anger. "You know there's no other way."

"This could kill her," Nicholas repeated. "If I do this, it could kill her."

"If you don't, you'll kill her anyway."

Raven licked her lips, the ringing in her ears still deafening. Heat crashed over her skin. "This really is the only way?" she asked. "Turning me into a vampire—"

"You wouldn't be a vampire," Dexter said immediately. "The Few cannot be turned into vampires."

The fire eating her insides washed away with the most potent wave of relief she'd ever known. "You might've mentioned that to me to begin with," she said, her palms flattening against her knees as her thundering heart fought for some strain of normalcy. "Jeez. You guys nearly gave me an aneurism."

No one laughed. No one rushed to reassure her. Instead, when she glanced up, she found herself the target of two sets of very empathetic eyes. Dexter looked torn beyond repair, and Nicholas seemed to be fighting an inner war, determined to both give her space and comfort her with his presence.

"You wouldn't be a vampire," Dexter repeated, "but there is something that would happen. What I am suggesting has never been successful."

She swallowed hard. "What *are* you suggesting we try?"

"No one can have two demons inside them," Nicholas said shortly. "When you get turned, your soul leaves your body and a demon takes over."

"But because of your daimon, your soul cannot be removed. At least, this is what Paimon has said," Dexter continued. "And your daimon cannot be removed because it is a part of who you are."

Oh right. The demon thing. She'd nearly forgotten.

The Guardian drew in a deep breath. "Your dominant trait is human, as I told you last night. Essentially, when we speak of turning One of the Few, what we mean is reversing nature's process, and making your human side recessive and your demon dominant. If successful, there is nothing ostensibly which would change. You would, understandably, be stronger. Much...*much* stronger. You would also be tapped into the vampiric lifeline."

"Meaning?"

"As a demon, and the Yin to the vampire's Yang, you would no longer age."

"The claim already took care of that," she pointed out.

"Yes, well, you'd also be damn hard to kill. Pure warrior concentrate, and all that," Nicholas agreed softly. "But it's not gonna happen. It can't. You won't survive the change."

"You'd rather she die at the hands of the Hell King, then?" Dexter asked.

"I'd rather find an answer that won't only *maybe* work."

"There isn't time for that! There's—"

"Why has it never worked?" Raven asked, amazed when her soft voice was able to slice so effectively through the arguing.

"As Nicholas said," Dexter replied, "no person...no *vampire*, even...can host two demons at once. When a move is made to turn a person into a

vampire, it involves a demon invading the host. You already have a daimon. What would ensue would essentially be a war over your body, and since you are human, there is no way you would be able to withstand it.”

Raven frowned. Her ears were beginning to ring again. “But I thought...with the strong and the immortal and—”

“You can’t possibly be thinking about doing this,” Nicholas barked.

“I’m thinking about it.”

Her heart broke at the agonized fear that commanded his body. “Raven,” he said shakily, “this will kill you.”

“I’m gonna die anyway.”

The words sounded so foreign on her tongue.

“We’ll find another way, baby.”

“This is the way,” Dexter said softly. “Nicholas, I don’t like it any more than you do.”

The vampire bared his fangs. “I think I can safely say I like it a whole lot less,” he snarled, dropping to Raven’s side again.

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

Raven sighed. This was getting out of hand, and fast. The anguished fear burning through the claim could make mountains bow in reverence. Nicholas was out of his mind with worry, and no indefinite answer would appease him. He wanted something concrete, something tangible. He wanted something that didn’t exist.

“Nicholas,” she whispered, shivering slightly when his eyes found hers again. “Whatever happens, it’s my choice.”

He shook his head, bright gaze blazing with tears. “Raven, please...”

“It’s my choice. Whatever I decide is my choice.” She trembled. “I’m telling you because I love you. But, whatever happens, the choice is mine.”

This wasn’t the time to bring up the past, but she knew well the memories her words evoked.

She also knew, feeling his sigh, that he knew she was right.

It was her choice, just as dying for her had been his. Nothing could have changed his mind, and nothing would change hers.

His acquiescence didn’t make her heart ache any less. She’d never seen him rigid with fear. She’d never felt him shake as hard as he was shaking. And even when she tried to placate him with a soft, reassuring kiss, she tasted nothing but his tears.

"I can't lose you," he whispered against her lips, his voice barely audible. "Not again."

"Then we should listen to them. Dexter wouldn't suggest something guaranteed to kill me if he didn't think there was a way." She breathed softly. "Please, let's just hear what he has to say. Okay?"

Nicholas didn't look so convinced, but he similarly understood there was no talking her out of it.

When she felt it safe to speak again, Raven wasted little time getting back to the question at hand. Her attention shot back to Dexter. "You said I wouldn't survive the turning because of the battle between inner daimon me and outward vampire...whatever. But if I'm all strong, then why wouldn't I be able to kick the vampire-demon's ass?"

A soft, sad smile drew across her Guardian's face. "The demon would attempt to possess your body when you're still human. The struggle that would ensue would be your inner daimon battling the other demon out, and asserting her claim on your body. This is where the turning would fail, you see. The inner daimon isn't strong enough because it's a recessive trait. The daimon is killed, and the demon takes over the body of the host, with every sort of person except the Few."

"Why?"

"Once inhabited by one demon, a body cannot withstand the inhabitation of another."

Raven frowned, squeezing Nicholas's knee. "Okay," she said slowly. "Meaning?"

"It's like a soul, really," Dexter explained. "Souls cannot exist in a physical form that is not their host body. They can for a time, granted, but not indefinitely. Eventually, the body will reject the soul and shove it out. The same thing can be said for demons." He nodded to Nicholas. "Paimon modeled Nicolai to be the same flesh, the same body, the same soul when he adhered to your bargain. Therein, the same demon was the only acceptable candidate when he was sired by Octavia. Any other demon would have killed him. When the Few are, for lack of a better word, sired, they either die during their battle for their body or they die after the invading presence has won."

"Why?" Raven was barely aware she spoke at all. "I mean, I get the stuff about the host body, kind of. But—"

"If your soul were transferred to another body, it would die," Dexter explained simply. "Not immediately, perhaps, but it would die because that was not the body for which it was designed. There are numerous accounts of sorcerers, particularly during the Black Plague, attempting to save people by transferring their souls to others. It just doesn't work, because that body wasn't meant for them. It's the same principle. You already have a daimon inside of you. The one you were born with, the one *made* for your body. Replacing it with another might work for a while, should you survive the transition...but ultimately, the body rejects the demon and they cease to be."

Raven inhaled sharply, the clockwork of her mind working fiercely to keep up with all the information being shot her way. "So in a perfect world..."

"Your daimon would prevail over the invading presence and become the dominant trait," Dexter concluded. "It has simply never happened."

"And nothing would change?"

"Nothing," the Guardian agreed. "You would become immortal, which won't change anything as the claim has done that already. You'll also be much, much stronger than you are now, but you would still be able to walk in sunlight. You'd still be able to ingest human food. You would still be *human*, Raven, because your daimon depends on your humanity for survival."

"As opposed to the ones that go into vampires who want them all dead-like."

"Right. Since your daimon was raised in a human body, it needs a human body to survive."

Raven arched a brow. "Mmm hmm. How are you expert on me and the daimonness that is me?"

Dexter frowned and shuffled quietly. "I told you I did a lot of reading today," he replied.

"But it's never happened!" Nicholas erupted, his grip on her waist growing so tight it would likely take a crowbar to separate them. "It's never worked! We know that some of the Few have tried before. It's there in the books. Guardians bemoaning their idiot wards because they tried to cheat death and got it back five times over. We have no reason to think it would work—"

“Yes, we do,” Dexter said. “Raven has something no other warrior has ever had. And that’s why I think this is our best chance.”

“Oh really? Some secret weapon, is it?” Nicholas snapped. “Well, your holiness, by all means enlighten us.”

There was a long, pregnant silence. No one moved. No one blinked. No one breathed.

Then Dexter spoke again, and the air vibrated around his words.

“She has you.”

## Chapter 28

She trembled so hard she was certain the bed would rattle when she sat. It did not. Her bedroom didn't spin, the ground didn't shake, the lights in the room didn't blink. She didn't feel like she was being watched, well, by unwelcome eyes, anyway. She hoped it meant Dexter was right—that Paimon's power in this dimension was finite. After what he'd told her of their conversation, she kept expecting the Hell King to bound around the corner and seize her debt before she and Nicholas could proceed.

Perhaps Paimon planned on intervening during a crucial moment. Perhaps he would collect the daimon during the change. He'd certainly indicated he was in the know, that he eavesdropped on every conversation and therefore trying to out-manuever him was a wasted effort.

According to Dexter, though, it was a lie. Paimon had to be summoned for a reason. Demons of his caliber couldn't sustain life in this realm without rites and people offering blood to complete their manifestation. If Paimon and others like him truly could exist in this realm, there would never be any rest for the wicked.

"It's very likely he has enough power to manifest whenever he chooses," Dexter had explained. "He must. But I think it's very limited. He came to both you and me. He wasn't with us very long, and I believe the point of his visit was to enforce the idea that not only is he omnipotent, but to dissuade us from seeking loopholes."

Raven perked a brow. "So he James Bonded himself on purpose?"

Dexter had frowned. "Um, yeah. That sounds about right."

Her Guardian's reassurance notwithstanding, she couldn't simply switch off the rattling of her nerves. The facts remained unchanged. These were her last minutes as a normal, earthbound human. If she lived, she would live on as something other than what she was. If Dexter was wrong and the turning didn't take, then she would die.

Raven trembled, a chilled breath rolling off her lips.

She would die.

“Raven?”

She blinked and glanced up. Nicholas shadowed the doorway, dressed only in jeans, his eyes heavy with fear and weighted with reluctance. He didn’t want to do this, not when nothing was certain and they gambled everything else in the hope that Paimon’s true reason for keeping them parted, for keeping them ignorant of the past, was to prevent what was about to happen from happening.

Dexter had concluded as much. Paimon’s real reason for separating Nicholas and Raven was to make his bargain bulletproof. He’d attempted to eradicate Nicholas’s memories by giving him another woman. He’d reconfigured Raven’s upbringing so that she had a peaceful childhood rather than a miserable one. He’d done everything he could without bending the rule of free will, and the truly frightening thing was he might have been successful were it not for the claim.

However, he *hadn’t* been successful. It seemed important to remember that. Paimon had failed. Nicholas had always had her in his dreams. Though Raven hadn’t been visited by visions of Nicolai at night, there were times, she knew now, when she’d *known* she belonged to something greater than the High Council. They were together now. If Dexter was right and this plan worked, they would be together for a long, long time.

Paimon had failed. He’d taken their memories, but he hadn’t been able to touch *them*. He hadn’t been able to keep them apart, and it was the reason he had to collect her debt now. It was the reason he’d stepped from the shadows and made his presence known.

“Why wait at all?” Raven had asked. “He gave me a week, Dexter. Why give me that week?”

Dexter hadn’t had an answer. He had, however, provided vague suggestions. The New Moon was set to appear on Raven’s last day. Perhaps there was some constellation moving into alignment. Perhaps a certain number of days had to pass before her powers were up for grabs. It was anyone’s guess.

He did, however, agree that Paimon wouldn’t have waited if it wasn’t needed. Something kept him from just taking the debt and getting out of Dodge.

And here they were. Raven sat on the bed, her eyes on Nicolas. Dexter had retreated to the kitchen, likely scrounging the cupboards for whatever alcohol they had on stock. She didn't blame him. She was about to become full daimon, or die trying.

"We don't have to do this, sweetheart," Nicholas murmured. He was on his knees in front of her the next second, his hands running comforting laps up her thighs. "Not tonight, at least. We can try and find another way."

Raven swallowed hard and tried to put on a brave face. "Do you really think there is another way?"

His eyes answered her immediately. His mouth was a little more reluctant. "No," he said after a long minute.

She nodded, glancing down. "I die either way, you know," she whispered. "If not today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then next week."

Nicholas raised a trembling hand to her bare arm and nodded, caressing the length of her skin with the backs of his curled fingers. "We can wait," he said. "If you need—"

"I think the wait alone would kill me." She forced a smile to her lips and shook her head. "There isn't another choice, Nicolai. We both know there's not. This is it." There was a short pause. "And if I'm going to die, I want to die on my terms, not his."

He nodded, brushing a kiss across her brow. "That's my girl."

"I do this, and the world doesn't end. It's a win/win."

"It'll only be a win for me if you wake up. If you're still..." Nicholas shook his head, his jaw clenching and his nostrils flaring. He was grappling for control, fighting the outrage that had been so prevalent among his objections just hours ago. It was still there, his desire to scream in protest and tear the town apart until he was offered a more concrete alternative. It remained, but they knew collectively they had no other choice.

There was nothing else. There was only this.

"I'll be okay," she replied, attempting a smile which quickly faded. "You're with me."

Nicholas nodded fiercely, his fingers curling around her wrist and raising her hand to his mouth, his lips caressing her palm. "Always."

The way his voice shook seemed to take the ground with it. "Do we wanna go over the pros again?" Raven asked. "You're my anchor. I'm human-girl with daimon-recessiveness."

Almost indiscernibly, he nodded again. "I'm a big, bad vamp," he replied, reaching for the hem of her shirt. It was gone the next second, rendering her naked save for her panties. There was no sense putting on bras when she wasn't going outside. No sense in putting on pants if she wasn't leaving the bedroom. She was bare before him. Her small breasts filled his hands the next second, her nipples the playthings for his thumbs. "Human-recessive."

"My human side completes your human side."

"My demon...yours." Nicholas leaned forward, his blunt teeth skimming across the claim mark. "We'll defeat it together."

She gasped, seizing him by the upper arms and squeezing hard. "Together," she agreed, sighing when his mouth began a cool, steady descent. She felt him kiss the hollow of her throat. Felt his lips murmur small blessings down her skin, between the valley of her breasts until he had one of her nipples between his teeth.

"Nicholas," she whispered, her hands wandering upward until they were wound in his hair. It was natural, the way his name rolled off her lips now. It didn't feel strained or forced. It didn't feel like something she said to appease him, to confirm that she knew he was as much the incarnation of this life as he was the last. His names were interchangeable because the same man lurked beneath them.

They were linked. They always had been. The claim had only turned something already known, already understood, into something concrete. It had given their connection a name and an unspoken vow in blood. A vow, like their bond, that had been there all along.

Dexter believed the claim was the reason she would survive. Her daimon wouldn't face the invading presence of a vampiric demon alone. Her daimon would have Nicholas. Their connection completed her strength, and together, they would beat it out. Her human side would recede and her daimon side would prevail. She'd be hardened into an immortal form, something for which she'd always been prepared for anyway, as the mate of an immortal creature. Her strength would be insurmountable.

This was the reason Paimon tried to keep them apart. Strangely, by keeping them apart, he'd led them right to the answer.

If it were indeed the answer.

“You taste so sweet,” Nicholas murmured around her breast, sucking hard on her nipple as his fingers trailed down her stomach. “You always have.”

Raven inhaled sharply. “Have I?” she asked.

He nodded, a harsh breath whispering through his lips. “I remember the first time I tasted you,” he replied, his tongue flicking over her rosy flesh, eliciting from her a long, needy moan. “You were so different. No powder. No perfume. You smelled like soap and the woods. Like the night.”

She chuckled, massaging his scalp lovingly. “Translation: you were sweaty and gross and covered in demon-guts.”

Nicholas released her breast with a wet plop, glaring up at her. “Putting words in my mouth?”

“I just think if you really think I smelled all nice back in the days before body-wash, you’re either repressing a horrible memory of Ravenstink, or really blinded by the love whammy I put on you.”

“Love whammy, eh?”

“Men should fear the powers of the love whammy.”

“Mmm...” Nicholas licked the underside of her breast, then turned to give her other equal attention. “And how many men do you think you’ve whammied?”

“Oh, dozens.”

He snorted around a mouthful of her flesh, the hand at her stomach easing her back against the mattress. Her legs fell open and before she could prepare herself, she felt his fingers dancing over the thin strip of cotton guarding her pussy. “Dozens?” he asked, biting her nipple playfully. “I’ll need names and numbers.”

“I’ve only whammied back with you, dummy.”

“Doesn’t mean these asses don’t need to get dismantled for thinking about you in the whammy sense.”

“One word: Octavia.”

Nicholas snickered again. “You’re never gonna let that go, are you?” he asked, his mouth abandoning her breasts completely, making a pathway of hot, wet kisses down her stomach. “I don’t want her, kitten. I don’t think I ever did.”

She released her grip on his hair. “Yeah-huh.”

His tongue dipped into her belly button, and he grinned when she squealed and wiggled beneath him. "I thought she was the best I could do."

"Whatever."

"The rest of the time I dreamed of you."

"You didn't know it was me," Raven countered, arching her hips off the bed when his fingers finally slipped under the elastic of her panties and slid the soaked material down her legs. It was slightly embarrassing how wet she became at his slightest touch, but for the desire clouding his eyes, she could tell he didn't mind. "Y-you thought I-I was...some..."

"You've always been my night angel, Raven," Nicholas said, his voice gentle but firm, his hands slipping upward again until he gripped her thighs. "Accept it."

"Mmm..."

"Always." He dove for her center without warning, his tongue plunging into her pussy and assaulting her with lick after lick. He slurped at her, drinking her honey as though parched and she was the only thing that could quench his thirst. Sensation exploded, blazing through her veins and making her skin so hot it was a wonder when it didn't melt right off.

"I can't lose this, you hear?" Nicholas growled between licks. "You *can't* die on me."

"I'll...uh...I'll...keep that...in...*oh Nicholas*...in mind."

He growled again, his mouth abandoning her opening to tease her swollen pearl. At the first flick of his tongue, she knew she wouldn't last.

"Nicholas, please..."

"Raven..."

"Stop."

He glanced up at her, and how he managed to pout with his lips wrapped around her clit, she didn't know. Only that he did and it made her insides quiver with need.

"You don't want me to...?"

"I just want *you*." She smiled when he took a defiant lick of her wet flesh, running her fingers through his hair again. "Please..."

"I want to commit every inch of you to memory," he replied. "Your smell. Your taste." Nicholas expelled a long breath and slowly untangled himself from her grip, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and rising to his feet. He paused to look at her, his gaze both softening with love and

blazing with desire as they took her in. Lying back, her skin hot and her hair tussled, her lips swollen from his kisses, her breasts wet and tender from the attention of his amorous mouth, her legs open and her pussy drenched for him. She saw everything he saw. She saw her reflection in his eyes.

"Every inch of you," he repeated, turning his hands to his jeans. In seconds he was as naked as she, and his thick cock bobbed eagerly against his stomach. "I know it's only been days, but..." Nicholas shuddered and looked away, blinking rapidly. "I can't imagine living in this world without you in it."

"Nicholas—"

"Without your hands. Your arms. Your sweet little smile. Your beautiful hair." He shook his head, sighing hard. He met her eyes again but couldn't hold her gaze. "I can't imagine..."

"It'll be okay."

"We don't know that," Nicholas countered. "We don't know that this isn't just a load of wishful thinking. If I do this...Christ, if I kill you, and it...We still have four days. We don't—"

"You already said you don't think there's anything else."

"I don't, but that doesn't mean—"

Raven sat up, tucking her legs beneath her so she could rise up on her knees. "Look at me," she said softly. When he didn't, she seized him by the chin and jerked his head downward. "If we don't do this now, we'll just be doing it in four days. I don't want to wait. I don't want to risk the chance that Dexter is wrong about Paimon not having the power he says he has. If not now, then—"

"Kitten—"

"Nicholas, make love to me." She lifted herself so she could reach his lips with her own. "I want you."

A dark shudder rode through him. "I want you, too," he all but gasped. "Always. Every minute. All the time."

"Then take me. I'm right here."

There were no other words. Nicholas moaned in defeat and swallowed her moan with a kiss, following her as she led him back. She fell against the mattress again, welcoming him as he rolled between her legs. She thrust herself up against him, rotating her hips to tease him with the wet waiting flesh of her pussy. She wanted this to be about nothing but them. She

wanted to focus on nothing but feeling him. She wanted to feel nothing but Nicholas moving inside her and his whispered kisses against her skin.

If she thought about everything else, she might not make it.

“Love me,” she whispered against his lips, her own hand reaching between them. She wrapped her fingers around his cock and grinned when he gasped, stroking him tenderly and rubbing his silky head against herself. “Feel me.”

“Oh Raven...”

Her smile grew wider, and she lifted her head to kiss him, at last positioning him at her vaginal opening. A little thrill raced through her when she felt her flesh draw him in, and as her muscles relaxed to welcome him home, she determined privately that the demon who tried to take this away from her would face a hell of a fight.

She wouldn’t quietly. She never did.

Long, trembling breaths collided with her lips as he sank inside her. Her flesh molded and gripped him, his balls pressing intimately against her. His weight comforted her, and gave way to almost choked sobs of fear-riddled pleasure. He looked at her and she touched the sky. There was nothing that could take her away.

It was a bittersweet lovemaking. She hadn’t expected any less. She held him as he rocked against her, pressing his lips to every inch of her they could reach. His hands explored without direction. One second they would be at her breasts, the next slipping up the soft underside of her arms, the next framing her cheeks to angle her into his kisses, the next rubbing her clit tenderly as his cock rocked inside her. They didn’t speak, and the tempered sounds of their whimpers and pants struck her as so unspeakably intimate that she wondered if she could reach orgasm simply by listening to him moan.

Knowing she did that to him was empowering in ways she’d never known she could be empowered.

Then Nicholas pressed his brow to hers, and their eyes locked. The walls could have fallen down and she wouldn’t have noticed. She saw nothing but the ocean, and the flecks of gold which reminded her of sunset. She felt nothing but his body, his flesh smacking hers, as his thrusts gained speed with desperation of release. She heard nothing but the whines of an old bed’s springs as they pushed each other toward an unfathomable edge.

The silence between them broke the second before she burst. The silence broke with three perfect words.

“I love you.”

His bite always came with a flash of pain before euphoria. It wasn't different this time. His fangs locked inside her, his hips thrusting hard as she spasmed and drenched him. She felt him flood her the next instant. She thought she heard herself say something but she couldn't be sure. She wanted to tell him she loved him too, even if the words weren't needed, even if he already knew. She needed him to know now more than ever.

The familiar second wherein he would normally pull away and lick her wound went by without ceremony, and her body spiraled into instinctive panic. She fought the need to push him away. She fought the rising anxiety and welcomed the blanket of darkness. Her ears rang. Her head felt light. Her skin was so slick with heat it might as well have dissolved. Consciousness danced further and further away until she was hanging on by a proverbial thread.

There was a voice, but God, it was far away.

“Raven, open up for me.”

Her mouth fell slack, and she tasted liquid copper.

It was the last thing she knew before the world went black.

## Chapter 29

She didn't moan. She didn't scream. Her eyes didn't flutter and her lips didn't part. She didn't call for him. She just lay there, pale as the moon and cold as death itself. She just lay there.

She didn't moan, but she moved.

The convulsions became easier to time. Every three minutes or so, she would jerk violently against the mattress, her neck craning back so far he was convinced the demon was trying to snap it clean. Her arms would flail and her legs would kick, her body contorting in ways that would make a gymnast flinch. Each fit lasted longer than the last, and they came quickly now. He felt them approach and suffered through them along with her, knowing simply by the way her body bent how much pain she was in. Pain he'd caused by feeding her his blood.

Nicholas did his damndest to remain detached, but Christ, it was hard. Every time he felt the approach of another seizure, he had to fight the urge to scream and pound on his chest and rip the walls down with his bare hands. He wanted to piss off the High Council so much they had no choice but to march their righteous asses to the front door and deal with him face-to-face.

Not that they knew, of course, but anger wasn't rational. Distant as they might be, a small unsound voice demanded how they could sit aside and allow this to happen. It didn't matter, in that instant, that the High Council had been deceived by Paimon. Raven was One of the Few, dammit, and they should just *know* when something was wrong.

He didn't know if he was helping or if his demon was doing anything to battle for the girl he loved. He sure as hell didn't feel tormented beyond the gut-wrenching agony ripping his heart apart, but that sort of pain was expected. He knew it. He'd felt it every second since she'd divulged the

price. There was nothing new. He didn't feel torn apart. He didn't feel like his demon was fighting.

Nicholas's eyes flooded with tears.

*God. I'm losing her.*

These were the sort of thoughts he'd forced aside. He hadn't wanted to dwell on negativity because unconscious—*dead*—as she was, he wanted to believe she could feel him.

He needed to believe being strong for her for was helping.

He needed to believe it, but as time ticked on, hope faded closer to despair.

"Use me," Nicholas whispered fiercely, collapsing to his knees beside her. "For Christ's sake, Raven, *use me!*"

She twitched. There was no answer. He hadn't expected one.

"Raven—"

A sudden wave of dizzy crashed over him, and without warning the walls began to spin as the floor beneath his feet became uneven. Desperation racked every fiber of his being. He thought for a second she might have opened her eyes, but it was gone before he could collect himself.

Then all was gone. The dizzy spell morphed into something unrecognizable, sending shock waves through his skin. A thousand invisible hands grappled for gray matter and tugged in various directions, and Nicholas's body caved without even a pretense of a fight. He felt himself depart from his body, felt himself projected into the heart of a nameless struggle. A roar tore through his lips even if the air around him remained silent. He was so dizzy he could barely remember his name.

He always, however, remembered hers. As he collapsed on the bed beside her, it was the only thing he knew to say.

\* \* \* \*

Raven had seen depictions of creatures trapped within the human body before, but she'd never given any thought to how it felt. Now, detached from consciousness and only aware of the presence of an angered beast trapped within her skin, she felt she truly knew the meaning of claustrophobic.

It was nowhere and everywhere at the same time. An unknown invader, an intruder, a thing that wanted her gone. It wanted her body, it was here to claim her body, and she wouldn't let it. It clawed at her and she clawed back. It snapped and she pushed. It was angry and primal, but she had strength at her side, and even when she felt her defenses weakening she had borrowed power to call upon.

She felt tears and scratches, felt her body thrash as wounds opened and blood rushed. Her pulse rang and she heard a dizzy ringing in the distance, but she couldn't answer it. She couldn't do anything. The angered demon held her hostage, pressing against her flesh and making her insides bleed. She felt its breath and heard its roar, and when it fought she fought back.

It wouldn't claim her body. This was hers. *Hers*. It wouldn't claim her body. It wouldn't send her into that good night. Her fight hadn't finished.

Raven wasn't going anywhere.

\* \* \* \*

When Nicholas awoke, his body was infused in bliss.

"There you are," a sweet, melodic voice singsonged, her tongue flicking a sensual path along the underside of his cock. "I seem to recall this is your favorite way to be woken up."

Nicholas blinked rapidly, mind-blowing pleasure battling confusion and physical fatigue. "R-Raven?"

"The one and very only." Her hot, heavenly mouth closed around his silky tip. "And don't you forget it, buster."

"Where are we?"

"My room." One of her hands suddenly made itself known, cupping his balls and favoring him with a tender, loving squeeze. "Look at me?"

It came back the second their eyes met. He glanced down the length of his body and found himself lost in green. Her moonlit skin was marked with angry, purple bruises. Her eyes were blackened but dancing with vivacity that had his heart singing. He remembered then—he remembered the battle. He remembered fighting. He remembered the turning. He knew.

Raven was awake and very alive.

“Is this real?” he asked, the words riding out on a gasp as she nipped playfully at his cock, his hips arching upward. “Tell...oh yeah. Tell me this is...real.”

“It’s real.”

“You’re hurt.”

The tip of her tongue traced the sensitive dip of his head. “You are too.”

“I’m not. I—”

Raven released him without warning and rose up on all fours, her mouth moving northward to caress a prominent bruise gracing his pale stomach. Nicholas frowned in confusion, his mind slowly catching up. It wasn’t the only mark. Like her, his body was covered with them. Completely ravaged with swollen sores he didn’t remember receiving. He became aware of a knot on his head and the foreign heat inflicting his tender cheek. More than that, he felt completely knackered. No part of him failed to ache.

Though sore as he was, pain was secondary to his blood’s burning need for her. Need which went beyond the physical and was purely primal. Something inside him howled and clawed and reached for her, and it wouldn’t be satisfied with merely touching.

He needed to feel her.

“Raven...I...”

A watery, tender smile spread across her lips. “I’m here. It’s okay. I’m all...daimon girl.”

“It worked?”

Raven nodded. “I’ll let you be the judge,” she said, offering her neck to his mouth.

Her intent could not be any clearer, and he was in a position to deny her nothing.

Nicholas licked her skin tenderly, then bit down. The second her blood hit his tongue, a gate opened in his mind and he saw her waking, her panic. He saw her rolling over and seizing him by the shoulders, shaking him hard and demanding that he wake up. He watched as her anxious eyes took in the battered sight of his worn body, then realizing their marks were shared. Her body was just as debilitated as his. She was worn and tired, but she’d survived.

He felt her—warm, alive, and real.

Then he saw her dissolve in tears as the weight of realization came crumbling down.

They had fought together...

...And they had won.

Nicholas closed his eyes. There were no words. There was nothing he could say. He wanted to cry, but he was too tired. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, but after everything, the words didn't seem adequate. Instead, he cupped her breasts when she straddled him, her pussy licking the underside of his erection as she moved to take him inside. Immediately, the fire within sizzled.

The demon purred and strained. He needed to feel her.

"There's so much to talk about," he whispered.

"I know." Raven pressed a kiss to his lips as she sank down, swallowing his moan. "But now..."

"I need—"

"Me too."

He was only half alive when he wasn't with her.

Eventually, when whispers of knowledge solidified, when he knew that the nightmare was finally over, he was sure he would break down. Relief would crash and send him to his knees. That moment, however, wasn't now.

Now was for them.

\* \* \* \*

If Dexter weren't bursting with glee-riddled relief, he might have been more disturbed. As it was, the sound of Raven's mattress rocking against achy springs was perhaps the most welcome sound he'd ever heard.

For the first few seconds, anyway. Then he just felt dirty.

Dirty, and very aware that he was sitting in the living room of his own home as his surrogate sister engaged in explicit adult activities with a vampire.

They didn't seem prone to stop anytime soon. If anything, the thumping just grew louder.

"Well," Dexter said loudly. "Isn't this nice and awkward?"

## Chapter 30

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, will you stop? It’s fine.”

“I just don’t understand why it hasn’t faded yet.” Nicholas frowned and pulled her to a stop beside him for the third time since they left her place, his eyes immediately fixing on the last of her turning bruises. While most of her other marks were practically indistinguishable now, the one on her cheek remained visible, and therefore at the height of Nicholas’s concerns. “Your other bruises—”

“This one’s healing fine, silly.”

“I can still see it!”

“You’re the only one,” Raven countered, poking out her tongue playfully. “They’re practically nonexistent.”

“It’s not nonexistent. I can still see it. That makes it *existent*.”

“You can only see it because you’re a freak-of-nature with freak-of-nature eyes.”

There was a telling snicker at that. “Never tell anyone you don’t know how to romance a fella.”

Raven grinned and snuggled into his side happily, her arm wrapping naturally around his waist as her head found his shoulder. She’d never understood how people could actually walk like this, but between two super-beings, almost anything was possible.

“All things considered,” she mused thoughtfully, “I think that went pretty well.”

Perhaps that was a bit of an overstatement. The past few days had been fun of the *not so* kind. Dexter confirmed the legitimacy of her new super-status while fending off nonstop incoming channels from the High Council, who demanded how the warrior had died and why. Then came the issue of Dexter’s role as Guardian and whether or not he would assume responsibility over a new ward. Their fears of incurring the High Council’s

wrath had been for naught; if anything, the higher-ups seemed pleased with Dexter's handling of the matter. They didn't want a talent like his to go to waste, and with Raven dead, after all, he could always volunteer himself for One of the Few.

The thought didn't rest well with Raven. Dexter was a huge part of her life, and while she knew he would eventually have to move on and take on a new ward, the thought made her uneasy. Those concerns, however, were for another day. Dexter was in the free-and-clear for the time being. He convinced the High Council that, dead as Raven might be, it was better for everyone if he stayed put.

It was so strange. It had taken three hundred years, but she could finally breathe freely. For everything she'd been through in the interim, it was hard to fathom that this night—the night that was supposed to be her last—would be one wherein she wouldn't be looking over her shoulder. The jaws of death no longer snapped at her heels. Clouds had parted, leaving soaked in sunlight.

Tonight, she wouldn't die. Tonight she would live, with Nicholas at her side.

"They'll fly by," Nicholas murmured as he slipped the bouncer at Club Intensity a few bills and steered her inside. "These next couple years."

"You think we'll actually be able to live together without killing each other?" Raven asked, mostly teasing, but she couldn't keep the worried strain from her voice. "We do well when we're outrunning death, but now our lives will be all slow and boring and—"

She didn't get to finish the sentence due to Nicholas's uproarious laughter.

"What?" she pouted.

He tried to answer but couldn't find his voice in his mirth.

"I gotta tell you, jackass, no girl likes to be laughed at."

Nicholas had doubled over, resting his palms on his knees as he tried to get a hold of himself. He held up a hand in a wordless request for patience, but every time his chuckles seemed to dwindle, he would remember what made him laugh in the first place and dissolve all over again.

Once he managed to get a hold of himself, though, his mood changed considerably, even if he couldn't chase the smile from his face. "Sweetheart," he said, reaching for her with one hand and not-so-

nonchalantly wiping his eyes with the other. “You are so self-righteous I wanna throttle your neck sometimes. You are bossy, bitchy, beautiful, funny, intelligent, caring, and independent. You think of everyone but yourself when the chips are down, and you’re so full of life it’s practically glowing from you. Not to mention, you’re a demon in the sack.”

Raven didn’t know if it was more appropriate to slap him, kiss him, or melt on the spot. She decided to withhold her judgment until he arrived at the point.

“You’re a thousand things, but the one thing you could *never* be is boring.” He smiled gently and leaned inward, stealing a kiss from her lips before she decided whether or not he’d earned it. “I love *you*. I always have. And if you don’t know that by now, you seriously oughta get that noggin of yours under some shiny machine so we can figure out which circuit is shorted, because I tell you, I—”

Apparently, her body had decided that he’d earned her lips, for the next thing she knew, she had flung herself into his arms. She stole whatever condescending-albeit-wrapped-in-love insult he was about to toss her way, gaining some of her own back when her womanly wiles got him moaning into her kiss.

Nicholas grinned and nipped at her mouth. “This boring?” he murmured, his eyes brightening with amusement.

“With you? Never.”

“Cause without impromptu town burnings and deranged old men with poisoned arrows or demons hankering for super mojo, I don’t know how you’ll ever put up with me.”

“I don’t either,” Raven retorted cheekily, sucking his lower lip into her mouth as her fingers explored his exceptionally fine ass before giving it a much-deserved pinch. “But I’m willing to find out.”

\* \* \* \*

The date of Raven’s payment came and went. While no one said anything, there was a certain aura of apprehension in the air about how the Hell King would react. The cosmos had been rearranged, Raven and Nicholas pitted into a century in which they did not belong, and she had cheated the demon—to whom she owed everything—out of her debt.

There was nothing on the night she was supposed to have died. Nothing at all.

It was unnerving. She wanted him to come out of the shadows. She wanted the confrontation over with. She wanted Paimon behind her completely, else she knew he would hang over her head forever.

Two nights following the new moon, her wish was granted.

As he had before, Paimon materialized out of nowhere while she patrolled. Only this time she wasn't alone. Her vampire was at her side.

"I suppose," the demon purred, stepping out of the shadows, "you feel you have won."

Nicholas tensed and seized her hand. "Yeah," he barked, "now that you mention it. Why don't you fuck off?"

Paimon smiled and spread his hands. "I am merely here to collect what is mine."

"The girl's not human anymore."

The Hell King delivered an icy glare, dragging his inhuman eyes away from the vampire and instead fixating on Raven. "We had a deal, remember?"

"Kinda hard to forget when you go through what I went through," she retorted. "Sorry. Shop's closed."

Paimon's face hardened, if such thing was possible, and the air around her grew very cold. "It is unwise," he said softly, "to spit in the face of Hell."

Raven blinked, refusing to betray fear. She thought, perhaps, that seeing the demon again would be easier with her strength fortified and with her future certain. However, no matter what had passed, no matter what she had defeated, there was an air about him which couldn't be overcome. The raw power that oozed from him in a simple look. She didn't want to fear him. She didn't want to fear anyone.

She couldn't help herself.

"And here I don't remember spitting," Raven replied, squeezing her growling mate's hand. "I just decided I didn't want to die."

"Find someone else to haunt," Nicholas snarled. "The girl beat you. Learn to live with it."

"Hell does not accept defeat."

“Hell will have to get used to disappointment.” Raven stepped forward, swallowing hard. “And you know, with all this brand-spanking-new strength, you’re striking me as less of a king and more like a common demon. So why don’t you get back to Hell before I send you there myself?”

Paimon stared at her. “You dare threaten *me*?”

“I dare. Didn’t you hear me? I could do it again.” She shrugged. “I should’ve figured a demon of your age...what, three, no, *four* million years old? I guess that’d make you hard of hearing.” Raven quirked her head and held up her blade. She was surprised to see a flicker of fear ripple through Paimon’s being. There were many things she’d expected from him—fire, brimstone, another taste of the inferno he’d shown her just a week before. She hadn’t expected fear, not from one who inspired so much of it, and she’d be lying if she said the rush wasn’t a potent one.

Creating fear in the eyes of a Hell King was heady. She could get used to this.

“It’s funny,” she continued, taking a step forward and grinning when he quickly recovered it in the other direction. “Now that I’m all Super Raven, it doesn’t take nearly as much force to defeat the local baddies. I barely tapped the last three.”

Nicholas, apparently having caught on, tossed in, “Not to mention she has these muscles that squeeze you so good—”

“Sweetie. Now’s not the time.”

“Just trying to help.”

Paimon’s chin shot up. “Are you so arrogant—”

“I think you’re backing up for a reason, Hellfiend.” She twirled the blade in her hand once, twice, and grinned. “Let’s find out.”

Whether or not the pointed end ever met its target, she didn’t know. All she knew was one second the Hell King had stood just feet from her, hatred and fear rolling off him so thick she was surprised she didn’t choke on it, and the next there was nothing but wisps of black air. The blade soared through the smoke and embedded itself through the bark of an oak tree, leaving them alone once again.

“Huh,” Nicholas said, gently caressing the small of her back. “That was...a little anticlimactic.”

“I dunno,” Raven replied. “I kinda got off on it.”

“Hey now. The only one allowed to get you off is me.”

She smirked and thumped his shoulder. "Not that way, perv."

"I think that's the only way those words can be taken."

"I'm just saying... the guy who has haunted me for three hundred years being afraid of little ole me?" Raven wrapped her arm around his waist, snuggling comfortably into his side. "I could get used to it."

Nicholas smiled and brushed his lips across her brow. "You think that's it, then?"

"I think he'll be too embarrassed to come back. And if he's not..." Her eyes focused on the blade protruding from the tree. "Well, if he thinks Raven-with-blade is scary, imagine how he'd feel about Raven-with-crossbow. Or Raven with...any kind of cool weapon, really." She grinned proudly. "I kinda kick ass right now, don't I?"

Her vampire's eyes were glowing with pride, and the look he gave her melted her into a puddle of goo.

"My love," he replied, "you always have."

\* \* \* \*

The cottage Nicholas acquired was not completely unlike the one they had shared lifetimes ago. It was marginally larger, built out of brick rather than wood, and instead of a basement, they had a spare room designated for sparring. It wasn't as large as they would have liked. Raven mentioned once or twice about knocking down a wall and merging the area with the empty guestroom. Nicholas countered it would make more sense to merge it with their bedroom, as most of their sparring sessions rendered them sweaty for reasons entirely unrelated to the art of sparring.

This time when she painted the sunrise on their bedroom wall, she didn't do it alone.

This time, they did it together.

## **Epilogue**

*Ten years later*

There was something about the way his lips curled around his fangs that fascinated her. It was a small thing, practically indiscernible, and perhaps it had nothing to do with the aforementioned curling at all and everything to do with what those lips did to her at night. Raven didn't know. The only thing she knew was the next move would be sadly predictable, and no matter what she did, she couldn't avoid falling into the inevitable trap.

Nicholas knew this, of course, and he used it to his full benefit. He knew what the slightest look did to her. He knew how to make her squirm without so much as batting an eye.

"Ready for me?" he growled, his eyes flashing.

The problem with trying to answer a vampire was the fact that they very rarely played by the rules. This was another thing Raven knew...and well. Thus, as her mind raced to come up with the perfect retort, she found herself inexplicably tackled to the ground.

"That's three for three," Nicholas purred, his hands closing around her wrists as his yellow eyes flashed triumphantly into hers. "You sure you're playing with a full deck?"

"My deck," she retorted, her hips bucking upward as by their own accord, "is plenty full."

"Mmm." His eyes wandered over her breasts covetously. "I'll say."

Raven put up a futile struggle. Well, not really a struggle. If she truly struggled, she could toss him off in a blink. Maybe. Nicholas never disclosed how much of her strength he could tap through the claim. She kept telling him to come at her full strength when they sparred, and he swore he never held back.

The tell in his eyes spoke differently. It always had.

"You ready to call it in?" he asked, running his tongue down the length of one fang. If possible, the gesture made him look even sexier, which was something she was certain he was aware of.

Raven smirked and flexed against the padded floor. They would soon need to get new padding, she absently noted. The stuff they bought was often too flimsy. Either that, or they were too hard on the rec room. Granted, the answer wasn't exactly a mystery, but she liked to think they weren't *too* horribly rough on their things.

"We've only gone three rounds," she retorted. "Sorry. I don't think so."

Nicholas winked. "I love it when you're feisty."

"I'll bet."

"Then again," he added, kissing her nose, "when it comes to you, I love everything."

"You're not charming your way out of going another round."

He grinned. "Oh, I'm *up* for going a round...or ten."

"A round of—"

"Glorious shagging?"

She flushed. "We're sparring. And I seem to remember promising a certain someone I'd mop the floor with his admittedly scrumptious ass for not letting me take out the last vamp in that nest last night."

Nicholas offered an unapologetic shrug. "To be fair, I called it."

"You big liar!"

"Am not. What do you call lopping its head off?"

"Taking my kill," she retorted, pouting.

"You say potato. Anyway...how do you think you're gonna get up? I got you all nice and trapped."

Raven rolled her eyes. "Oh, I dunno..." Her voice trailed off and lured him right into a headbutt. She was free in an instant, rolling to her feet and assuming position as Nicholas managed to climb upward, pressing his palm against his brow and glaring at her as though she'd kicked his favorite puppy.

"That actually hurt!"

Oh no. She wouldn't fall for the fake guilt-trip. Not again. It won her over too easily, and she'd been duped more times than she wanted to admit.

It was silly, really. Nicholas loved this kind of pain. They both did.

After all, this was foreplay.

"If that hurt, I can't imagine how this is gonna feel."

Raven took off for him and dove in a forward-flip, her hands bracing the rubber-matted floor as her thighs closed around his neck. The tactic worked beautifully, sending them both to the ground, and trapping him snugly between her legs.

"That was too easy." She giggled.

He had the decency to look like it might have hurt, or, had he not been a vampire, that oxygen might have been an issue. That was, of course, until he quirked a brow and said, "Uh huh," and utilized the obvious advantage of his position to nuzzle the warm and increasingly wet apex of her thighs. "You smell all nice."

"Nicholas, we're not—"

"I am."

Raven frowned and wiggled, but he was gripping her hips and tugging her forward before she could stop him. "I'm trying to fight you here!"

"I know. And it's making you very wet, you naughty girl." He chuckled and tongued her through the cotton of her very thin sweatpants. "Why don't you just admit you've been outdone by Nicholas the Great?"

"Stop calling yourself that! It's totally lame!"

"Riles you up and makes you nice and gooey."

Her struggles became more pronounced and even more futile. His hold on her was insurmountable. "Nicholas—"

"Oh yeah—"

"*Nicolai!*"

"That's just hot." He winked at her. "You wanna do this here or head back to our room? 'Cause once we start—"

Raven pouted and glanced down. "I was under the impression that we were sparring," she said, her voice dropping.

"You can say that as much as you like, I'm not gonna cave."

"You're not the easiest person to love sometimes," she said, feigning a hard sigh to cover how quickly her resistance was crumbling. Not that it did any good. Not that it ever did.

"I'm challenging," he countered. "And for the last time, we *were* sparring. We're not now. I won. Gimme my prize."

"You get a prize?"

“Course. I get *you*,” Nicholas replied, brushing a sweet kiss against her clothed inner thigh. “Won you fair and square, I did. And I have you all the time.”

“Some could argue that *I* won *you* fair and square,” she pointed out.

“Right now, I wanna have you on your back with your legs in the air. But since I’m in a giving mood, I’ll let you decide whether or not we race each other to the room or have at it right here.”

Raven quirked a brow. “Giving mood, huh?”

He shrugged. How he managed to shrug and managed to bark orders at her while he was on the floor with her straddling his face was completely beyond her. “You know me,” he said. “I’m a giver. So how about it? Me? I’d like to watch the sun rise.”

Heat flooded her face. It was amazing that nearly a decade later she could still blush over the artistic lovemaking that had occurred after they painted the mural on their wall. But then, for the way his eyes softened as he took in her blush, she knew he wouldn’t have it, or her, any other way.

He liked it when she blushed.

Just as she enjoyed watching the sunlight spread across their painted wall, even though she typically awoke alone in bed. It was something she never took for granted. Ever. Every day with him was a gift. A blessing. Something she’d fought to earn, but cheated to keep.

Something she would never give up.

“I let you win,” she informed him.

Nicholas grinned and released her immediately. “Believe what you like. I still get the prize.”

“That’s debatable.”

And then he was on his feet, grabbing her hand and tugging her out of their rec room and down the hall.

Into the room that was theirs. In the home that was theirs.

This life that was theirs.

It might have taken generations to make it, but made it they had. Even with the knowledge that for all that had passed, there was so much more ahead. The future didn’t scare her. Nothing did anymore.

The future, after all, was just another sunrise.

**THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Rosalie Stanton lives in southwest Missouri with her husband and two dachshunds, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At an early age, she discovered a talent for creating worlds into which she could escape. Over the years, her vivid imagination evolved into a love of words and storytelling. Rosalie graduated from Missouri State University with a degree in English. When her attention is not employed by writing, she enjoys spending time with close friends and family.



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