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BOUND BY
Rebellion

THE BLOOD-VINE: Book Two

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Blood-Vine Book 2

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Blurb

Katiya and Lucas are blood-bound mates. Nearly a decade ago, their idyllic relationship quickly devolved into one of animosity. Furious with Luke's meddling in her privacy, Katiya left him. Except they have a pesky issue that continues to bind them together—they must carry on sharing their blood or face the deadly consequences, literally.

Ten years have passed since Kat moved out. Now, their estrangement is firmly in place and she is desperate to get on with her life. So desperate that she will even rebel against the long-held convictions of her people. Secretly, she has formed an infatuation for a co-worker. Tonight, she plans to take it to the next level.

Luke is unhappy with their tenuous situation. He is prepared to do anything to win her back. He wants her in his arms where he can show her the depths of his need. If seduction is the key to their reconciliation, he is more than ready to take her to new levels of pleasure. He needs her home with him to keep her safe and secure.

Once Kat takes a drastic step to alter her life, she comes face to face with a sinister threat. Lucas must find her in time, and when he does, he promises, on his life, that nothing will keep them apart ever again.

Chapter One

Tawny, damp skin held her attention. Muscled abs rippled and clenched tightly. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch the taut ridges. A bead of sweat trailed over the dusky, flat nipple on his chest. It pebbled hard. She licked her lips, wondering how he would taste. Captivated, she let her gaze travel upward, eager for a glimpse of rugged features and the color of his hair. She ached to see his face, to glance into his possessive stare.

Her mind would not cooperate, though. She tried to focus, but the image remained blurry. With her eyes fixed on the kaleidoscope of colors spiraling around her computer screen, she attempted zoning out again. She wanted to view more of that hot, male specimen her imagination had conjured up. Before she had a chance to see any more, the screensaver on her laptop froze. In a blink, it vanished and her desktop icons came into view. *So much for daydreaming*, she scowled irritably.

A chiming tone indicated she had received an email. She directed the cursor to her mailbox. When she clicked on the little flashing envelope, it opened the new message:

Katiya, Suite 410, at dusk. Put your hair up this time.

Luke

Lucas Komar was a total jerk. Impulsively, her hands went to the tight chignon at the nape of her neck, tucking in errant strands. These days, she always wore her hair up. Whether in a ponytail or twisted into a bun, she kept it pulled back. However, the first Thursday of every month she wore it long and loose. Just to piss Luke off. And boy, she had become a pro at making him mad. In fact, right from the start, she'd had that talent nailed down. She never did what he wanted, even went out of her way to make sure the complete opposite occurred.

Why should she conform to his standards, anyway? He didn't deserve even a shred of her time, let alone an attempt on her part to make him happy. Not like he did a damn thing for her happiness. They had long ago left the lovey-dovey, kissy-kissy, puppy-dog-eyed adoration behind. Now, it was all business. If she had her say, it would be only a couple minutes in his presence to do her duty. Once finished, she would walk out, slamming the door in his too-smug face. But no, it didn't work like that. They had to do the sit-down dinner and act civilized while sipping a rich, sweet wine. Finally, when everything had been said that could possibly be said, they would retire to the rented room and make use of its private confines.

With a shiver, she swallowed back the lump in her throat, knowing what the entire purpose of this whole deal meant. Three days of dabbing concealer on her throat, two days of ravenous replenishment, and one whole month of hating herself, and him, for the choice she had made so many years ago. Lather, rinse, repeat, *ad infinitum*.

Kat really wanted to tell Luke to screw off. However, doing so meant much more than breaking a date. It meant a hideously evil death-by-starvation for him and, consequently, a one-way ticket to old age for her. She didn't like considering her impending demise. The whole ashes-to-ashes, dust-to-dust thing freaked her out. Wrinkly skin and gray hair were not very appealing either. She fully enjoyed looking like a twenty-five year old, fresh out of college. For a long while, she had benefited from this

constant state of youth. Shucking it because of a little bit of hatred and murder plaguing her conscience hindered her desire to cut him off completely. Therefore, dutifully, every month, she gave him what he needed and went on with her life.

And went on, she certainly did. Recently, her eye had wandered, fixing upon one of the new CPAs her company had hired. Tall, lithe, and amusing, Daniel Miller positively dripped with intelligence and charm. Also, he looked at her with a tad more interest than a co-worker should. She didn't mind it one bit. In fact, sometimes a wicked, cajoling voice in her head prodded her to encourage his advances. They sat next to each other during staff meetings now, sharing secret smiles when no one was looking. Every once in a while, he asked her to join him for a working lunch and she gladly agreed to go.

He didn't know her secret and she wouldn't be sharing it with him any time soon. Thinking of her clandestine activities, Katiya's gaze flicked down to her blotter.

A towering stack of files took up one half of her desk, while the other side held a similar pile of those already completed. Newly printed invoices, in a wrought iron basket, waited for her attention. Pens and paper, stamps and staples, sat in haphazard positions amidst the chaos and clutter on her desktop. Such disorder gave the distinct impression that she was hard at work. But Kat knew better.

It was only a facade; a well-achieved one at that.

Rather, the open file folders sprawled in front of her managed to do a nice job of covering the planner underneath; perfectly so. The bland, yellow manila envelope worked as a screen, hiding the calendar and its daily squares. The tape dispenser secured everything down. It hardly mattered what she put on top of her eighteen-month date book. When she closed her eyes, the weekly layout flashed in her memory like a tickertape news alert on CNN.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday ... nothing important there except her typical meetings, accounts receivable and a few meaningless entries.

Then there was today, the first Thursday of the month. This one was different. The square for the day had been outlined with a thick red Sharpie, until no black showed. Scribbled within the crimson border was only one letter, *L*. Beside it, red ink crisscrossed through the next three days. A testament to how long she would be out of commission after her appointment with Luke.

She had no real choice in the matter. Like all the mated females of her kind, her life was bound to another. Because she chose to live outside of her native community, Kat took additional precautions to ensure her unusual dealings with Luke were never revealed.

Nearly three decades ago, her people fled to Los Angeles seeking a safe home where they could live privately. Now, they kept their secrets well hidden. The culture of the *Kan Asma* dwelled in a shadowy existence. They feared exposure and would not risk another mass-destruction of lives because of their altered genetics. Sticking together ensured limited exposure of their unique characteristics. The safety of their community superseded all social expectations. Often times, the females bore the brunt of the apprehension and had limited exposure with the human population in the city.

Following a nasty argument with Luke, though, Kat had distanced herself from anything remotely related to her background. She didn't care about the consequences, personal or otherwise. Katiya simply wanted out.

A quick staccato rap on her door jarred her attention back to the present. She knew

that knock and considered for a second; perhaps she had summoned Daniel with a subconscious thought. Even when she wanted to erase all possible connection with Luke, obviously some still remained. It seemed she might have tapped into Lucas' unique talent, one of a group of 'talents' that her people called *Hibe*. The choice of language was an archaic throwback to the Turkish settlers of the First Family. Many still used it as if they resided in Abkhazia today.

Luke's talent was the power of persuasion and suggestion. Through their blood-bond, she shared his preternatural gift. The years of their separation dimmed her ability to exercise it at will. Kat figured a fleeting capacity for using suggestion remained within her. Somehow, she realized, Daniel arrived only after her budding relationship with him had dominated her thoughts. Might as well take advantage of the circumstances and enjoy the end result. This turn of events could help her with Daniel. *No point in dithering*, she mused, and decided to benefit while she could.

"It's open," she called out. Her lips curved up at the corners, while her heart beat a little faster. It had been a really long time since she felt giddy over a guy.

The door swung on its hinges and he stepped through the threshold. Flawlessly tailored, Daniel wore pressed black slacks and a pinstriped shirt with a vibrant, red tie. It instantly reminded her of blood. *Rich, crimson fluid contained in a golden goblet.*

Oh hell, shut up. Get with the program and get your mind off Luke, blood, and any other facet of your old life, she mentally admonished herself.

"Kat," his low voice drew her attention and she looked up at him expectantly.

"Hi, Daniel." Deliberately she blinked, and flashed a beguiling smile.

He returned it with a grin of his own, not bothering to conceal his desire.

"Did you eat yet?" Two long-legged strides brought him right in front of her desk. Today, he looked more Calvin Klein than Armani, but the clothes worked for him. With handsome, boyish features, he could easily be a GQ model and his magnetism fascinated her. Kat took in the sight, enjoying what she saw immensely.

"Sorry. I did," she replied, wishing she had waited a little longer before wolfing down her turkey on sourdough sandwich. Trying to explain, she added, "I am swamped."

In a swift move, he pushed aside her files and folders, tilted his head to the side and scrutinized her calendar. Drat! There was no way at all she wanted any questions asked about her imminent schedule.

"Going out of town or something?" Daniel's elegant finger touched the square, tapped right on top of the L.

Grimacing, she shrugged, "Business."

One side of his mouth quirked up, "Want company?"

Yeah, that would go over like a freight train collision. *Hey, Luke, this is Daniel. He tagged along to watch. Let's give him a show.* In her mind's eye, she imagined the ensuing carnage, the bloodlust and animalistic rage of Luke's response. She choked back a nervous laugh. Oh sure, that might tick the beast off just a smidge. Even so, she actually considered doing it. For only a split-second before her sanity returned and she decided it probably meant a viciously dismembered Daniel. Nothing sexy about being dead; she liked her Daniel alive and well.

Her Daniel. Oh, that sounded nice.

"Kat?"

To buy some time, she cleared her throat and yanked a memo over, covering up the

calendar. *What to say, hmmm?*

"Thanks for the offer, Daniel. I can't, though. Maybe another time?" There, she sounded professional and yet promising.

"Let me take you to dinner instead. On me. I think you need a relaxing evening before throwing away your whole weekend for this job," his voice had lowered to a slight demand.

When she hesitated, he reached across the space and took her hand in his. The pad of his thumb brushed her palm, teased, "Say yes, Kat. It'll be fun, I promise. Like a date."

Don't do it. Kat knew saying yes invited the possibility of trouble. However, if timed right, say before the sun had set, there couldn't be much to worry about. But it was both prudent and safe to decline. Shaking her head in resignation she replied, "Okay, sure. Why not?"

No, no, no. She did not just say that, did she? He spoke again; damn, apparently she had.

"How about seven?" Daniel's smooth query had an excited edge to it.

"Yes," Kat murmured, while warning bells pealed loud and clear in her thoughts. "Oh wait, no. I mean we need to go earlier. Work is demanding and such." *Smooth going, Katiya*, she thought irritably as her pulse picked up pace. She was flirting with danger and knew it, but embraced it wholeheartedly. What Luke didn't know wouldn't kill either of them. If he did know, now that possibility she vowed to avoid completely.

Before Daniel left her office, Kat made sure to set a safer time and they agreed to meet at Chimera Restaurant off of La Cienega in Beverly Hills. It worked out well because her destination after dinner was located down the road a few miles. She needed to run home, gather up some things, stash them in an overnight bag and freshen up. Exhilaration bubbled in her stomach while she contemplated what to wear for her date. A grin tugged at her lips; poor Luke would have to eat dinner all by himself while she wined and dined with Daniel. *Good*, Kat smirked, the overbearing male deserved it.

The rest of the afternoon slid by and she scarcely completed a thing. When the clock finally indicated that her day was officially done, she pushed away from her desk and stood up. Gleefully, she reached over and flipped the date book closed. Katiya uncapped her water jug and doused the scraggy-looking plant that sat askew on her standard, gunmetal gray file cabinet. She'd won the unfortunate perennial at a bonding-shower and her neglect was obvious. *So much for a last-ditch effort*, she thought as the final water drops plopped onto the fragile, yellowing leaves. After two-pointing the empty bottle into the recycle bin, she turned to retrieve her purse from its perch on the bookshelf and slung it over her shoulder.

Excitement dogged her steps as she strode across the small, boxy office. Switching off the lights, she plunged the room into darkness, the only light seeping in from the corridor behind her. She paused long enough to close and lock her door. In the general reception area, she waved half-heartedly to the woman sitting behind a contemporary marble counter. Kat didn't wait for the receptionist to respond. Instead, she made her way to the elevator. Pushing the down arrow, she tapped an impatient foot.

A quick glance at her watch told her that she only had an hour and a half to get everything done. Not enough time, but it must do. *Come on*, she willed the elevator to hurry up while silently cursing the fact she worked on the eighteenth floor. A little ping indicated its arrival. Quickly, she stepped inside and pressed the Garage button twice. Kat

hoped no one else would join her and slow the descent with multiple stops. The doors slid shut and she let out a sigh of relief at being the sole occupant. When the lift started its decline, she leaned back waiting for it to carry her to the parking lot.

Fifteen minutes later she pulled into her driveway, threw her Jetta into park, and took the key out of the ignition. Hastily, she got out of the car. The moment Kat entered the house she tossed her keys and purse on the entry hall table and ran down the hallway to her room. With one swift move, she kicked off her heels.

On the back of her door hung a large duffle bag; a quick yank and it came off the peg. After bringing it over to the dresser, she rummaged around in her drawers and started to pack all the necessary items for the weekend: cotton yoga pants, a ribbed baby-doll tee, her plain everyday panties. Nothing special. Not for Luke. No way. Kat's days of wearing lacy scraps to entice him had long passed. The thing he hated even more than her hair being left unbound and hampering his every move was when she wore slouchy flannel pajamas. The pink-striped pair he so detested sat in the bottom drawer; with a decisive grab, she shoved them into the bag.

Moving into the attached bathroom, she leaned over and turned on the spigot. She considered the bath gels and selected the pearlescent jasmine oil. A few capfuls under the water made it foam up nice and inviting. While the tub filled, she went to work adding toiletries into her bag. Once done, she quickly stripped off her work suit, throwing the skirt and tailored coat into a bamboo hamper. A tug at the clasp between her breasts released the stiff support of her bra. She took in a deep breath, reveling in the cool air on her nipples. Rolling her nylons off and shucking her panties, she dropped them both to the floor. Totally naked, she turned off the faucet and set her foot into the hot, sudsy water, getting ready to lay back and soak for a few blissful minutes.

The shrill ringing of her house phone put her plan on hold. With one wet and one dry foot, she jogged through her room to the nightstand and grabbed the receiver. Irritated at the bad timing, she answered in a frustrated voice, "Yeah, hello?"

"Katiya," the deep, rumbling growl of her name raked over her like phantom fingers, stroking along every sensitive nerve ending. "I am hungry, baby. For you," he added in a low and enticing voice.

Wicked, lustful images came unbidden into her thoughts. Kat's grip on the phone tightened and her hand shook. Damn it, no. She would not melt into a puddle simply because his tone sounded rough, needy. Where was her own voice when she needed to say something scathing? It seemed like she had lost it. To gather her wits, she looked up at the ceiling, trying to form a coherent but aloof reply. She only managed to say, "Lucas."

Silence stretched out between them. Kat bristled. Listening to him breathe helped to bring back her perspective. Exhaling, she huffed audibly. "What do you want, Luke?"

A long pause. "You know, Katiya. Close your eyes, baby, feel me."

Her eyelids drooped as if he commanded them somehow through the phone line. The shadow of a memory speared through her mind's eye. She remembered a whisper of his touch, the brush of warm lips against her soft flesh and a hard male body covering hers. Kat felt them all. Urgency, a bone-melting, aching, yawning emptiness crashed into her, making her shudder with pent up desire and emotions she swore never to feel again.

"Stop it, Luke," she uttered, breathless and trembling.

"Never!" he replied harshly.

They didn't speak and Kat flirted with the idea of hanging up on him. She refused to give in to the urge, knowing they must end on some semblance of good will so that later, when they met at the hotel, things went smoothly and quickly. He needn't know about her dinner date and he certainly had no right to run roughshod over her already-made plans.

With another man ... her conscience screamed out loud and clear.

Gritting her teeth, she hoped that Luke had no connection to her other than through the phone, or things probably weren't going to go as planned.

"Why did you really call?" she asked with forced civility.

Chapter Two

She was hiding something from him. Luke sensed it all the way to his toes. The barely-concealed spite lacing her every word also held a tinge of anxiety. If he didn't know her the way he did, he would think the worst possible scenario. But this sounded more like an evasion. Before, when things between them had been good, he would easily delve into her psyche and read what was truly going on. It just so happened Luke had done it one too many times and with too much freedom. Because of that, and other things, he had ended up losing her.

Right now, he felt conflicted. His nature screamed for him to slide right into her mind and see what she hid from him, while his resolve told him invading her privacy probably wasn't the best approach to take. Jesus, why did this have to get so complicated anyway? He wanted Katiya back, and tonight his plans centered on making her return home, once and for always. This tired quarrel, spanning a decade, had to come to a full stop. Not only did he intend to finish their argument, but he planned on reinstating their bond until it grew strong again.

Unbreakable.

"Luke? I am waiting."

God, her voice, sultry and sexy, washed over him like a rainstorm on a hot summer day. Swallowing to clear the tightness in his throat, he responded, "You weren't at my sister's goblet ceremony." *Shit, that was pig-headed.* He tried again. "Anna missed you."

She muttered under her breath; it sounded adorable to his sensitive hearing.

"Convey my apologies," Kat added tersely.

"I will." For a second, he mentally debated sharing with her a revelation he had experienced.

Gut instinct helped him make the decision. Hesitantly, Luke explained, "A terrible occurrence transpired, Katiya. After Anna mated Dimitri, Sergei came to my parent's house during the celebration dinner. When he found out she completed the bonding, he was enraged. The asshole declared that if 'he couldn't have Anna, no one would'. In his fury, the sick bastard threatened to take her life. Sergei actually cut her."

Luke heard Kat's indrawn breath, the whispered curse. She could hide out in the human world, but a lifetime of being someone else was hard to suppress. The spilling of a mate's blood by a usurper went far beyond a little crime. Oftentimes, it meant death for the offender.

For now, Sergei's status within the Family prevented an all-out, bloody execution. The fucking half-breed mongrel had successfully finagled his way into the Family. Also, he garnered life-long protection from the Council because his mother was a cherished female who had been forced to endure unthinkable atrocities.

Luke pressed his palm against his forehead. Terrible memories welled up, dominating his thoughts. He shook his head, tried to fight the recollections but to no avail.

The violence from nearly thirty years ago flashed before his mind's eye. The world had watched as an Abkhazian separatist army rose to power in the Caucasus Mountain region. Soldiers sought out the unlucky Georgian citizenry and left a path of heinous

extermination in their wake. The Council had believed their village would be left alone. How wrong they were.

He would never forget the screams of his people. The melee had awakened Luke and he bolted out of his bed, fear curdling in his gut. He sprinted to the door, pulling it open. Instantly, his body lit up with a painful burning. The mother-fucking sun confined him like no other prison could. At that moment, he realized there was nothing he could do to help save those he loved. For the first time in his life, he had felt utterly powerless.

Trapped with his brothers, he had paced the confines of their home, plotting an attack, but when tanks and heavy artillery barged into the *Kan Asma* village, they had no way to protect themselves. They feared the death squads would annihilate their females and younglings. Newly mated, Luke's sole mission was to save Katiya. Before he could react though, the circumstances were changed. Reluctantly, the Family Elders struck a bargain with the commander of the army and promised their cooperation with a peaceful relocation.

However, the separatists had other intentions for Luke's people. Within days, carnage followed, bringing terror, pain and death. A constant nightmare of torture! The scientists wanted to find a link to the *Kan Asma* longevity and they did monstrous things, including rape, all under the guise of research. When Sergei was conceived through force, the female pled her case to the Elders. She fell to her knees, begging that her unborn child be granted immunity within the community. They agreed. When her blood-mate was brutally murdered, she went into labor and found the will to survive only long enough to deliver the part-human mutant. *Too bad the runt didn't die at birth*, Luke wished. He brought his hand down and clenched it into a fist.

Sergei wasn't related by blood to Luke, but his familial ties made him a cousin of sorts to the Komars. How he had managed to be selected as a potential mate for Anna was still a puzzle. If Luke's brother, Traian, hadn't acted in advance by meddling with the goblets, there was a chance their sister, Anna, could have mated the scientist's spawn.

Female offspring were few and far between. Having a sister brought out the protective instincts of her brothers. Fortunately for Anna, she had four bull-headed, determined brothers who would move heaven and earth to ensure her happiness. Traian and Anna had the tightest bond, so it was Tray who had taken on the task of making sure she had the best mating possible.

At first, Anna's reaction to Tray's interfering had earned him an ass-chewing, but everything turned out as it should have. She was bonded to a strong, honorable male. The Council members had combined their various *Hibe* powers, ensuring that Sergei was confined indefinitely. The time had come to move on.

Except that memories of their village's occupation jockeyed for Luke's attention and he swallowed down the acrid taste rising in his throat.

Though all of Anna's brothers, Luke included, had wanted retribution for Sergei's assault, the ruling body of the *Kan Asma* dictated the usurper's punishment. Luke exhaled roughly as the vivid details replayed in his thoughts.

"And..." Katiya's impatient request forced Luke's concentration back on his own mate. Diverting his train of thought, he explained what had transpired.

"Dimitri was incensed. We all were." Luke knew that his words sounded edgy. He felt it, too. The pool of blood on his mother's wood floor and the ensuing aftermath had opened his eyes some and bludgeoned the stubbornness he had fostered through the

years. The appalling circumstance helped him realize a life was precious and a mating even more.

For the last nine, long years, he had squandered away valuable time estranged from his mate. Tonight, he planned to put an end to the nonsense and claim her once more as his own.

"Lucas, is she ok?"

The kindness in her voice made his heart clench. How long had it been since she used the same, sweet tone with him? Ages and ages, at least.

"Yeah. Dimitri has her cloistered in his condo, doing obscene things to her. Things, I am sure, I truly have no desire to know of." But he couldn't stop thinking about the obscene things he wanted to do to Kat.

"We all give in to those besotted desires as newly bonded mates." Her voice grew thin, emotionless, "Then we mature, and realize it isn't only about sex."

Damn. The chill settled in and her words doused him like a bucket of ice water. Anger prodded him on, regardless of his earlier intent. "Or that we bound ourselves to an immature workaholic."

"Lazy, chauvinistic, demanding bore..."

"Arrogant, shrill child."

Indignation sent her tone sky high into orbit and he heard Kat stamp her foot through the phone line, "I am no child."

Luke laughed. "No, of course not. How could I have forgotten? Ten years has a way of eliminating youth. Heck, you are certainly packing on the years, Katiya. Better not forget our appointment tonight or you might wake up with crow's feet adorning your pretty face."

She said nothing, and finally, "I'll. Be. There."

Luke yanked the phone off his ear a mere second before she slammed it down into the cradle. With a curse, he hung up.

That went smoothly, moron.

Prowling around his luxuriously finished basement, he passed the afternoon in a state of hyperawareness. His mind zeroed in on Kat, pushing against the mental barriers she had skillfully erected to keep him out. Tired of this never-ending situation, Luke worked at finding some way into her guarded thoughts. He hit a wall every which direction he attempted. At one point, he slipped into older memories. Right away, he realized she was pulling them up and examining them like pictures from the past. She rummaged around for every hurtful moment of their relationship and used it to lambaste him.

Great, she knew he was trying to sneak into her consciousness.

Like Fort Knox, she held him at bay. Luke realized he must wait until she was distracted enough not to notice his presence. Until then, he would bide his time and hang around for the opportune moment to arrive.

Sprawled out on a butter-soft, overstuffed, dark leather couch, he flipped on his big-screen plasma TV. The fifty-two inch monstrosity hung on the wall directly across from the L-shaped sofa. Underneath the television, a black lacquered entertainment center held speakers, game consoles and a vast selection of DVDs. In this age of technology, there was much to keep a sun-sensitive *Kan Asma* male occupied during daylight hours. His satellite receiver offered a whole slew of mind-numbing shows.

Idly scanning his program guide, he scowled at the long list of reruns and boring

documentaries. A cooking program called 'Eat, Drink and be Happy' caught his eye. "Yes," he mumbled. That was exactly what he needed to do with his mate. His stomach rumbled at the thought. How he hungered for her. He wanted more than physical nourishment. Feeding from her vein would quench only a small portion of his thirst. Luke needed to do much more than take her blood.

Ten channels of news stations, several more dedicated to reality television, and a handful of talk shows presented little to divert him. Clicking on Menu, he quickly read each summary and with an amused grin selected one with a prominent relationship therapist. The theme of the day: reuniting estranged couples. Well, didn't that one fit him perfectly? Leaning back against the cushion, he concentrated, listened to the arguing banter, and hoped the host came up with a solution even Luke could use.

Some time passed and the annoying fight between the woman and her boyfriend had grown intense. Luke tuned out, totally uninterested by their insipid discourse. He closed his eyes, seeking Kat, and nearly fell off the couch when he caught her completely unaware. Carefully, he tested their connection. It was way too weak. Compared to the time they shared after their mating ceremony, it had dimmed nearly a hundred fold. What used to be strong, binding them in heart and soul, had ripped to shreds. It took all his concentration just to move into her deeper thought processes and not alert her to his being there.

Surprisingly, he found her mind open and he searched for some sign to determine what she was doing. Ah, a warm haze permeated her senses and a hint of jasmine came in on each breath. She must be taking a bath. Instantly, his body hardened in anticipation at the thought of a naked, dripping-wet woman.

His woman.

Oh yeah, he could use this moment to their advantage. Not wasting even one minute, he called forth his *Hibe* and instilled the first suggestion right into her psyche.

Chapter Three

Warm water lapped against her belly, soft and gentle, almost like a caress. She closed her eyes, allowing the rich perfume of her bath gel to enfold her in the heated steam. With her head resting on a rolled-up towel, she relaxed even more. Peace and quiet, at last.

A silky blanket of bubbles slithered over her chest, down between the valley of her breasts. One trailed across her nipple. Such a divine sensation, as it clung to sensitive skin, brushed underneath and continued on to disappear in the water. Exposed to the cool air, the pert, pink flesh tightened, begging for a knowing touch. A wicked thought popped into her head. *Indulge yourself*, it prodded. *It'll feel so good*. Shaking her head, she tried to clear the impulse away. But the demand grew harsher, vehement.

Touch it.

Well, why not? She lifted her hand from the side of the tub, set it atop her breast, circled the bud with her thumb and shivered at the contact.

Again.

Side to side she stroked, reveling in the pulses of heat gathering under her fingertip, making the nipple pucker and strain for more.

Harder.

Oh yeah. That was what she needed. Pulling on the distended nipple, Kat rolled it between her fingers, pinched and soothed until it throbbed. Her breast swelled and ached. She cupped it in her palm and massaged the underside. With her fingers drawing together, she increased the pressure against that tender, straining tip. It stung, needed something more than her simple contact. Submerging her hand, she brought it out and lifted up, just enough to let the water droplets hit her flesh.

Just like my mouth. Sucking, tasting, nipping them. Do it again.

She gave in to the demand. A shudder wracked her body as she thought of lips latching on, hard, an insistent tongue tracing back and forth, suckling with fervor.

Now the other.

Lost to the mindless pleasure, she played with both breasts. Her knowing touches skated over the curves, lifted them up in both palms like an offering. Pushed together, she teased each one with enticing squeezes almost bordering on pain. Her back arched and she bit into her lip. Need boiled in her belly, tendrils of liquid fire licked through her veins, gathering low in that space between her legs.

Yes, move lower.

In a quick motion, Kat did as instructed. Her gasp echoed in the small bathroom. She barely registered the sound as her fingers delved and circled, finding the nerve bundle that would bring her so much pleasure. Around and around, she slid two fingers, not yet touching the rigid pearl hidden there. Under the straining bud, she settled one fingertip and pushed down, inch by inch, until it dipped within the folds of her body. A quick withdrawal and she reversed course, skimming upwards to the most sensitized place. Urgency took over and her hand worked faster, bringing her closer and closer to the edge where ecstasy reigned and all else dimmed in the glow of bliss.

A slight shift sideways and she met the thrust of her fingers, lifting her hips for each

penetrating stroke. Her breath came out in sharp exhalations, panting as the precipice of release neared. Water sluiced over her hypersensitive skin, splashed out over the sides of the tub and onto the floor. With frantic jerks, she mimicked the plunging entry of sex, trying to find satiation. Except her body wouldn't obey, refusing to shatter no matter how deeply she moved, how fast her wrist turned. It waited for something more while she trembled, drowning in a sea of overwhelming need.

Suddenly, an image speared into her mind and she called out in a tormented moan, "Lucas."

A vivid sight appeared within her thoughts. Kat saw Luke, gloriously naked, sprawled on his couch. One strong hand wrapped about his unyielding length, pumping up and down. His thumb slid underneath the thick crest and he gripped the head in a fist. Then he drove up with a harsh jolt, his hips bucking as he held his erection in a tight grasp.

Katiya.

She saw his chest expand as he drew in a deep, shaky breath. The ridges of his belly clenched, sweat beaded there. Kat wanted to run her body against his, feel the slippery play of their slick skin rubbing together. Instantly, her nipples firmed, diamond hard, desire lanced from those aching tips to the pulsing, hollow emptiness inside her inner depths. Damn, she needed to come.

But Kat couldn't find release. Not without him. His hands, his mouth, his cock, she wanted them all. An anguished groan tangled in her throat and she held on to the rim of the tub with one hand. The other hand took her farther, winding her need to a higher level. She matched his timing, moving her fingers deep while his shaft speared up high in his palm.

God, Katiya. You are burning up. Make it come, baby. Make us come together.

Impatiently she squirmed and bent her knees, heedless of the water spilling onto the floor. "I can't!"

Just feel, Kat. Feel me.

Lightning crashed through her body, molten and hot. A simmering churned low at the apex of her thighs. Persistent tingling worked its way from her toes, along her legs, until all sense was focused there in her most secret feminine place. The whirlwind gathered strong and harsh, whipping through her veins, pounding in her pulse until the vortex consumed all, flinging her off the cliff. She jerked, a cry hitched in her throat as her body strung taut like a bowstring.

Yes, Katiya. Now!

Everything dimmed and her eyes slammed shut. Behind her closed eyelids, light sparked as the shimmering glory washed over and through her, claiming her in a tide of incredible release.

Chapter Four

Luke groaned, and it reverberated in his chest. Such pain, a terrible, thirsty, gnawing hunger, roused the beast within him. His lips curled back over sharp canines. They tore out of his gums and elongated, ready to strike at her lovely, pale throat. Except she wasn't at arm's reach, she was an entire city away. What he planned to do had spun way out of control. Now, his physical state demanded that he slide deep into her snug depths until he, too, found peace. The next few hours would be a real bitch.

Mentally shackling the demons raging out of control, he leaned back into the armrest, let his eyes close and found his way back into her consciousness. She remained in the blissful haze, quiet and sated, humming under her breath. He loved when she did that. Especially with her cheek pressed to his chest, the soft vibrations soothed and calmed him. Then he would hold her. The act was part instinctual, his need to protect her. Often times though, he embraced her just for the sheer purpose of keeping her close, cherishing her. Lately, all it seemed he held was his pillow. Sometimes he beat it a little too hard with his fist, in mounting frustration and intense need.

He glared down at his still hard, aching dick. By the time she arrived later this evening, his desire for her would be nearly out of control. He could only hope his well-honed strength was sufficient, or the animal prowling just below the surface might take over. That scenario must not happen. Sexual frustration alone could provoke the predatory instincts of a *Kan Asma* male. Add anything else to the mix to rouse aggression, and the resultant behavior might be deadly.

Luke did not want to harm Kat. Instead, he wished to show her exactly what it meant for him to reclaim her as his. To lie beside her when they slept, and keep her safe in his embrace. He longed to stroke back the damp, amber tendrils of her hair which framed her beautiful face and clung to her flushed cheeks. His fingertips prickled in want of her skin, touching and exploring, bringing her ultimate pleasure. Even more pressing though, he longed to rekindle their connection. He missed their mental communication, allowing them private moments when they could not be physically together. Danger lurked everywhere. His natural inclination was to stay near his mate, keeping her secure. Luke had wasted too many years letting Katiya "find her own way."

As she so scathingly told him, that final night before their separation, she had no intentions of being pinned down under his thumb for the rest of her extended life.

Luke didn't understand what bothered her about it. Growing up in their tight-knit community as part of the Family, Kat had known exactly what to expect when she walked down the long aisle, to the altar where her future hinged upon a fateful decision. Like every other bonded female before her, Katiya had faced the mating ceremony, risking her life to find a blood-mate. Kat didn't have the luxury of modern science to help lessen the danger of her selection. In the past, the Elders simply chose three of the strongest candidates. To up the odds, the males came from different families. Everyone hoped the couple would be genetically compatible. Sometimes, the worst possible outcome occurred and the female's body rejected the blood, killing her within moments. Luke had watched, not knowing if luck would shine down upon him that night. But it had and Katiya survived the ritual. She had sworn an oath by taking his blood, and had bound

herself freely to him.

The moment she drank from his goblet, their connection flared to life. Luke felt whole, complete. Once the rite had been fulfilled, he expected many long years of happiness. However, it only lasted a little while. At first, Luke tried to ignore her outbursts whenever he slid into her thoughts. She hated the invasion, made him promise not to do it. Luke tamped down on his mental probing and she began hiding things from him, like covering up her feelings. He never knew if she lied to him, or if something hurt her. It nearly destroyed Luke, not knowing if she was all right both physically and emotionally.

She spent less time at home, working all hours of the day, which meant sleeping away the entire night. Unsure of Kat's intentions, Luke didn't know why she ran from her responsibilities to her people, her mate, even her own life. And one particularly bad day, he finally lost control. Luke pushed into her mind, found her thoughts and, enraged at her antics, stooped to the lowest behavior. Caving in to his natural inclinations, he used his *Hibe* on her. What good was having the talent for persuasion and suggestion when he couldn't use it to save his relationship?

Apparently, no good at all, for Kat's response to his manipulation had resulted in her leaving him completely.

Their business-like arrangement kept him alive. Barely. Used to feeding whenever he wanted, Luke learned how to make do with the once-a-month appointment. He couldn't take anyone else's blood. The idea repulsed him, but it didn't matter if he wanted to or not. Their genetic bond made it impossible. Only Kat would do. *Kan Asma* males mated for life to their female. Once their blood had been exchanged, it became the only way to find sustenance. So using another female was entirely out of the question. Some wicked stroke of fate caused them to adhere to this forced monogamy. His fangs wouldn't even twitch, let alone rip out of his gums, if he tried to sip from anyone other than Kat.

His mouth watered, thinking about the sweet taste of her essence. A throbbing sensation pulsed along his gums. The serum. "Yes!" Luke shouted in exultation; that particular element had long been absent from his feedings with Kat. His blood kept her sustained, but for the past many years Luke had wondered if the substance might have somehow dried up. The first time Luke took Kat's vein, a bitter secretion dripped from his fangs. When the serum flooded her blood-stream, twining within her DNA, it bound them together as blood-mates. This irreversible bond allowed them to share his *Hibe* and intimacies like speaking in each other's thoughts no matter the distance.

The spasms above his canines were not too painful. A twinge here and there, an echo of the earlier days when he first sank his fangs deep into her vein and tasted her blood. The need to claim her back then, in an irrevocable manner, had brought the serum to its maximum.

She belonged to him, no matter the separation. Perhaps this is why he had not felt the burn in quite a while. Interesting that now, after so much time, it finally returned.

His thoughts buzzed, still attuned to Kat as her thoughts turned from the bath and fixed upon a pressing issue. Luke distinctly made out her unease at being late for some appointment. Knowing the sun prevented him from going to her and would do so for the few hours more that it hovered in the sky, her behavior piqued his curiosity. Carefully, he masked his presence by remaining silent, pensive. He waited for her to reveal her exact intention.

A crystal clear image of a man, smiling and looking on in adoration, nearly brought a snarl out of Luke. Quickly clamping down on that visceral urge, he held back to see what came next. Luke could almost smell him. A citrus and sandalwood combination teased his sensory receptors, as if he, too, had some kind of contact with this man. The dawning conclusion worked its way into Luke's perception. This human had been close enough to Kat, in such proximity that she could take his scent deep into her lungs, where it emblazoned itself into her memory. Gritting his teeth, Luke braced for more to come. But when the image flickered to the man's smiling face, all bets were off.

Luke snapped, letting out a ferocious growl. He knew what that smug grin meant. Mister Piss-Poor Excuse for a human had designs, salacious by the looks of things, on Kat. Oh hell, no. Over his, and by *his*, Luke meant the man's, dead body.

With his rage whipping into an inferno, Kat realized his meddling. No longer lounging in sated bliss, ruminating on things, her mind went entirely blank.

Lucas, get the hell out of my head, she screeched within his thoughts. Like a door slamming shut, she effectively forced him out. It hurt Luke immensely when she ripped away from their intimate sharing.

Fury built, intensified, and pain speared out from the root of his fangs. He launched off the couch and stalked to the far side of the underground chamber. Hands curled into fists, everything felt as if it was spinning out of control. Anger warred with trepidation.

Luke realized, for the very first time, that he might lose his mate.

And by god, to a human, no less!

Forcing past her barriers, he shouted directly into her mind. *Katiya, you are mine. Don't forget that,*

Go to hell, was her only response.

Chapter Five

That was too close, Kat thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. One little slip and Daniel's very life would be in mortal danger. She should have recognized Luke's presence. A nervous giggle choked up her throat. Oh, who was she fooling anyway? From the first moment Kat had the impulse to touch herself, she knew Luke prompted her. He instructed and encouraged her, taking her to the brink. Finally, his sensual whispers, right into her subconscious, sent her plunging into ecstasy.

It had always been like that. Needing him, wanting him and desiring him, until they became so tightly connected that she was not simply Katiya but someone else. A person completely dependent upon her mate, and Kat no longer recognized herself. It frightened her. If she could lose her individuality so easily in his presence, what else might she give up? Young and stupid, Katiya had blindly followed the dictates of an archaic society, traipsing down the walkway of the chapel with fanciful dreams flitting through her mind.

Picking Lucas had been exciting. Any female would've looked at the match with Luke or one of his brothers as advantageous. Reflecting, Kat realized she had lucked out with her selection. Luke's blood had not killed her when they were bonded. Because of her survival, there was a theoretic possibility that she could have mated any of the highly-sought after Komar males.

When she considered the ramifications of ending up with the eldest in Luke's family, Ivan, Katiya cringed. Yikes! Talk about autocratic. Ivan defined all things domineering. He was sexy as sin personified, but he took authority to another level entirely.

She pitied the female who ended up bound to Ivan. That unfortunate lady better have a thick skin and a resolve of steel to live with His Royal High-handedness. *The poor thing*, Kat sympathized with the unknown female destined to mate Ivan. *Rather her than me*, she added as a caveat. No way at all would Ivan have allowed Kat to run off and leave him for a new life. The eldest Komar probably had a dungeon somewhere that he'd lock her up in. Scowling at the idea of being so confined, Kat turned her thoughts on to what it'd be like as a mate to either of Luke's eligible younger brothers.

Mikhail was the complete opposite of Ivan. As the youngest son, he lived a coddled, spoiled life. It didn't help matters that he possessed the good looks of a fallen angel. Mikhail was born during a time of Imperial Russian rule. To keep the peace and honor the government's dictates, the Elders had agreed to send the younger males to military-style boarding schools in Moscow. Mikhail hadn't gone through maturity yet, which meant he could endure the sunlight during daytime classes. He was shipped off with the others and sent to school. Mikhail flourished in his studies and continued on to Lomonosov Moscow University. Because of this, he had not been present during the invasion of their village. To keep him away from the danger, he had remained in Moscow for many long years.

His deep Russian accent added to the allure. Being a world traveler, he had most likely sampled women all across the globe. A playboy through and through, Mikhail lived the charmed life. Katiya knew she had her own beauty, but it'd be dimmed in the shadow of Mikhail's charisma and magnetism. He bucked every rule of civility, enjoyed being a smart-ass, and his ego knew no bounds. It was enough to make any female feel

inadequate.

No thank you, Kat mused. She liked feeling confident and beautiful, especially when Daniel stared at her with sensual hunger. Besides, whoever roped in Mikhail Komar would need to tame him or keep him on a very short leash.

That left Traian. On the surface, Tray seemed like the safest choice. First, he was utterly beautiful, in the hurts-to-look-at-him-for-too-long, male perfection category of beautiful. He had a sharp wit, too. Underneath all the good-looks and intelligence, a very different Traian emerged. The killer within him prowled close to the surface. The things he had suffered at the hands of the scientists, she really did not want to know about. But he had scars, both on his soul and deeply etched in his skin. When Traian snapped, blood and vengeance reigned. Kat had glimpsed the deadly side of him on occasion, and that propelled Tray to the bottom of Kat's probably-could-make-a-nice-mate list.

So she should've been thrilled with her choice of Lucas. His paternal line was directly descended from the First Mates. Only a few remaining families possessed the genetic code from the original humans who ingested the sacred berries. Luke's was an ancient, noble lineage. This undiluted genealogy of altered DNA gave him more physical power. Also, it meant he was a high-ranking male with gobs of money and prestige within the Family. His pedigree aside, the way he touched her, setting her skin on fire, brought the most incredible pleasure. It made her feel as if her very life were a fairy tale come true. After all, she had scored the proverbial prince, and he was forever bound to her.

Forever bound to her...

Kat groaned, letting her head fall back as the implications came crashing down upon her. No other male had ever touched her, only Lucas. Could she find the same pleasure with a different suitor? The intimacy surely wouldn't be as deep or as intense, but with a mortal man, maybe other things waited for her discovery. Daniel might be able to inspire, entice, and take her to new levels of delight. She needed merely to give him the chance.

At least he wouldn't be able to sneak into her mind and read her every thought. *Good*, Kat smirked. Nice and easy. Simple. A typical human courtship. They would take it one step at a time, until they reached the final culmination. Imagining Daniel in her bed, his agile body covered by satin sheets as he leaned in to her, sent a thrill coursing through her veins. *Yes*, she prodded her imagination, *go on*.

But he remained inches away, fixed in place. Kat acknowledged, with a sinking realization, the buzz she felt didn't come from arousal. Instead, apprehension gathered low in her belly and made her stomach flutter with nerves. Every single time she forced her mind to envision a torrid exchange with Daniel, it blacked out. A wash of cold dread prickled across her skin, making her shiver.

Frustrated, Kat shook her head to pull herself together. Yanking out the plug, she watched as the water ebbed down the drain. A chill set in. Quickly, she stood up, grabbed a towel and dabbed the moisture on her face. She stepped out of the bathtub and finished drying off. It probably wasn't the best time for day-dreaming, anyway. Luke had made himself cozy in her consciousness and she must be careful. Mentally pushing him out always took a toll on her. She could feel the throb of a headache starting. The effort expended to keep Luke at bay threatened a hellacious migraine, pounding in her temples.

The minutes crept by. Time was ticking down. Less than a half-hour remained for her to get dressed and arrive at the restaurant. Going to her closet, Kat thumbed through

her assorted clothes, yanking out a burgundy spaghetti-strapped blouse. Next she chose a simple, black A-line skirt and tossed them both on the bed. A quick jog to her dresser, for her under-things, followed. Swiftly, she rolled the iridescent thigh-high stockings up her legs. It took her a few minutes to slip the clothes on. Luckily for her, mating with Luke had given her the gift of youth and vitality. She needed no make-up to alter her looks and had already decided on wearing a no-frills hairstyle.

Even in the early years following her maturity she hadn't spent much time adhering to the trends of style. A smile tugged at her lips as she recalled the attire she had worn in the mid-twentieth century. Thanks to the designer Erte, most of her gowns had been loose and flowing. However, they covered nearly her entire body from head to foot. No need for elaborate hairdos when donning one of his exotic sheaths. Her favorite garments had been all those scandalous harem pants. They allowed for a greater amount of comfort, and she had enjoyed purchasing many different pairs. In the mid-1920s, Coco Chanel's long, belted blouses had become a staple in her wardrobe. The design worked wonders for quick removal. A bonus for any newly-mated female! It was that, or have it torn right off. Katiya exhaled a bit roughly at the imagery the memories brought to mind. Luke had always wanted her. No matter where they were expected or the time they needed to arrive. He'd often wrench open his high, tubular collar and pop the buttons off the "Arrow" shirt, because he craved feeling her skin against his.

Throughout the ages, only one thing had never changed: her hair. It was always long, the perfect camouflage for those all-too-telling bite marks. No matter the high couture, she had a way to conceal the vibrant bruises ever-present on her throat. Sometimes she regretted the strict chignon she wore now, but it was one way to get under Luke's skin. Back before their separation, Luke preferred her hair left unbound. He would run his fingers through the length and fist it, tugging her head to the side. Then he would bite her. Thinking of Luke's teeth, raking over the column of her throat, made her skin prickle with gooseflesh. Frowning, Kat pushed back the physical reaction her traitorous body had at remembering Luke's stamp of ownership upon her skin. Nobody owned her. Not any more.

Tonight was all about her independence.

Kat went to her vanity and undid the bun at her nape. Her hair needed a little smoothing and she pulled her brush through the wavy length. The bristles snagged in a knot. With a frustrated tug, she yanked it through the long strands and hastily worked out the remaining tangles. Satisfied with the result, she secured one side up in a stylish clip. To finish the look, Kat fastened a golden necklace with an emerald pendant around her neck and added matching earrings.

Excitement coursed through her veins now. She slid her feet into flirty little pumps, grabbed her duffle and exited the room. Retrieving her keys and purse, she made her way outside, pausing only to lock up. Once in her car, she flung the bag to the backseat, reached over, and clicked on the radio. Paula Cole's "Feelin Love" blared from the speakers in a sensual tempo. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel to the rhythm of the beat.

Kat backed out of her driveway in a rush. With her reservation in less than five minutes, she would never make it in time. But it hardly mattered now. This was happening... really, truly happening.

Had she lost her mind entirely?

Chapter Six

Fashionably late, Kat exited her car and retrieved her purse. Shutting the door, she clicked the lock and tucked her keys into the side pocket of her handbag. Her heart beat a little erratically. With measured steps, she forced herself to take a controlled and leisurely pace. No need to rush in to meet Daniel like a school girl with her first crush. She pushed open the frosted glass doors of the upscale restaurant and made her way toward the hostess.

Slatted shelves held bottles of wine from ceiling to floor on both sides, forming a tight corridor. The bright opulence of the waiting area gave off into a dimly lit hallway that divided the establishment into a bar and dining room. Yellow-hued lights and cozy tables with shiny, multicolored vinyl backrests were situated in precise lines. This helped to maximize the space, allowing for a greater occupancy limit in the general dining room. She walked past the bar, where light green walls were decorated with slick, flat-screened televisions set at a low hum. Between both chambers sat a low-slung cherry-wood counter, and behind it apron-clad hostesses stood waiting to seat the customers. Kat felt a little bit of relief when she realized they would be eating in a room full of people. It sort of made this whole forbidden experience seem somewhat less menacing.

"Kat," Daniel's cheerful tone came from directly beside her.

"Hi," she said quietly and tilted her head up to look at him. He wore his sandy blond hair deliberately spiked up to look messy. Long eyelashes framed his brown eyes. Pale skin was dotted with a few freckles over the bridge of his slightly aquiline nose. Thin lips parted to show perfectly straight teeth. Sometimes he reminded her of a teeny-bopper heartthrob from the Eighties.

Tonight he wore impeccably tailored gray slacks and a long sleeved polo with some obscure Rugby team design embellished across the front. The shirt was tucked in and a black belt finished off the apparel. All of it screamed "preppy." He never dressed like that at the office. Kat stifled a sigh and made concessions for him. Maybe 'casual' for Daniel had a totally different definition. Not an issue, anyway. She didn't need a man who dressed to kill.

Like Luke, her mind shouted loud and clear while supplying her with a potent image of Lucas wearing nothing but thigh-hugging jeans, the top button undone. Smooth, bare skin with flawlessly chiseled muscles spanned his chest and shoulders. It all tapered down into a narrow, solid abdomen. That wicked tattoo peeking up from his waist band, the silver tip of a scythe decorating the masculine dip just below his waist, always made her mouth water. Just like now, when she thought of it and the warm flesh surrounding the area, Kat felt heat wash through her, desire flow in her veins. But when she focused back on Daniel and his sweet, baby-faced smile, she remembered it wasn't Luke she would be dining with.

Daniel slid his arm around her shoulders and tugged her against him. He smelled nice. His cologne was a crisp, lemony blend. She leaned into the embrace, allowing him to lead her along.

"I hope you don't mind; I asked for table in a more secluded part of the restaurant." His eyes darted to an arched doorway. Kat followed his gaze, noticing a sparse number of

tables nestled in a small room. He drew her forward to the other side of the chamber. The smell of incense hung in the air, almost cloying. Because of her altered senses the aroma seemed more intense, and to counter it she breathed in through her mouth until she became used to the tang.

Nestled into a back corner sat a black couch. It was positioned behind an elegantly set table. The gray tablecloth and silver utensils accentuated the intimate atmosphere. Recessed lighting illuminated the area but cast the rest of the space in shadow. Large, pyramid-shaped lamps hung from the ceiling. An intricate, swirling design paneled each side and projected the pattern onto the beige stucco. In the middle of the side wall, a huge wooden door shut off the private room from the bar. It looked imposing, with iron nails hammered into the boards and medieval style rivets driven through the frame.

Daniel held Kat's wrist, seating her. A moment later, he sat down and his hand immediately reclaimed hers. He soothed his thumb across her knuckles and interlocked their fingers. With his head tipped to the side, he looked her over. She felt the inspection acutely and wanted to go check her reflection out in the ladies' room mirror. Hopefully, she didn't have a smudge or something even more embarrassing on her face. Biting her bottom lip, she let him continue. But her heart beat a little quicker when heat flared in his eyes and his stare turned molten.

Kat let go of his hand and took hold of her water glass. Ice chips clinked against the crystal as her hand shook. After bringing it up, she took a long sip and used the distraction to break their steamy connection. She put the glass down, flipped open her menu and perused the items.

"I can order, if you would like," Daniel offered. "Is there a specific drink you might prefer?"

The wine list and drink specials had many variants that sounded good. The more alcohol, the better, she surmised. A cocktail might just take the edge off. Her nerves were a wreck. She decided on a mango-flavored martini. They agreed on an appetizer of *Tikka*. She debated on what entree to order and finally chose a traditional Turkish dish, *Beyaz peynir*, a type of white cheese combined with a variety of spices and stuffed into a flat-bread. A side of saffron-flavored jasmine rice completed the meal.

He gave her a strange look when she told him what she wanted. But the waitress came to take their order, and Daniel quickly relayed the specifics. When he finished and the young server had retreated back to the kitchen, he leaned forward, trailing his fingertips along the length of her arm. "Cheese and spinach, sounds more like an appetizer than a main course."

Kat shrugged. She did not want to explain why she chose that particular dish. Tonight would take a toll on her, and she knew the more iron she had in reserves, the better. Luke sounded hungry. The tension in his words, the deep, sensual tone of his voice, warned her that he had come close to the brink. They played this roulette game every single month, pushing the limits of their separation. She knew he could be borderline feral by now.

Feral enough to murder.

A vivid image speared into her mind, forced straight to her conscious thought. Lucas' gleaming fangs were extended and scraping his lower lip. His black hair and fierce, angry features were a potent mix of male aggression. Those piercing, deep blue eyes had enlarged pupils. An eerie glow swamped all the remaining color and showed a warning to

everyone around that his preternatural state had taken control. His lips parted, he growled low, his stare pulling her into the evocative spell. She visibly shuddered. Every nerve in her body charged and tingled in expectation. Then he murmured, *Katiya. Yes, baby, I am waiting for you. Only a little while longer.*

Kat's stomach turned, dread welled within her. Before she could stop, her gaze flicked up at Daniel. Her date looked back with a puzzled frown. He lifted his hand, and even though Kat shook her head in warning, Daniel continued with the direction of his motion. In a split-second, his palm cupped her cheek and consternation puckered his brow. "Kat, you alright, honey?"

She couldn't respond. Because right at the same time Daniel leaned close and touched her, Luke had succeeded in his attempts to fully enter her mind. A vicious snarl ripped through the quiet of her suddenly blank thoughts.

I am going to fucking kill him, was the last thing she heard before a deafening silence echoed in her mind. Dread welled out from her breast, running through her veins like a torrent of ice. Immediately, she shut her eyes, blocking any attempt of Lucas' at trying to find her location. If he knew, oh sweet god, if he knew, Kat trembled again, if Luke had any inkling of where she was and with whom, the ensuing carnage would be gruesome and horrifying.

Pressing her hands to her forehead, she prayed for calm. Next, she worked at erecting the blocks again that had held him at bay for so many years. She wasn't entirely sure how he had managed to get through. One minute she conversed with her date, the next, she imagined the way Luke looked without his shirt on.

"Kat, everything okay?" Daniel's query held a hint of concern.

She nodded and said, "Just a sudden headache, give me a minute."

He ran his thumb down her jaw, to her chin. A little pressure lifted her head until she glanced across the table at him. She blinked quickly, and cautiously met his stare. Nothing but quiet reverberated in her consciousness. A breath of relief slid out between her lips. Kat could not sense Luke in her mind anymore. There would be hell to pay later on, but right now she felt perfectly safe. *Yeah, keep lying to yourself, Katiya, if it brings you comfort.* She fought the urge to grimace at that thought, while hoping they wouldn't be interrupted again. With a little grin, she cocked her head to the side, trying to reassure Daniel and herself, too. "All gone, now. Probably a brain freeze. Sorry about that."

He set his thumb on her lip, dragging it back and forth. "Good, 'cause, I don't want anything to spoil our evening together. I'm a selfish man, and Kat, tonight will be a night of many firsts for us. Starting, now."

Before she could say another word, Daniel slanted over the expanse of the tabletop, bent toward her and pressed his mouth to hers.

Chapter Seven

The side-table crashed against the wall with a loud thud. It simply wasn't enough. He wanted to destroy, annihilate, wreak havoc and the only thing in his proximity for such violence was furniture. Not that conceited bastard who had the temerity to lay a hand on Kat. With a roar, Luke went for the lamp and hurled it through the air, until it shattered into a hundred pieces.

"Katiya!" he bellowed. "The human is dead."

Not that Kat could hear the threat; he snarled anyway. No, it was not a threat. Instead, a bona fide promise. Right now, so out-of-his-head with rage and aggression, Luke could hardly focus on the door ten feet away. Let alone try to slide back into her mind and issue declaratives as to the imminent and grizzly demise of the pretty boy.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that, right now, he could literally do nothing but pace. The sun still lingered in the sky, holding him at bay. Its deadly rays kept him underground and idle. With long strides, he crossed from one end of the spacious chamber to the other. He needed a plan, some form of action. When night finally came, he didn't want to squander any time. Kat might feel bravado at seeing some measly human when Luke had no ability to track them down and exact revenge. But the moment that flaming ball of fire hit the horizon, all bets were off.

The time had come to reclaim his mate. Tasting the blood of this usurper would be the coup de grace.

Something felt off about the whole situation. His mind whirled with a thousand what-ifs, weighing and discarding the possibilities. Whatever had prompted her, this night out of many others, to go on a date, had Lucas' mind spinning for answers. She must know he could smell the bastard from a mile away. Their scent permeated everything around them. Humans often over-did it with the specialized perfumes. This man, in particular, wore an egregious amount. Luke scrunched up his nose, realizing when he did see Kat the likelihood of her smelling like the whelp was quite high. Another man's scent, on *his* female, made him see red. It would drive him to kill, like an enraged berserker.

Damnation, another reason to annihilate the lowlife. The only scent Katiya should have upon her was his. Like a mark or a pheromone. It should prompt any other contender to back off, because she had his blood within her. Apparently, human scum didn't have the ability to recognize the scent. Or that idiot would have known to stay away. *Nothing a little fist-to-face action won't take care of,* Luke thought morosely, as he envisioned tearing the cretin apart, limb from limb.

A quick glance at his watch and he realized a mere half-hour remained before he could leave the safety of his sub-level great room. Meanwhile, his time would be well-spent finding a way around Kat's mental barricades. Then, the moment he found her, hell would come calling.

A foul grimace twisting his lips, Luke walked out of the living room area, intent on dressing for the occasion. Entering the master retreat, he made his way to the gun safe. He spun the lock working the combination and it sprang open. Judiciously inspecting the contents, he settled on a deadly K-bar knife. Just in case things went south. Luke scowled

for a second before a vicious smile tugged at the edges of his mouth. *Yeah, bring it on.*

He tossed his weapon onto the bed. Beside the safe was his closet, and he rummaged around the clothes until he found a set of dark jeans and a long-sleeved, black shirt. He liked the selection and recognized it as the perfect ensemble for hanging out in the shadows. The ideal scenario while he waited for his unsuspecting prey. Luke smirked, knowing he really didn't need any such help. His *Hibe* allowed him the most convenient talent of suggestion. He could stand in plain sight and yet manipulate others around him to not notice his presence. A handy ability, one he intended on using to its fullest tonight.

The minutes ticked by and he headed to the computer, intending to log on to the internet. A quick search of Kat's business directory might give him more specifics. Luke wanted to know every detail about this man and what kind of contact he had with her. If he had to guess, Luke thought dourly, the human was probably some show-off executive with a corner office. *Someone impressive, by the looks of his choice in clothes*, Luke considered angrily.

He flipped on his laptop and typed in the web listing for the company where Katiya worked. If he had to methodically click on every single bio until he found the cretin, so be it. Lucas needed to know who Kat was with.

He finally found the bastard's smarmy photo. Next, he entered Mr. Daniel Miller's name into the Komar Industries background investigation database. *Thank you, Traian!* Luke grinned, completely grateful for his brother's far-reaching connections. All that remained was simply waiting on the search results. A niggling in the back of his mind said that everything wasn't as it seemed.

He had a really bad feeling about this.

And his bad feelings were rarely, if ever, wrong.

Chapter Eight

They finished eating in companionable silence. Kat didn't feel particularly hungry and ended up pushing the rice around her plate, making it look like she had consumed something. Each time she risked a glance at Daniel, she noticed the practiced skill of his etiquette. Pierce, slice, switch hands, bring food up, chew, chew, chew and finally swallow. His manners were almost dainty. He even dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin, refined and neat. *Stifling*, Kat reflected inwardly as she shoveled spinach into a small heap on the square china dish.

Her stomach clenched and twisted, nerves taking away her appetite. What she wouldn't give for an ice cream sundae right about now. Comfort food sounded utterly divine. Uneasy and apprehensive, she crumpled her napkin and plopped it on top of her food. Then she waited for Daniel to finish.

"I have a treat for you, after dinner," Daniel grinned between bites and continued, "I'm certainly looking forward to it."

Confused, she narrowed her eyes and tried to keep the nervousness out of her reply, "I don't have much time."

Daniel set his knife down, covered her hand with his. "Everything is taken care of, Kat. I want us to enjoy the evening."

A wash of cold trepidation had Kat edging, "I can't. Duty calls." She smiled crookedly but hoped to dissuade him from pushing her for more time.

"Duty is on hiatus," he replied cockily. With a smirk, he added, "I have my ways, Kat. Consider your schedule free."

Oh, Hell. Kat could barely form words. The worrisome buzzing of her agitation drowned out every other sound but the rapidly increasing rate of her pulse. "I don't understand," she managed to say coherently.

"It pains me to see you working too much. So, I had a little pow-wow with Mr. Jeffreys. Turns out, there isn't any reason for you to go out of town this weekend. My powers of persuasion worked like a charm. The only thing you have to do now is enjoy yourself while I enjoy myself with you."

He had powers of persuasion? She stifled a nervous laugh. Good grief, Daniel had no clue.

She could feel her head, shaking side-to-side. As she took in a steadying breath, she lifted her gaze and met his. Using a firm tone of voice, she conveyed her displeasure at his meddling. "I never asked you to do any such thing. My plans are firm. There isn't a way to cancel them."

Oh, please. Spare me from the meddling of human men and Kan Asma males combined. Of course, Daniel had definitely gone where he never should have. What gall, to speak with her boss and try to rearrange a schedule long in place. Not to mention that her job had nothing to do with her plans tonight, she simply used work as an excuse.

Kat never would have thought Daniel had it in him to be so intrusive. He seemed sweet, kind, and witty. Not manipulating or conniving. *Damn it.* With Luke, she already had the master conniver bound to her. This certainly had to stop before Daniel got any more brilliant ideas, ending in his early demise.

Going for a firm yet gentle let down, Kat said, "Thank you, though, for thinking about me. Maybe another time?"

He reached over with his free hand and picked her drink up by the rim, his palm covering the top. He held it out to her but she didn't take it from him. Daniel's brow lifted, one side of his mouth kicked up in a sly grin. "We still have the rest of our dinner. Later, we will see what occurs."

Not so much a concession, Kat realized. Frowning, she retorted, "Nothing will occur. I am going to my appointment."

His grip on her fingers tightened, hurting a little. "Kat, believe me when I say that your plans will change."

She yanked her hand out of his and glared at him. Choosing not to press the subject, she grabbed her martini and swallowed down the remaining liquor in one gulp. He could believe whatever he wanted. Once they finished here, she would say a quick goodbye and head straight to her car. Already she walked a thin line between danger and provocation. She had to protect Daniel, even if he unknowingly put his life on the line. Hopefully, come Monday with the weekend behind them, his irritation at her refusal would be gone.

If not, well, she had to do what she must. This was the choice she made so many years ago.

Bound forever.

To Luke.

Her mate.

Kat had a sudden realization bloom in her mind. What in the world was she doing? Not a thing about Daniel entranced her. When she thought about it, she recognized Daniel seemed harmless. Attractive, sweet, even somewhat youthful. Nothing to make her heart skip a beat. Sure, women wanted him for his charm, his money, and those pearly whites he flashed in a cocky grin.

But she wasn't just a woman. The blood running through her veins contained altered genetics. Her ideal man encompassed much more than a checklist of must haves. Alluring, dangerous and strong for certain, but she wanted more. Someone who could protect her with his bare hands, who would cherish her mind, body and soul, a male whose need for her superseded all. Joining, sharing, and completing her.

Luke.

Suddenly it became extremely important to put an end to this charade. Kat wanted to go see Luke. They needed to work things out, come to some kind of resolution with their situation. This impasse had lasted too long. What had started out as a punishment, her way of making him see how much she hated being manipulated, had spun out of control. Now, she wondered if the possibility to fix it still existed. But the longer she sat here across from Daniel, the more her mind was made up. There would never be another man who could fill Luke's place in her heart. Nobody would make her pulse pound in wild delight just at the smooth, deep tone of his voice when he said her name.

Katiya. Baby.

Biting her lip, Kat felt her pulse leap. Giddiness spread like a warm breeze through her limbs and pooled low in her belly. She opened herself to him, allowing him access. Her eyes drooped as she turned inward, looking for their connection. A glimmer of light, nothing tangible, merely the slightest presence gave her hope. And for the first time in many long, wasted years, Kat reached out to her mate.

Lucas.

Chapter Nine

Stunned, Luke shook his head, drew in a deep breath, exhaled slowly. It was there, still. Her whispered word reverberated around his mind like aftershocks. The urge to latch on to hope buffeted him, yet he forced himself to remain aloof. Tentatively, he searched his consciousness, wishing beyond all expectation that his mate truly had spoken to him and it wasn't some ludicrous conjuring of his imagination.

Luke.

Soft, lilting, gentle, Kat's voice echoed in the solidarity of his silent cognition. Beautiful. He wanted to rejoice but waited, knowing this was only the first step in a marathon. They had much to accomplish before crossing the finish line and becoming one again. Taking it easy, he did not barge within her mind. Instead, he answered her with cautious anticipation. *Kat, I miss you*, he murmured quietly, directly into her thoughts, his tone almost like a caress.

She sighed. He could almost imagine the way her shoulders hunched and settled back again. *Tonight*, she muttered in reply and Luke knew instantly what she meant. This rift between them must go.

"Hell, yeah!" Luke shouted to the empty room before he switched back to their mental communication. *Yes, baby. Come to me, now. Come home.*

Only peace and relief flitted between them. She responded wistfully, *Home*. A sliver of apprehension colored her tone when she finished, *I'll be there as soon as I can*.

Luke stood up rapidly and his chair tipped over. If Kat intended to return to him now, then he no longer needed to sit there and watch the web search as every personal detail regarding Daniel was revealed.

On top of that, since Katiya was coming home to him, they had no need for the hotel reservation. Luke set about calling and canceling the suite. After he hung up the phone, he began readying for her arrival. He wanted to make this homecoming everything she could ever want. First and foremost, he needed to clean up the mess he had made earlier. Next, it was all about Kat. Candles, wine and silken sheets, the best for his mate. Even more so, one important item remained. Something he had longed for, a necessary step to rekindle their bond.

With a renewed purpose, Luke hastily exited the bedroom and made his way to the linen closet. By the time she arrived there, everything would be set up and waiting. Excitement and need welled up within him. Tonight, his mate came home.

For good.

Chapter Ten

"Thank you for dinner, Daniel." Kat walked out of the dining room, with him trailing behind.

"My pleasure," he uttered as he came to stand beside her. He slid his arm around her lower back and matched her pace. She didn't repudiate the touch but remained impassive, hoping instead for a quick parting. They exited the restaurant. She had parked to the right, in the overflow lot. Figuring that she should bid him farewell here and now, she stopped walking.

They stood outside the glass doors and she pivoted to face him. "I appreciate you taking me for dinner. But now, I really do have to get going."

He glanced over her shoulder at the dark parking area. "That your Jetta?"

The white VW stuck out in the far corner. She grimaced when she realized he knew her car. Heck, she didn't even know what he drove. *What else does he know about me*, she wondered for a moment. Remembering his inquiry, she absently nodded to confirm his question. She took a step backward, getting ready to head to her car and be on her way to meet Luke.

"Let me walk you to it. Never know when someone is hiding in the shadows. I would hate for something to impede you from your...work," his tone was laced with sarcasm. It made Kat flinch.

"I'll be fine." With a smile, she tilted her head to the side and hoped she distinctly conveyed platonic gratitude. "Thanks, again. See you Monday."

Anxious to leave him, she hurried a few paces toward her car. Only she didn't get too far before his fingers curled around her upper arm and halted her movement.

"I said I would take you to your car."

Her heart pounded hard, a jack-hammer against her ribs. His tone went from derision to cold, calculating, and ominous. She jerked back trying to break the hold, but his grasp only tightened. With a frosty glare, she looked at him and demanded, "Daniel, let go of me."

"You see, Kat, I meant what I said. The only thing you are doing tonight is being with me. We can do this nice and easy, or not. But, to be safe, I made sure things tipped in my favor." This time while he spoke, his stare turned hungry. He let his gaze linger on her chest, her thighs and fixed on the space between.

Kat shuddered. Fear accelerated her pulse. It rushed at a chaotic pace, making her feel woozy. "What?" Her tongue felt thick and heavy in her mouth. When she tried to form more words, it became dry and uncooperative. "What have you done?"

His laugh rumbled low in his chest. "Oh, Kat, don't you see? When I set my mind on something, I will stop at nothing to get it. You are going to feel really good in a moment and won't care about a thing. Then we are going to take a walk. Right over there. Because I am of a mind to get this party started."

She followed the line of sight to where he pointed. 'Right over there' meant an alleyway between the restaurant and another group of buildings, all of which were closed for the night. Trying to speak, she couldn't make her mouth work. Her lips parted and her breath came out in nervous gasps. "No."

"I don't believe I offered you a choice." Callously, he tugged her forward. "Come along now. A whole dinner staring across the table at your breasts has made me eager to see them without the silk top."

She tried to protest, but the effort was futile. He yanked her toward him and she stumbled. Terrified, she ineffectively attempted to wrestle control away. Her frantic mind worked through the mental fog, to figure out what had gone awry. But her wits were so out of whack she couldn't make sense of things. Dizzy and confused, she staggered and tried to fight his grip. Unfazed, he cajoled her, while towing her closer and closer to the dark alley.

The walls of both buildings pressed in on her. The high-rises towered way, way up and they blocked out the waning sunlight. Darkness swallowed the light, casting the pavement into shadow. Scurrying rodents scratched along the ground, the rank stench of garbage wafted from dumpsters. Daniel continued walking, hauling her when she refused to move, and tugging her against him when she tripped.

Three feet into the passage, she stepped into a murky puddle and her shoe filled with cold, grimy water. He kept dragging her, pulling her farther into the darkened alleyway. No one would see them now. Fear ignited a desperation which sprang up deep inside her. She wouldn't let this happen. Fighting as best she could through the hazy aura, she jerked and twisted. A brief struggle ensued and her arm slipped out of his clasp. She bolted, running from him, heading down the lightless corridor.

Her steps faltered as she came around the corner. Not sure which direction to go, she turned left, hoping it would take her behind the Chimera and out to the main street. Maybe there, she could rush into traffic and flag down help. As she darted that way, her mind became clearer and she realized he must have secretly slipped some kind of narcotic into her drink. It felt like thinking through molasses, sluggish and distressing, almost impossible to make split-second decisions. Kat could hear him coming after her, his steps echoed loud and looming. She picked up her frenzied pace.

Dim street lamps washed the road up ahead in a dull, yellow light. She focused on the halogen glow and tried to run even faster. So close, almost there.

Pain speared through her shoulders. His hand bit into her tender skin like a steel manacle. He hauled her backward and rammed her, face-first, up against the brick wall. The rough masonry scraped her cheek, a bead of moisture trailed down to her chin. Great, now she was bleeding.

With her eyes squeezed shut, she tried to inhale, to get some air in her lungs, but it whooshed out when hot breath fanned across her ear.

"Such a bad little kitty. Running away from me."

He spun her around to face him. One hand curled about her throat. The chain on her necklace broke and it tumbled to the ground. Daniel held her immobile. His other hand went to work on her shirt, yanking it out of the waistband and wrenching it up to reveal her lacey bra.

"Oh. Nice. Now, I am going to pet you," Daniel sneered. Then his palm slid up, grasped her breast, and squeezed.

Katiya gasped, shuddered and turned inward, opening her mind.

Chapter Eleven

After setting the last candle in its stand and lighting it, Luke surveyed the room, deciding it looked perfect. He returned to his bedroom to retrieve one last item. Right away, the computer drew his attention. He remembered earlier when Kat had sought him out, her distraction had interrupted his search on the human scum she dined with. If Kat caught him snooping, he knew everything might end up going south again. It would be prudent to turn off the browser and forget about it. Let bygones be bygones and all that other noble bull-shit females liked.

Several space-eating steps later, he had crossed the room and leaned over the desktop, intent on exiting the webpage. The investigation he initiated earlier sat on the monitor awaiting his scrutiny. But it didn't matter now. Kat was coming home to him. The meager human was in the past. No harm done.

Except.

"Oh, Fuck no!" Luke grabbed the mouse and jerkily scrolled down to read the page. Daniel Bryce Miller. CPA, a sizable income, magna cum laude, rich, surfer kid, and three arrests for assault. Two for attempted rape, one for misdemeanor battery, every one of the charges were dropped for some asinine reason or other. Probably had some contacts pulling for him.

But that criminal was with Kat.

Which meant...

"Oh, Jesus." Luke bolted to his feet as a wave of dizziness washed over him. Then stinging pain filled his chest, tightening up until he could hardly take in a breath. His heart battered against his ribcage. He put his hand above it, almost willing it to slow down. But then he realized his pulse beat nice and steady, slowing even.

A mere whisper caught his attention.

Luke. Oh, God.

"Kat. Katiya!" he roared. In an instant, his full transformation occurred. He could feel the scrape of his fangs on his lip, his sight intensified, as did his hearing. He sought out his female, focusing upon her and trying to pinpoint her position.

The time had come to kill the bastard. Good and dead.

He moved into Kat's mind, searching for answers. The constant reverberation of one word over and over placed him on a course to find her.

Chimera. Chimera. Chimera.

Freaking Beverly Hills. Luke focused on the Persian food establishment, latching onto the parking area and zeroing in on a place to flash himself.

I am coming, baby. Hang on, Katiya.

Just as he made the first attempt to transport himself, an utterly, frightening vision pierced through his conscious awareness. He could barely see in the gloominess, but what he made out brought a deadly growl tearing out of his throat.

Daniel's hand roved about her skin, twisting and pulling, bruising. The human leaned in and forced his mouth against hers, kissing her soft, sweet lips while between terrified sobs she begged for him to please let her go. The bastard just laughed in her face and continued his assault.

Fury boiled in Luke's veins and bloodlust fueled his rage. No one touched his mate.
No one harmed her without paying the penalty. It was time to exact his payment.
In a blink, Luke was gone.

Chapter Twelve

Hang on.

Those words bolstered Kat, renewing her attempts to keep Daniel from inflicting any more harm to her. She struggled, fought his bruising touches and clenched her jaw, unwilling to make even the slightest sound of pain. He fed off of her whimpers and sought out her weaknesses. There must be some way to stall him while she waited for Lucas.

Luke. Kat thought inwardly about this fateful choice she had made and realized nothing mattered anymore but survival. Her mind was a powerful tool. She knew that Luke's talent could force a human to do practically anything. Closing her eyes, she shut out the distracting way Daniel's fingers groped. His mouth left a wet trail down her throat, and his fetid breath raised prickly goose-flesh over her bare skin.

Instead of reacting, she worked to find a manner in which to thwart him. Changing all his desires was too hard for her, especially with her bond weakened. But she only needed to buy Lucas some time.

Suggestion might work; if not, persuasion would be the fall-back. With determination she focused and turned inward. She thought about surveillance cameras, someone calling 911 and the police arriving there. It took all her might, but she managed to push the mantra from the recesses of her mind towards Daniel. She silently chanted the phrase over and over.

What if the cops see us?

An imperceptible shifting of Daniel's body followed. She prayed it meant her notion had somehow made it through his mental barriers. Hopefully, it was worming its way throughout his synapses and making him feel the need to retreat.

She reiterated the implication, adding a tinge of anxiety, *Sirens? Are they coming this way?*

Daniel paused and turned his head to the side, glancing around the dim alleyway. He cocked his head as if listening. Kat used the distraction to her benefit. Bravely wrenching one arm from his hold, she twisted and jerked free. Hauling back, she rammed a clenched fist into his eye. Her fingers hit bone, while her knuckles sank into soft flesh. She wanted to gag at the sickening sensation, but managed to keep everything down. He took two steps backward, his palm immediately covering the injury. A hateful sneer pulled at his lips and Kat looked on as his entire demeanor turned vicious. The grasp he had on her opposite arm tightened.

"You'll pay for that."

Fear coiled in her belly, dread washing through her veins like icy torrents. She wasn't going to make it. The deadly glint in Daniel's eye bespoke her fate. He was going to rape her before killing her.

"Yes, that's right, you understand now. It's your fault, you know. Walking around the office like a sex kitten, your ass twitching in those tight skirts, you were practically begging for a fuck. And now you get all coy and innocent, crying like a virgin." When he lifted his hand from his face, she saw a trickle of blood from his swollen eye socket. It did not deter him, though. The chilly air on her upper thighs spread as he took a fistful of

her skirt and yanked it up.

Daniel shoved his hand between her tightly clasped thighs and pushed his knee into the space. "I am going to have you now, Kat. I am going to give you exactly what you deserve."

She felt shadows pulling at the edges of her vision. Numbness traveled along her limbs, tingling pinpricks skittered throughout her body. Each breath she took grew tighter, more laborious. The fragile connection she shared with Lucas remained her only hope. She knew he would come and she had saved a bit of time. Now, her reprieve was over.

The first stinging pinch of his vile touch incited a silent sob. The next hurt even more and she couldn't stop the cry as it tore from her throat.

"Yes, that's right. Scream for me now, Kat. Scream." The tender flesh at the apex of her legs burned with his painful tweaking. She could do nothing when he squeezed again, but shout.

"Lucas, hurry," Kat managed to yell amidst her cries.

"Who the fuck is that?" Daniel snarled in her face.

"Your worst nightmare!" the enraged, deadly response came from behind them. "Let go of her, now," Luke added, his tone calm, each word enunciated precisely.

Kat looked at Daniel; his grip on her loosened. She saw confusion in his features as he watched his arm lift away from her of its own volition. The fingers between her thighs slipped out, too. Kat instantly stepped away from him.

"What the hell?" Daniel cursed, while staring at his arms with confusion.

"Turn around, asshole."

Kat wanted to run to Luke, needed his arms around her, his kisses to erase all the sickening traces of Daniel's assault. Still, she remained unmoving against the coarse brick wall. Nervously, she tipped her head back and glanced across the space to meet Lucas' stare. His full transformation had taken effect. Jet black hair hung in tousled waves to his shoulders, framing autocratic, dominant features. He oozed malevolence. From the slash of his dark eyebrows to the deep blue eyes that smoldered ominously, the harsh angles of his face were lined with aggression. Lips drawn back over gleaming, sharp fangs promised retribution.

For a moment he watched her, his eerie, intent look raking over every inch of her body. He was cataloging her injuries. The tick in his jaw could be seen across the space and he gritted his teeth as he took in the torn material of her clothes.

When his gaze touched on the injured flesh of her upper thigh, a low growl broke the silence. *Was I too late?* His rough, private query held an edge. The anxious tone didn't hide his fear that he had not been able to prevent such a horrible attack.

Kat shook her head, mumbled, "No."

Daniel's head whipped around and he barked at her, "Stay out of this, bitch."

Lightning quick, the blow came so swiftly that even Kat didn't see it until Daniel reeled sideways and slammed against the wall. Luke followed the motion, stalking forward until he stood an inch away from Daniel. "Fucking look at her again and she will be the last thing you ever see."

Daniel scoffed, "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but this little tussle is between me and my girl. We don't need any help from a good Samaritan who still thinks it is Halloween." Fists clenched and arms akimbo, Daniel took a step toward Kat, "You

can leave us now."

Chapter Thirteen

Luke narrowed his eyes, one side of his mouth kicked up in a sneer. Indignation lit up every cell in his body and he chose to use the same insolent tone the human had dismissed him with. Luke retorted, "You can stop, now."

Daniel froze in his steps. Frustration filled his irate gaze when his body wouldn't cooperate. A shiver worked its way from his shoulders out to his arms, but he didn't budge an inch. "What the..."

"Don't speak." Luke crossed his arms over his chest, scrutinizing the pathetic man. Why he drew Katiya's interest, he really didn't want to know. Daniel was a total wimp. In his early years, Luke would have called him a dandy or rakehell. Now, well, he was dead. Plain and simple, nothing would stay Luke's hand; he'd give no quarter or reprieve.

Daniel flapped his lips, his throat working as he attempted to say something. Luke smirked, "Your frantic cognition is fairly amusing. Right now, every synapse in your brain is firing off, trying to over-ride my control. Unfortunately, being a human makes success highly unlikely. All I must do is think it and you will obey." Luke pointed his finger at Daniel. Indicating the wall, he focused on trapping the human against the same bricks where the scum had assaulted Kat. Instantly, Daniel stepped backwards and kept moving until his body pressed fully to the building. The baffled expression on the man's face only increased Luke's irritation. This one was slow on the uptake.

Two long strides brought Luke face-to-face with Daniel. "I could suggest that you simply stop breathing. It would be like drowning, but without the pesky need for water. Or I might persuade your pathetic, mortal heart to cease beating. It will look like a simple heart attack for the coroner to report as your cause of death. However, you see, Mr. Miller, you have hurt one too many people. This time you messed with *my* female."

Luke's hand shot out and clenched Daniel's throat. His fingers squeezed hard around the man's windpipe. "There is something rewarding about feeling the life of a bastard like you draining out within my hand. That's how you are going to die, Daniel. I'll wipe you from the face of this earth, with the simple flick of my fingers."

Alarm flashed in the man's glassy eyes. Trepidation made Daniel's breathing erratic. The human's pulse sped up with a hectic beat fluttering in his arteries. Luke gave into the urge and tightened his hold.

He could feel the rushing blood under his palm. The longer he left this worm alive, the more hatred filled Lucas' thoughts. When he reflected on the sight of Katiya being shoved back into the wall, Daniel's attack growing twisted and vile, it only made the matter worse. The time had come to extract payment for such egregious deeds.

"Katiya. Look away," Luke said in warning. He didn't want her to witness the destruction of life. She had seen too much when they had fled Russia. Bodies strewn on the ground like so much refuse, dead women and their mates. It had scarred her, and Luke couldn't add to her grief. But he wasn't going to allow Daniel the luxury of staying alive to hurt someone else.

He paused for only a moment to make sure she was not watching. But she was and he turned, meeting her anguished gaze. "Baby, it has to end this way. Honor demands vengeance. I can't let him go. He hurt you, Katiya. He hurt others before you."

Shock replaced her distress and she nodded once before stepping to the side and facing away. The pressure of her emotions weighed heavily upon Kat. He saw her stress in the way she dropped her head into her hands and covered her ears with her fingers. Her spine stiffened and she said softly, "*Evet simdi.*"

She was giving him permission. Even greater, she used their language, an indication that she had chosen to return fully to him, to their people. Luke felt relief and joy gathering through his veins like a brewing storm. The only thing left to do was dispose of the garbage and never look back.

"It is time, Mr. Miller, to meet your maker." Luke drew his fingers together over the constricting length of the human's throat. The unyielding cartilage protecting the windpipe gave like a sponge under Lucas' preternatural strength. Lifting Daniel from the ground, Luke let the man's legs dangle like a rag doll before exerting even more pressure. The structure in his feeble, mortal neck gave with a pop. The human thrashed, gurgled and shuddered. With wicked pleasure, Luke released the hold he had on the bastard's mind. He allowed the measly human to feel every remaining second of his life as it ebbed out of him. One last violent tremble and the oxygen supply expired, and so did the human. The man hung limply within Luke's grip.

I am still a cold blooded killer, Luke thought, as he realized nothing much had changed from his youth. There had been moments of sheer savagery that still plagued his dreams. Vengeance was a balm to the soul, and any slight to the family meant swift retribution. The warrior in him would always have blood-stained hands. From raids to male-posturing, he learned the art of meting out swift justice.

The worst of it, though, occurred when the refugees hunkered down within the rock-citadel of Uchisar in Turkey. After many long nights fleeing from their village, the females and younglings were exhausted. The ancient dwellings, caverns hewn out of volcanic rock, seemed like the safest place to seek rest. When the scouts returned with bad news, Luke and the other males prepared for the worst.

They had been followed, and their hiding place was soon discovered. The only recourse left was to annihilate the human scum. He could have killed with proficient speed, but Lucas allowed the monster within to wreak havoc until the terror-filled screams and bloodshed were emblazoned upon his soul forever.

His brother, Traian, had the emotional detachment skill nailed down. Tray dealt death quickly, without even a grimace. Lucas, on the other hand, had taken this miscreants' life the hard way. Dying by asphyxiation was a painful means of being dispatched from one's life. And still, he wanted to do even more. But Katiya needed him now, and Luke recognized that the consequences of this horror had brought them to a new avenue in their relationship, a place to start over and to continue on.

Letting the body fall to the ground, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Purposely, he dialed, punching in the number for his younger brother.

Mikhail picked up on the third ring. In a gruff and disgruntled tone, his brother growled a deeply accented, "Yeah?"

"I need your *Hibe, kardes*," Lucas didn't hide the edginess in his voice. He wanted to convey the immediacy required to clean up the mess.

"What did you do now, Lucas?"

Mikhail's sarcastic retort aggravated Luke but he ignored it, answering, "There is a very dead man here who attempted to rape and subsequently murder Katiya."

A lengthy sigh followed the declaration. After long minutes, Mikhail responded, "Usually, Tray is the one calling me for help. But if you hadn't killed the *sik kafal*, I would have gladly done it for Kat."

Luke knew Mikhail would have gone to the ends of the earth for Katiya. Any of his three brothers would have. "*Sagol*," Luke replied.

"You're welcome. Now tell me specifics. I have things going down right now, so expedience is of the utmost importance."

Luke quickly gave Mikhail their location and filled him in on all the pertinent details. Confident that his brother had this tenuous situation handled, Luke disconnected from the call and shoved the phone back into his jeans' pocket. Without a glance, he stepped over the body and strode to where Kat leaned against the wall.

The minute he got close, she launched from her position into his outstretched arms. She clung to him and he felt the way her body trembled within his embrace. "Katiya, it's over. I am going to take you home, now. Okay?"

She nodded her head and tilted her chin up to look at him. He saw anguish there, but also clarity, and it made his heart swell with love. A trickle of blood formed a crimson line over her cheek. Instinctively, he leaned near and swiped over the cut, using his tongue and the healing properties of his saliva to seal the wound. He had to forcefully pull away from the injury before his hunger welled up and out of control.

He was starving for more of her.

Not wanting to tempt the beast any further, he slanted down and covered her mouth with his. Deepening the kiss, he focused on their living room. In a flash, they were gone.

Chapter Fourteen

The howl of wind thrashing around her died down the instant they arrived. Once at their destination, Kat became inundated with a familiar scent. The combination of cinnamon and nutmeg tinged the air and drifted on currents from the heating vents. Anticipation bubbled in her stomach, increasing the nervous tension lingering from the occurrence in the alley. She kept her eyes closed for a minute longer. The spicy aroma indicated Luke must have been busy before coming to her rescue.

His strong fingers soothed circles across her spine and over the small of her back. A tremor worked its way outward to her limbs. Of its own volition, her mind replayed the myriad of horrors in the filthy alleyway and she moaned low in her throat. Daniel was dead. If Luke had somehow been too late, it could have been *her* lifeless body sprawled there, instead.

"I am sorry, Luke." She leaned against him and took in a steadying breath. It felt right, protected, and she knew she was exactly where she should be.

"No apologies," the gravelly tone of his voice belied the emotions he held in check. "It is over. I wouldn't change the outcome, for anything. You are my mate; I protect what is *mine*."

Her entire body shook with residual anxiety. Kat reached around him to steady herself. "I was so stupid. Now, Daniel is..." good Lord, *dead*, the word stuck in her throat.

His strong arm settled about her shoulders. "He won't hurt another girl again," Luke growled the declaration.

Before she could utter a question about his ominous statement, Luke tilted her chin up and placed a tender kiss on her lips. "I couldn't stand by and let him take the one motivation I wake up for each night. My life, Katiya, *you* are the reason I live. From today on, nothing comes between us. Open your eyes, baby, look at me, see my love and know you are safe in my arms, where you belong. Always."

When she finally cracked open her eyelids and saw the promise of his words, evident in the adoration shining in his gaze, Kat relaxed somewhat.

She turned her head and viewed the sprawling underground chamber. Shock worked its way from her toes and fingers, zipping through her veins and blossoming in her heart. The entire room had been transformed into a replica of the blood-rite ceremony. Complete with black candles, diffusers and Lucas' goblet. Like a signal sitting on an embroidered cloth, his ancestral dagger gleamed, the jeweled hilt twinkled in the candlelight.

Kat stepped out of his embrace and strode toward the sofa-table. He had converted it into a miniature altar. Everything resembled the actual ritual, except the other two cups were not included. Kat focused upon the singular, golden chalice and moved to stand in front of the display.

"I'll put everything away. We can do this some other time when you feel up to it." Luke came beside her and leaned over to snuff out the flame of one candle.

Kat reached across and laced her fingers about his upper arm, staying his motion. "Don't. I want to do this. Right now."

A perplexed look lined his forehead. "You have had a terrible scare, and you're

injured. The last thing you should be doing is reinstating a bond. Take a bath, get some rest, and later on, we will do this."

The hot shower sounded wonderful. No need to lie about how much she wanted to scrub every single inch of her body. She needed to remove the evidence of her foolishness. However, waiting for another time to make her bond with Lucas strong? No, she wanted to do it tonight.

"A compromise?" she asked in a soft, demure tone.

Luke crossed his arms over his chest and cocked an eyebrow. One fang scraped his bottom lip; the sight made her shiver in anticipation. Desire bloomed in her core; her pulse kicked up, eager for him to sink those sharp canines deep, scoring her flesh and giving him her life-force.

He inhaled, deep and long. Kat saw his body harden, the bulge behind the denim of his pants firm. The stormy blue-gray of his eyes swirled with a bright intensity. Rocking back on his heels, he watched her intently before letting out his breath and replying, "What compromise, Katiya?"

Two steps, and she closed the distance between them. Kat draped her hand over his shoulder. The curve of well-defined muscle pulled the dark shirt tight against his chest. Her fingers found the top button, and with a flick she undid the clasp. The next followed, and she made her way down until both sides sagged open, revealing the chiseled perfection of his abs. She trailed her fingertips over the sculpted dips and valleys until she came to the edge of his jeans. Plucking open the metal fastening, she paused before lowering the zipper. "Join me; let's shower together."

She tilted forward, leaned her cheek on the heated skin over his heart. The strong beat reassured her, made her long to get even closer. Skin to skin, nothing keeping them apart, no clothes, no problems, only the two of them sharing the intimacy. A slight shift to her right and she brushed her mouth along his midline, skimmed to the side. The desire to taste him dictated her movements. Compelled to show him exactly what she yearned for, she covered the dusky, flat disc and suckled the bud until it tightened. Little flicks of her tongue circled and teased.

"Baby, it is too soon. We can wait a little while."

A need, to entice him more, had her parting her teeth and nipping the taut skin.

"Fuck," Luke's hand reached up and grasped her hair. The way he fisted it held her immobile. She repeated her naughty bite, this time increasing the pressure.

"Bathe with me, Lucas. And we will see what happens afterward." Deliberately, she let her breath fan out over his pebbled nipple. His grip tightened and Kat reveled in the tingles rippling along her scalp. She wanted him to pull harder until the pleasure bordered on pain.

Instead, his strong arm slipped down and cradled her. The other lifted her thighs up. Lengthy steps took them across the room as he carried her through the doorway and into the sprawling master-bath.

"You remodeled?" Kat couldn't hide her surprise at the newly refurbished bathroom. Glossy, cobalt tiles of pressed glass decorated the walls around the Jacuzzi-tub situated in an alcove. The floor had an inlaid mosaic of scarlet berries surrounded by gleaming sandstone. White cabinetry perfectly offset the speckled beige granite counters.

"Do you like it?" Luke asked, and she heard the expectation in his tone. He had done this for her, as their private retreat. For a brief moment, she let her mind travel back in

time to their modest dwelling in the village. Even then, Luke had made sure she had the very best luxuries available. From running water and plumbing to electricity and other modern conveniences, Kat never had to want for anything. Her stone and wood-framed home had stunning Turkish rugs and beautiful hand-made furniture. Though none of her possessions back then compared to the estate Luke owned now. Living in Westwood meant high-end to the extremes.

"All of the faucets are Starlight chrome. The vanity has a built-in mirror and will light up with the simplest touch. I had the stool imported from Istanbul. I thought you might be fond of the Persian fabric."

Kat took in the beauty of the chamber. Every accent, the decor, the vaulted ceiling indicated a rich quality. Elegant and simply stunning, but it lacked a certain touch.

"Although there is nothing personal in here," she replied quietly.

"I was waiting for you to come home, Katiya."

She turned to face him. A quick tug of her torn shirt and she pulled it over her head. Tossing the tattered material to the floor, she grinned and replied, "First, we need a clothes-hamper."

Luke followed her lead, wrenching his shirt off his shoulders and throwing it on top of hers. "Yes, we do."

The clasp at the back of her skirt opened with a flick of her thumb. She drew it down her thighs slowly and let it pool on the floor.

Hunger for him grew incessant. She stepped out of her shoes and quickly yanked off her stockings. Her bra and panties came next.

He wore a slick pair of Assassin biker boots. Her eyes barely noticed as he loosened the ties and kicked them off with little flourish. The chains rattled as each boot hit the floor. His socks followed next.

Raising an eyebrow in challenge, she waited for Luke to shuck his jeans.

In a flash, he tore them off. Kat inspected his naked form. He was massive. The animal behind the surface of the manly physique came to the fore. Virile and completely male, he stepped closer, allowing her inspection. A hard slab of muscle set off his taut belly, the full span of his tattoo now completely revealed. Her fingertips prickled, wanting to touch the outline of the curved blade, feel the muscle clench as she traced the circular vine twined about the scythe.

Striated and well-formed, his musculature tapered down at his delineated hip bones. Supple yet dominating, his powerful body showed no weaknesses. A spattering of dark hair trailed down the ridges of his abdomen. She followed that line to the immense erection below it.

Blatant and throbbing, the hard shaft strained out from the base. He gripped it in his hand, pumped up and back, pausing at the thick crest. With the pad of his thumb stroking over the nearly purple rim, he teased the head. Kat shivered at the sight.

They stood together, totally bare. She took in a tremulous breath, anxiousness tingeing her excitement. The way he worked his cock and watched his fist move along the engorged length incited a yawning hunger within her center. A heated slickness coated the folds of her sex, beading on her thighs in obvious want of him there. She squeezed her legs together trying to curb the aching hollowness. The motion only served to increase her need. Air expelled from her lungs in a harsh gasp and she shifted, parting her legs once again.

"Lucas, I want you."

He licked his lips and stared at the swollen curves of her breasts. Her nipples puckered diamond-hard as his gaze focused on the distended tips. She felt the inspection intensely. Then, his look traveled lower to her curls. It swept down, fixed on the space below. His lips parted; she watched his chest heave in roughly as he took a deep breath.

"I want to kill him again. That fucking bastard deserves to rot in hell," Luke's hoarse curse broke the silence. He paced forward and came to stand next to her. His hand lifted as if to reach out and touch her. Instead, he moved to the vast shower and jerked open the glass door. With a hard wrench, he turned the faucet, the spray at full blast. A couple seconds later, steam drifted throughout the room.

He held out his hand and waited for her to set her palm against it. His fingers clasped hers tenderly and he drew them inside. "Let me wash you."

Kat followed him into the enclosure. The door closed with a soft clang. The massage setting hit her back, the hot water seeped into her, warming the ice that seemed to linger in her bones. Dropping her head back, she doused her hair and wet her face. She closed her eyes, let the streams run over her cheeks, her chin, and wash away the remnants of the horrible exchange in the alleyway.

A tender touch of lips caught her attention. Luke's mouth pressed to one thigh. He brushed it back and forth, slid his tongue out and soothed the ache of the bruise there. On his knees before her, his broad shoulders flexed with his movement as one arm wrapped around her hips. "I want to ease these hurts, erase them from your skin and show you gentleness. Katiya, sweetheart, I was terrified of losing you tonight."

With splayed fingers, he urged her to step outward, parting her legs wider. His hot exhalation feathered over her throbbing clit before he leaned forward and kissed the straining bud. "I need to taste you. Bring you pleasure. I surrender all of myself to you. Tonight, I will give you everything."

Kat swayed with the onslaught of sensations. His tongue slid through her folds, circled around and back before plunging inside. In response, she grasped his hair, fisted the damp strands and held him there against her. He growled and lurched up. Insistently, he sucked her pulsing flesh between mobile lips. He moved his hand higher and speared two fingers into her grasping depths.

His sucking increased, pushing her closer to the brink. The tip of his tongue lashed across her clit, dipped below with a hot, wet sweep. It melted the frost lingering in her body until it scorched a fiery path from his intimate kiss, burning through her veins and igniting an incessant yearning, a crazed longing that only he could sate.

"Lucas," she tried to speak but his sinful lips caressed along her slick core.

"Hmmm," he replied inaudibly, the hum vibrated against her pussy sending shockwaves from the contact of his mouth.

"I want more." Did she ever. 'More' didn't adequately describe the need clawing in those secret depths.

"Me too. Soon," Luke muttered as he blew out, the warm gust teasing her aching clit.

A little move and she arched into his kiss, rolling her hips and seeking the rhythm that would bring her to the pinnacle. Eager for his skilled touches to give her fulfillment, Kat shivered and leaned back. The tiles of the shower wall supported her back. The water hit her furred nipples and the hard spray teased them. Kat cried out. The dual pleasure warred for her attention and it was all too much.

"That's it, give me your sweetness."

She squirmed to the side, sensations crashing over her in turbulent waves. His hand splayed wide on her belly, pushing her back firmly and holding her still to his wicked sucking. An eruption convulsed outward, a string of contractions followed. The inner walls of her core spasmed, bore down and gripped his fingers. He pushed deeper, his mouth coaxing more from her.

"No holding back, Kat. Let go."

A twinge followed his demand. Sheer ecstasy radiated from the contact. Kat forced herself to look down at Luke, to watch him as he repeated the action. One gleaming white fang trailed over the rigid pearl of her clit, followed by the heated tip of his tongue. It was too much and Kat trembled. Luke brought his arm behind her thighs and yanked her to his mouth. Renewing his suckling, he threw her over the edge.

She screamed as the crescendo rose higher, tighter, and careened into a shimmering convulsion. Kat held on to his shoulders as the tremors flooded throughout every nerve and cell in her body.

"So good, Kat, you taste heavenly. It has been too long since I have sipped from you here." Warm, full lips pressed reverently to her swollen flesh. Kat knew he had drawn blood, just a hint, really. It had always been his desire to suckle there, savoring a hint of her essence as it mingled with her arousal.

"Let's finish our shower." He shifted and stood up fluidly. Kat couldn't stop the urge to pull him towards her. Lacing her hands about his lean waist, she tugged. Water sluiced over his sleek, corded body. Luke lifted his arms, his hands braced on the tiles beside her head and he leaned into her. The motion forced her back until she could go nowhere. Only a sliver of space separated them. She tilted her chin up and watched him, seeing the obvious love shining in his eyes. He had kept it hidden from her for such a long time.

She parted her lips, wanting to say something, anything. Before she had a chance, he bent near and covered her mouth with his, silencing her.

Chapter Fifteen

Their kiss wound its way through him, igniting a blaze of arousal the likes of which he had never before experienced. It curled in his balls, drawing them up tight. It hurt like hell pulling away from Kat when all he wanted to do was push her back to the shower-wall, lift her up, part her legs and thrust in deep.

Going for distraction, Luke picked up the bottle of bath gel. The scented cream pooled in his palm and he rubbed his hands together. Sweet almond oil and jasmine perfumed the air. He set his hands on her upper arm and worked the lather down the graceful curve to her elbow. He moved lower and soaped all the way to her hand. Stroking her fingers, he slid his thumb around the tender flesh of her inner wrist. "When you hold me with these delicate arms and touch my skin, you reach deeper and soothe the untamed being within me." He released her hand and worked the suds over her other arm.

Another capful and he used the slippery liquid, applying more to the beautiful line of her neck, the rushing pulse points of her throat. He traced the vein with his fingertip, and watched it flutter. As he pushed down, it kicked up, racing with the increase in pressure. "Here, Kat, when you allow me to take of your essence, it goes beyond capitulating. You nourish me. Only you give me life."

The sting at his gums grew relentless and he opened his mouth to allow his fangs room to elongate. Utterly famished for her, it took considerable willpower to resist leaning near and biting her, right then.

With a shudder, he turned his attention to her breasts. The silky gel bubbled up as he lathered each heavy curve. Drawing her nipple between his thumb and finger, he rolled it and plucked. It slipped through his grasp. He cradled the underside within his palm, kneading gently. "And this, Katiya, brings me pleasure, joy. I want to worship you here, always."

Kat's breath expelled from her parted lips. He bent close and captured it, drawing it deep into his lungs.

Luke released the swollen curve and traveled down her flat belly, encircled her navel. He spread his fingers and slipped lower. Through her curls, down to the tender folds at the apex there, Luke barely touched the sensitive bud. When his fingertip glanced across the protective hood above her clit, she tilted her hips, attempting to meet his questing stroke.

"Not yet. Let me finish washing you." He lifted his hand and rubbed along the length of her thigh, to her knee. Lifting her leg up, he paid special attention to her calf, ankle and foot. "These beautiful legs drive me crazy. All I have to do is imagine them wrapped about my hips, pulling me into you, and I lose my mind."

Repeating the process with her other leg, he didn't stop until he had soaped her entire body. His chest heaved at their close proximity. He ground his molars together, finding the strength to hold his need for her back by sheer determination.

"Now, time to rinse off." Luke pulled the hand-held shower nozzle out and stretched it over to her. She deserved soft and gentle, so he turned it on the mist setting. He allowed the mild spray to remove all traces of the bath soap.

After replacing the shower-head, he set to lathering her hair. She dutifully followed

his every prompt, tipping her head this way or stepping that. Her body moved sinuously, sliding against his, teasing him and inciting a painful ache in his veins. It was hunger, it was desire, it was a need that clawed at his soul; and still he refused to take. Every second that ticked by had his restraint crumbling. He wanted to give her time, while inside, the feral beast roared for him to let go and take what he craved.

All too soon, he had finished washing her. Quickly, he soaped his own body, and grasping the faucet, he jerked it to the cold water setting. In a rapid move, he doused himself, rinsing away the suds. Finally, he turned the spigot off. Outside of the shower, he had installed a rack with a warmer. Thick, terry cloth towels hung from the rod and he grabbed them. The dripping strands of her hair needed attending to first. She leaned into his chest while he dabbed at the ringlets. He removed the excess moisture and wrapped her in the heated cotton of a new towel. Slinging another around his hips, he tucked in the loose end.

Together they exited the shower. The room was hazy; a thick cloud of steam hung in the air like a cozy blanket. From the back of the door, he retrieved a pink satin robe. Silently, she let him help her into it. Depositing her towels on top of the counter, Luke smiled as she muttered about the clothes hamper again. He nodded in agreement and led her from the chamber into the great room.

Chapter Sixteen

In this room it was cooler, but the change of temperature did nothing to abate his arousal, barely covered by the scrap of terry-cloth. His cock pulsed and a fiery pain speared from the base to the tip. It nearly destroyed him to continue holding back from her.

The robe clung to her damp body as she moved from the doorway. Such long legs should be illegal. Alluring and gorgeous, they teased him with her every step. Luke hung back, watching her cross the room. Proud and determined, the only hint of her disquiet was in the way she bit down on her lower lip. She worried it, and he longed to capture her mouth in a fierce kiss so he could soothe the spot with his tongue. His hands curled into fists and he willed himself to remain where he stood. The urge to follow her grew unremitting.

She continued on, until she stood before the converted table. Her arm lifted, fingertips settled on the golden rim of his chalice. Tentatively, she trailed across the etching that decorated the cup and moved down the stem to its base.

He looked his fill, taking in the curve of her spine, the riot of curls falling about her shoulders in an amber cascade. The emerald tear drop earrings she wore twinkled in the candlelight. They drew his notice upward to her flushed cheeks. He swiftly hid his grimace at the bruise forming there. Higher still, he let his gaze roam across her lovely features. She elevated her pert little chin, pressed those full, pouty lips together. He continued upward, until their eyes met.

Luke saw no apprehension in her eyes. Only sheer determination as she shifted to the side. A slight motion followed. The next moment light flickered, glinting off the blade of his dagger. It flashed as she turned it over in her palm, examining the hilt.

"Were you nervous that first time?"

Luke heard the underlying tension in her question and wondered what she wanted to hear, and why. "I was anxious and hopeful. I had a slim chance of coming out from the ceremony mated to the most stunning female of our people."

Her lips parted and she exhaled a tight breath. "Tell me again, Lucas, about your arrival at the cathedral that night."

He hesitated, taking in the wild array of her hair framing her face, the pink blush staining her cheeks and the grip she had on the dagger. She wanted to remember the beginning of their bonding.

"Please, Lucas," the nervousness in her voice washed over him. She needed this, and by God, if hearing it again was all it took to overcome the varied obstacles between them, then he would do it.

Three steps, and he came to stand right beside her. She replaced the blade on the table and pivoted to face him. The collar of her robe gaped open in a plunging vee. It hid her breasts, but the sight made his mouth water. The slightest hint of the fullness there summoned his touch. Lifting his hand, he brushed the back of his knuckles across one full swell. Gently, he pulled the silky material taut over her chest. Puckered tight, her nipples grew stiff and hard. Overwrought with need, he couldn't stop his questing fingers and he let them play over the firm peak.

Soyle.

A tiny lilt in her tone brought out her accent when she asked for him to tell her. There had been a time when they spoke primarily in Turkish. The way their language sounded when she uttered the request did something to Luke's brain. It made him long to hear her rough demands of *siki* and *derin*. Harder, deeper, all the ways he wished to take her, merging their bodies until nothing kept them apart. Chest to breast, with their hearts beating in tandem and his arms wrapped around her, holding her to him, forever.

Slender fingers encircled his wrist, tugging him closer. She gave him an expectant look. Luke slid his thumb under her chin, bringing it up until he could stare into her eyes. They were fathomless pools of wonder and desire. He longed to fall into that hazel gaze, be submerged within her emotions. The pink tip of her tongue slid out and moistened her lower lip.

He wanted to kiss her. No, he *must* kiss her. There was not any way to stop the roaring demands shouting in his thoughts. Angling his head, he closed the distance between them and pressed his lips to hers. Warm and seeking, her mouth moved over his, devouring him. And he greedily pressed for more. Purposely, he scraped his fangs along her bottom lip to the corner, where he paused long enough to suckle.

She whispered his name, her hand fluttered along his shoulder to the nape of his neck. Her fingers speared through his hair, she squeezed a fistful and compelled him to stay. He deepened their kiss. His tongue forced her mouth to part, to take him inside. Nothing tentative about this kiss, Luke would not settle for simple. Instead, he plunged in and out, swirled across the blunt edges of her teeth.

She nipped down, restrained his motion before drawing him farther inside and sucking. A groan rumbled in his chest. Instantly, his arms snapped out, wrapped around her and hauled her forward. Embracing her, he dueled for control and won it. Everything spiraled out of control. He moved one of his hands along her side, traced the dips of her fragile ribs to her hip. With his palm, he stroked inward and cupped the firm, rounded cheek of her ass. He lifted her to him, angling her hot, sweet pussy against his raging, hard dick.

The slight friction nearly had him bursting right there. Like an inexperienced youth, his damned cock throbbed, ready to come. Engorged and sensitive, the rasping of the towel on his shaft aggravated his condition. When she arched, seeking the bulge and rubbing her core there, Luke sucked in a breath over his teeth. He clenched her hips, staying her movement. There was no way he could form a coherent thought now. But he needed to. For her sake, because she asked it of him and he had promised her anything, Luke reluctantly released her.

It took every ounce of his strength to take one step backward. He lifted his hand, touched his fingertip to the corner of her eye, running it over her cheek to her swollen bottom lip.

"Pretty Katiya." He let his hand drop and he backed up to lean against the couch. In order to keep from ripping the robe off of her and taking her to the floor, he crossed his arms over his chest. He glanced to the side where the little altar beside him held the accoutrements of their history together.

Their beginning, and soon their future.

Anxious to continue with their loving, Luke decided on a fast retelling. But when he opened his mouth to speak, she held up her hand, forestalling him.

"Don't skimp."

Shaking his head, one side of his mouth quirked up and he teased, "Minx."

She smiled at him and a moue formed on her mouth. It looked sexy as hell and made his dick rock-hard. He envisioned sliding the bulging crest past those glistening, full lips, liquid heat enveloping him. Digging his fingers into his biceps, he cursed and wrenched his thoughts from the sensual imagery.

"It was just after dusk. The orange glow of the sunset hovered between the mountain peak and our village. It washed the stones of the cobbled pathway in a dusky hue. Like a beacon, Kat, leading me to my destiny. Before I could step inside, Sevastian arrived. Cocky as hell and grinning ear to ear, he proceeded to declare his goblet would be the one you'd chose. Rage took over. Right there, before the doors of the chapel, I hauled back and nailed him with my fist, right into his gut. Nearly broke my hand, too. Hard bastard."

Kat tried to hide her smile but failed, and Luke decided next time he saw Vastian he would punch him again. Possessive male dominance flared to life. He swallowed it back and continued on. "One of the Elders came rushing outside; he coaxed us into behaving. We waited for Kaisen to arrive. I didn't like my competition. Vastian is too harsh, and soft little Katiya needed someone like me to adore her. Kai worried me. Too damn secretive, great in a fight, but hell, those eyes of his are haunting."

Katiya reached over and cupped his chin, silencing him. She bit the inside of her cheek and tilted her head, inspecting his face. "Good thing I picked the one I did." A tentative step brought her in front of him. Both palms pressed against his jaw, her thumbs caressing over the rough stubble there. "Then what happened?"

She was so close, he could smell the arousal pooling in her body and growing with intensity by the second. The sensual perfume filled the air; he drew it deep into his lungs and let it ride through his veins, whipping his lust into a gathering tempest.

"Luke?"

Affectionately, she trailed her thumb along his jaw, higher to his lips. The touch drove him insane. He caught her hand, held it there. Lashing the pad of her finger with the tip of his tongue, he selfishly drew it into his mouth and sucked, rasped, finally nipped her. A tiny droplet of blood formed there. He swallowed it hungrily, a moan rumbled in his throat at the ambrosia of her taste.

With a pop, she tugged it free and gave him a cheeky grin.

In a hurry now, he continued with the reminiscence. Luke turned to the sofa-table and pointed to his goblet. "We were led to the front of the sanctuary. Kai went first. He didn't even pause when they told him to slice into his wrist. I'm telling you, Katiya, not a flicker of emotion or pain. He was all business. Vastian was next for the bleeding. He held himself rigid as a board the whole time, and the minute they told him it was enough, he sealed his wound and backed up into the shadowed alcove. It was my turn to face the obligation. I moved to stand before the altar and I prayed, Kat. I whispered my deepest desires and asked that you would be mine. Then, I lifted my blade and..."

The cold, steel hilt of the same dagger slid into his palm. Luke stopped speaking and stared down at the weapon.

"Do it, Lucas. Right now." Her voice tight with emotion, she added, "Just like the first time."

But he shook his head, turned the blade over in his hand and held the handle to her. "No, Kat. This time you do it."

She trembled as she retrieved it. Luke flipped his arm over, exposing the vulnerable, inner flesh for her to cut. "Right there, baby, across my wrist."

Visibly shaking now, she raised the point of the sharp edge and set it upon his skin. A shudder gripped her and she nearly let the dagger slip from her grasp. Luke reached over and covered her hand with his, guiding her to him. "Don't be afraid; the pain is nothing compared to the significance of the act." A little move brought their conjoined hands closer to the altar so he could spill the fluid into his goblet the second she pierced him.

"Do it, Katiya."

A sting followed as the pointed tip pricked down, but it wasn't enough to open up the vein. With a little bit of force, he pushed her hand downward but she resisted. Indecision flickered in her stare and Luke had enough of the waiting.

"Now, cut me now, before I lose control for want of your claiming." Not letting her retreat one inch, he kept her grip on the handle. The moment she sliced deep, the tearing sting ripped up his arm.

"Fuck, yes. That's it, baby. Now, the goblet."

The weapon clanked to the floor. Luke focused on her. Eyes wide, her parted lips and shallow inhalations did nothing to prepare him for what she was going to do next.

"No, Lucas. Not this time." Instead of holding the golden cup beneath his hand to capture the scarlet beads running off his wrist, she grasped his arm and lifted it to her mouth.

She began to suckle, one swallow, then another. Teetering to the side, her legs trembled and she staggered with the powerful onslaught of his essence. The clasp of her fingers tightened as she took more of him in. Not wanting Kat to lose balance, he reached around her and pressed her against his chest. With his free hand, he stroked through her hair, down her back.

"More, oh Luke, you taste so good. So right." The swipe of her tongue sent a bolt of heat tearing through him. Nips of her teeth made him squirm. She sucked hard, and an explosion of sensation detonated at the base of his cock. Pulsating, rigid, the throbbing shaft hurt so damn bad. He wanted her sucking him there, passionately and greedily.

"Take as much as you want, it is yours." Luke cradled her in his embrace, letting her have her fill. It was all he could do to resist throwing her down, covering her with his body and thrusting in deep, claiming her secret depths.

A moment later, she released his wrist and glanced up at him. "You better seal that."

Both his eyebrows rose in an unspoken question, but she remained silent. He hastily did as she bade and asked, "Why did you stop?"

A saucy, eager smile lifted her lips. "Because I want something more."

Before he could ask what, she wrenched the towel off his hips and tossed it away. He was mindless of where it landed because she shrugged out of the robe and slipped to the floor on her knees in front of him. Wet lips encircled the aching crest of his erection and his entire focus fractured, splintering like shards of glass. Fingers worked along his length, from the base upward. With her tongue, she laved the sensitive slit, dropped down and trailed the damp tip about the engorged head. She opened her mouth wide, took him inside and sucked.

"Fuck, baby, so good," he crooned and his hand gripped her damp hair, directing her forward. "Relax, take a little more." Her cheeks hollowed as her throat worked against his

thrusts. The sharp twinge of her teeth biting down made him gasp out her name. She repeated the motion with more pressure. After bringing her hand below, she massaged the tight spheres underneath. With her thumb trailing across the unyielding flesh, she pressed in deep. Luke shuddered as a burst of red-hot fire ricocheted up to the base of his erection.

Her rhythm increased and sweat beaded on his forehead. Jaws clenched, teeth grinding together, he could do nothing to stop his fangs from punching out of his gums. Thirst welled up inside him and Luke didn't know which to sate first. Her mouth burned his cock, sinful licks and insistent suckling tossed him over the edge. "Sweet Kat, you have to stop. I am not going to have the strength to hold back much longer."

A slight shake of her head and she tipped it back to look at him. "No," she spoke around his dick pausing long enough to draw the swollen length through her grasp. Up and back, she pumped him, "Give it to me, Luke. Don't keep anything from me." Leaning down, she captured the nearly purple crown between her lips. Using the tip of her tongue, she flicked over the peak. Those scorching, eager lashes provoked his need until all he could think of was his impending release.

Kat lurched up, a smooth impalement, taking him deep and keening as the fullness claimed the inner recesses of her mouth.

His restraint shattered. "Open then, take it all the way. I am going to fuck your mouth. Oh yeah, Katiya, just like that. Lick it, slow, tease me. Make me burn for you."

Pulses raced up the shaft, the scalding heat of his seed collected low at the bottom. Kat held him in both hands and worked the entire length. She pitched forward, suckled him to her throat, and swallowed. The friction destroyed him.

"It's almost there, suck harder."

Kat's grip tightened, her lips parting for his broad width while her tongue rasped. The scorching jets rushed upward, burning him in their wake. He tried to pull away from her but her unyielding clasp kept him right where he was. His hand cupped the arch of her neck, keeping her there, while his hips flexed. He threw his head back with a guttural shout as his release barreled out of him. It tore at his soul, ripped his restraint to shreds and loosed the beast.

A growl tore from his chest as he lifted her and carried her into the other room. Luke dropped Kat on the bed, covered her body with his. Dominant, possessive and utterly carnal, the primal need shattered his control and demanded satiation. His thighs pressed her legs open and he slid upward, deliberately dragging his chest against her swollen, firm breasts. The sweet sound of her gasp at the contact wound him even tighter. Pushing up on his palms, he stared down at her, taking in this female, his mate; and he knew from that moment on, nothing would ever part them again.

"I am beyond starving, baby. I need your vein now, before I am crazy with delirium and my hunger hurts you," he ground out roughly, not willing to force her in any manner.

She turned her head, showing him the beautiful line of her throat. "Take it then, *kavalye*."

With a roar, Luke arched toward her, parted his lips and moved to her rushing pulse-points. "I love you, Katiya." That hoarse declaration took the last of his strength. In one quick strike his fangs sank deep, slicing through the soft skin protecting her racing artery. He latched on and drew her essence into his mouth. Exhilarating, potent, utterly sweet, her blood hit his tongue and he was lost. So far gone, nothing could stop him from taking

more.

Chapter Seventeen

A stab of pain followed the powerful bite. Kat squirmed underneath Luke, trying to get closer. Each second passed like an eternity, and still he resisted moving against her pussy. A tentative touch of his rigid cock sliding across her slick folds made Kat part her thighs wider. She lifted her hips, rolled them and attempted to push him inside. He pulled back, and the loss of contact made her tremble in need.

The wet sucking of his mouth ceased. She knew he hadn't finished and she looked at him to see why he had stopped. When she tipped her chin to the side and dared a glance at him, a shiver raced down her spine. His lips pulled taut over his fangs. The gleaming white canines looked wicked, foreboding. He licked his bottom lip, sweeping off the remnants of her blood.

"Luke, please," she managed to choke out.

"Not yet, baby, first you need more of me." With a fluid move, he brought his arm up and turned it over. The slash there had almost healed. She watched him yank his hand to his mouth and he caught his wrist between his teeth. With a low growl, he bit down and reopened the wound.

"Drink, Kat. Sip from me again. Let my nature flow through your veins until you're burning up in want of me, here." He flexed his hips and pushed the blunt head of his erection across the opening between her sex. She nearly panted at that brief touch and moaned with the sensual slide and retreat.

Rich, red beads formed at the cut and she stared at it, focusing on him. He kept his arm motionless until the droplets trickled over the side.

Open your mouth.

The silent command caressed through her thoughts. She exhaled slowly, anticipating the potency of his taste. With her lips parted, she tracked the crimson trail as it rolled off his arm and dripped down. The first drop burst on her tongue and her taste buds flared to life.

"Wait, don't swallow yet. Let it gather, like a heady wine. The longer you resist swallowing, the more intoxicating it will be." The gravelly tone of his voice deepened, "You are going to crave me like I do you."

In a fluid move he flipped his hand, hovering it over her mouth. She arched and lifted off the pillow, bringing her lips to the wound.

Now, baby. Luke's mental communication was a forceful demand. He settled the hot flesh against the seam of her lips.

Not pausing for her acquiescence, he slid his other hand behind her neck, gripped it and lifted her up to his waiting mouth.

A slight prick of his fangs, and the vein at her throat split again. She couldn't hold back, and joined him in the drinking. She latched on, took in a spicy mouthful and gulped it down in desperation. It lit up every cell, a blazing inferno whipping through her. Like the most potent aphrodisiac, the flames grew unbearable, blazing the way from her fingers and toes inward. The storm gathered, coiling in her belly. She swallowed again, his essence sliding down her throat. It set each nerve aflame in its wake. Her nipples pebbled utterly taut; it was almost agonizing.

He suckled at her vein, taking more of her in. She reached around him, her fingers fluttering along his ribs to the broad expanse of his shoulders. The muscles bunched underneath her fingertips and she traced an intricate pattern with her nail across his spine. When he groaned, it rumbled in his chest; she added more pressure.

He rewarded her by bearing down and biting harder. She yanked him against her and clawed his back, forcing him to cover her body fully with his. Spreading her legs wide, she tilted her hips and sought out his rock-hard shaft.

The flared head nudged in and retreated. With her knees gripping his sides, she tried to force him there, into the hollowness now pulsing with a chaotic beat. It clamored for him to spear within the tight walls, all the way to her womb. She rocked sideways, undulated her pelvis, rising up to meet his inflexible length. He remained seated a sliver of an inch between her grasping muscles. It was pure torture. His resistance drove her insane and she wanted it to stop. She needed him to let go.

Opening her mouth wide, she skimmed her lips to the soft pad of flesh below his thumb. She bit down, hard.

"Fuck," Luke cursed as he pulled away from her throat. He threw back his head, and squeezed his eyes shut. Shallow breaths wrenched from his lungs. With the tip of her incisors, she nipped in warning. Exerting more pressure and biting him harder, Kat nearly lost her hold when he lurched forward with a roar.

"Give me everything, I want it all. Now!" The thick broad head of his erection barreled through her core. She jerked, a low wail tearing out of her as his hot, engorged shaft parted the quivering walls and surged within.

A yank of his arm and she released her grasp. Both of his hands shoved underneath her. "More. Deeper. God, Katiya, take every fucking inch of my cock." He cupped her ass in his palms and raised her upward, angling her perfectly to accept his harsh, frenzied plunging.

He slammed into her over and over, all the way to the hilt. The friction rubbed enticingly across her clit and little explosions rippled from the contact. He worked his dick farther inside, rolled his pelvis and circled. The swollen crest brushed against the hidden bundle of nerves high up inside her. An array of commotion fired off in rapid succession. It zipped through her, streaking like lightning. Electrical pulses traveled along nerve endings and banded together. Each brush of his chest across her breasts ratcheted up the intensity. It wound her nipples into tight peaks. She choked on a sob at the constant barrage of sensation.

Kat tried to breath, writhing underneath him. Crossing her calves over the small of his back, she held him to her. Urgently she lifted her hips, dragging her sensitive little bud in time with his thrusts. Every pass worked her closer to the precipice of sheer ecstasy. Her body jolted at the contact and she gritted her teeth together to silence the breathy moans.

"Don't you dare hold back from me," Luke declared hoarsely. In a quick move, he withdrew from her. With a tug, he pulled her legs from behind him. Now sitting back on his heels, he spread her thighs wide and stared at the apex there. "Gorgeous. Your pussy is swollen and glistening. I want to bury myself in you, move in as far as I can go. So there is nothing separating us, no distance, no issues, nothing but you and me, baby." Luke inhaled, staring at her and spoke directly into her mind, *Think of nothing except me taking you.*

He urged her legs forward, bending them at the knees. Pushing towards her belly, he grasped both ankles with one hand. The other skated across her core, one finger dipping inside. She couldn't see his movement but the next instant sharp, fiery bolts streaked outward from her rigid clit. He flicked her again, and took the straining flesh between his fingers. To increase the pressure, he rolled it until Kat thrashed about on the bed.

Hollow and empty, she sought a deeper touch. "Luke, I need you inside me."

In response to her plea, he thrust two fingers past her quivering folds. She clamped down on him, holding him within. A quick twist of his wrist and he curved his fingers. He ran them up and down. Kat whimpered, and he tapped the spot with his fingertip. She came apart, squirming at the sensual caress over hidden nerves.

"Lucas, take me now," Kat demanded with an impatient keening.

"You want it, baby?" His fingers played, petted. "You want me right here, my hard cock pumping in and out?"

Kat nodded, she couldn't manage a coherent, audible reply and instead she replied with a silent entreaty, *Yes, Lucas, please.*

"I am even harder than before, Kat. Aching for you, the damn head is so inflamed, it is killing me; I am about to burst. When I get in you this time, there is no turning back. I am not going to stop until I make you come. I want your wet cream soaking my dick. You gonna give it to me, sweetheart?"

She didn't reply, could not say even one word. Instead, she reached out and grasped his wrist, heaving him to her. A second passed and his fingers curled around her thighs, pressing them together and to the side.

"Oh yeah, just like that," Luke groaned and it rumbled almost like a growl.

The thick head brushed her slit, pushed in. A shiver ricocheted out from the invasion and she bore down on the broad crest. He flexed his hips, rolled them, and she fought against the restraining hold he had on her leg, wanting to bring him farther inside.

Luke leaned forward, captured her mouth in a heated kiss. It whipped like gale force winds through her, rebounding in her belly. When he pulled back, she saw his fangs elongate sharply from his gums. All his features contorted, his eyes glowing in warning. She knew then, in her heart, that this time would end in their culmination. They had shared blood, their bodies, and now Luke intended to merge their souls.

Nothing would keep them apart, ever again.

With a shout, he surged forward, impaling his cock against her womb. She whimpered, the invasion stretching her inner core. Full, she was filled completely with his unyielding length.

Then, he moved, and her world spiraled out of control. She clung to him, holding on to his biceps. The muscle rippled beneath her palm; she dug her nails in, anchoring herself in place. He flowed over her, within her. She shuddered and he heaved upward, retreated, surging inside again.

There, baby, Luke reassured in a silent communication. He rocked into her, flexed his pelvis and rotated.

"Luke, harder," she cried his name with her plea. Near to begging, she shifted, seeking more of him. He lurched with his rhythm, the slap of skin against skin echoed in the chamber. A bead of sweat formed on his throat and rolled down the midline there. It fell from his collarbone and dripped on her breast. So hot, it left a trail of simmering, wet heat in its path.

He moved harshly, buried to the hilt. "You are like a fucking vise, Katiya. A silken fist capturing my dick and holding it inside you; I never want to leave. It is heaven."

She thrashed her head, arching her spine, thrusting her breasts up, enticing him further.

Lucas, finish the bond. She offered herself to his every need.

Luke roared; the sound split the air and reverberated through her, zooming to her pussy. It blossomed, as moisture seeped from the confines and drenched where they were joined. When it spilled from her, he took the advantage, thrusting inside. A spasm rippled around his thick shaft. The aggressive drives upward increased; they were desperate and hard, pounding into her.

His hips jerked and brilliant pleasure speared to her clit, setting off a detonation of sensation.

In an erratic motion, he forced her legs to part. He brought her thighs up to his sides and squeezed them to him. Right away, she realized his intent and gripped him firmly. One arm reached under her and tilted her forward, angling her perfectly for his deeper penetration. The other hand splayed over the roundness of her breast. He cupped the tender flesh, lifting it in his grasp. Flicking his thumb over the nipple, he circled until the tingling grew into a relentless throb. *Baby, you ready?*

She met his gaze, saw the promise in his eyes and knew that it was time. The moment had come for them to complete the act. *Yes, kavalye. Do it.*

He didn't wait for her to offer; once she spoke within his thoughts, calling him her mate and telling him she was ready, he leaned near and captured her breast with his mouth. One gentle kiss, followed by a soothing lick and his teeth parted. His fangs scored through her flesh, latched on with a fierce animalistic bite.

A high pitched shout wrenched from her. Once he sank his teeth in, a stinging burn followed. Suddenly the storm in her veins detonated, shimmering and rippling with powerful vibrations. They rocketed all the way through her, spiraling out of control. She needed to get closer, and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him to her. One hand speared up into the nape of his raven black hair, gripped tightly, fisting the strands. *Don't stop, Luke.* She cried, pleading with him to give her more.

Never, Katiya. You are mine, he declared silently, the primal statement of ownership resounded in her head. It was right, perfect, and she knew it completed her.

Elevating her pelvis, she swayed into his thrusts. The tension in her womb ratcheted up, spasms congregated in the quavering muscles squeezing him and holding him deep.

Luke slammed into her, within her. She felt the throbbing beat along the underside of his shaft. When he ripped his mouth away, his lips slick with moisture, Kat trembled in his embrace.

"Now, Katiya. Fucking come with me now!" he shouted in a primitive snarl. The hand beneath her pressed up and slanted her for his impaling strokes. A whirlwind overtook her. It tossed her off the cliff, a free-fall straight to paradise. Radiant heat surged within her veins, pooled low in her core. The tension gave, exploding with a sparkling ray of white-hot light.

She clung to him, sweat-coated and shivering. He pumped into her, spreading his hand wide over her ass and forcing her to take him. His cock jolted. Heated streams of his seed spurted out of the bloated tip. Each pulse washed her inner depths with his very nature, marking her as his.

He swelled within her, the vein on the underside of his erection pulsated. The hard contractions ignited another release inside the deepest part of her. She let her head fall back on the pillow, giving in to the tremors. It took her higher, farther, until she was flying.

Everything ceased to exist but them. She belonged right there, in his arms. And from that moment on, she knew with every beat of her heart that it was where she would stay. Forever.

Chapter Eighteen

He held her in a tight embrace, marveling at the emotions swirling deep inside of him. Too much had happened today. The fear of losing her to a human's seductive charms had quickly derailed, turning into a circumstance of terror. If he hadn't found her in time, the results would have been horrendous.

"Stop thinking about it, Lucas." She snuggled closer to him. Her cheek rested on his chest directly above his heart. A little vibration followed and Luke's lips tipped up in a grin. She was humming. Damn, he loved the sweet sound of her satisfaction. Every single barrier between them had disintegrated. They were going to start anew. This night had been the rebirth of their bond. Luke realized, from now on, Katiya came first and foremost in his thoughts.

The long strands of her hair blanketed his arm. He reached over, running his fingers through the thick waves. *I love your hair like this*, he whispered softly into her mind. He took a fistful and tugged. The pressure made her tip her head up and when she did, he met her impish stare.

"You manipulated me?" Though her statement was one of disbelief, her tone held a hint of amusement.

He chuckled at the mischievous glint in Katiya's eyes. One of her eyebrows quirked up and she shifted. The warmth of her palm on his hypersensitive skin sent shivers of warmth racing from her touch. Luke ignored the growing arousal, needing instead to explain to her about many things.

"You barricaded your mind from me. How else could I achieve my desires without you knowing?" He smiled, and the pinch of his fangs on his lower lip reminded him that his hunger for her had yet to abate. "I figured you would do the exact opposite of my requests. You are a stubborn female, Kat." His smile faded. In all seriousness he added, *And, I love that about you.*

She sat up and gracefully turned to face him. One of her arms rested on his abdomen, supporting her. The curve of her breast brushed against his ribs. A little shift of her legs and she bent them to the side. Her eyelids fluttered, the sweep of thick lashes drooped down and veiled her gaze from him. A playful smirk tugged at her beautiful, kiss-swollen lips.

"Katiya?" Luke stilled, let his mind reach out and enter her thoughts, *What are you thinking?*

She moved quickly, bringing her hand up and flicking her fingers across his nipple. "You like those flannel pajamas?" The disbelief in her tone matched the bewildered expression on her face.

Luke reached over and captured her hand before she could pinch him in a playful punishment for his response. "No, those I can't stand. They are doomed for the dust-rag pile."

The other elegantly arched eyebrow quirked up like the first, but then she narrowed her stare on him, in an obvious challenge. The look was sexy as hell. It made him want to roll her over onto her belly, run his hand up her spine to her shoulder, restraining her. He wanted to show her the ferocity of his claiming, the wild dominance simmering in his

veins.

What do you want me to wear to our bed? The pink tip of her tongue slid out, trailed over her teeth.

Luke groaned at the sight, recalling her hungry licks followed by her determined bites. *Baby, I don't want you to wear a damn thing.*

"Nothing?" The sensual reply was throaty and did not hide her growing excitement. Luke yanked her arm forward until they were face-to-face and only an inch separated them.

"Yes, Kat, I don't want anything to cover you. I will rip it off and tear it to shreds. Nothing comes between us, anymore. No secrets, no anger and no flimsy clothes. Come to me as you are. Beautiful, passionate and totally exposed; I promise to do the same."

Swiftly, he caught her chin within his fingertips and drew her head back. Skimming his mouth down the pulse points there, he inhaled and reveled in the jasmine perfume of her skin combined with the heady scent of her rushing blood. Her heart rate kicked up with his close proximity. He waited, unmoving, and she squirmed to get closer.

Yes, Kat. That's right. I will take you again. Soon. He pressed his lips to the spot, dragging them upward to her jaw where he placed tender kisses. After a teasing nip, he drew the flesh into his mouth and sucked.

She made the prettiest keening sound, and Luke pulled her forward. He covered her mouth and deepened the kiss. She jerked and her arms encircled his shoulders, holding him to her.

Abruptly, he pulled away and looked at her passion-clouded eyes. "We have a lot to talk about, Katiya. Things we need to discuss."

A vehement shake of her head silenced Luke. *What is it?*

The light touch of her fingers playing with the strands of his hair grew rougher, demanding. Luke clenched his jaw and tried to listen to her over the roaring thirst growing by the moment.

"I was wrong to run away; I should have stayed and worked it out with you. But I've learned who I am and what I want now." Her hand stopped sifting through the ebony strands, fluttered along his neck across his shoulder blade to the muscle of his arm. She squeezed; it felt possessive, and Luke tensed with the pinprick of her nails.

He caressed his free hand over her elbow, down to her wrist and covered her hand with his palm. *Go on, Kat.*

"I can't be your puppet-on-a-string, Lucas. Yes, I am your lover, your partner, and your blood-mate. There is no way I can pretend I'm merely human. I am a bonded female. And I love my mate. Just respect me, Luke, and that is all I need to go on from here."

Pulling her hand away, he brought it up to his mouth and kissed the inner skin of her wrist. "You have it, Kat. But I need to protect you, cherish you, and part of that is instinct. It is primal, and it is what I am. You are mine. I won't allow anything, or anyone for that matter, to come between us ever again."

To prove his point, Luke parted his lips and latched on to her skin. His fangs scored through the barrier and her sweet, hot blood hit his tongue. With a groan, he sucked hard, drawing more of her in and swallowing it hungrily down.

The hoarse declaration of his name echoed in his mind. Luke slanted his head to look directly at her. While he took more of her in, he pushed into her thoughts. *It's time, baby. I don't want to wait any longer to have you again.*

Her eyes sparkled with desire, heat washed over her cheeks and tight breaths lifted her breasts up with each excited inhalation. "You have me, *kavalye*, always."

She leaned close, her swollen nipples rubbing against his own pebbled flesh. "Now take me, Luke, just like you are imagining." Their mouths touched, tongues danced and the simmering fire burned hotter, flaring bright between them.

No more holding back, Lucas. Do it.

With a triumphant shout, Luke did not hesitate. The pillows scattered, one falling on the floor. Their comforter bunched up, and with an impatient tug Luke yanked it away. Eager to have Kat again, he rolled her over to lie on her belly and he moved above her. One hard, penetrating thrust and he merged their bodies together. Powerful and demanding, he took them farther. Tides of ecstasy washed over him and he wanted closer, needed closer.

His arm slid under her and drew her up. Eagerly her back curved into his chest, seeking the same close touch. He was lost now to her, to their hunger. Silence reigned all about them, but within the privacy of their thoughts, he told her everything.

His love for her was utterly boundless, his desire flying out of control. She replied into his mind, confirming the same and reassuring him that she was right where she should be, safe in his arms.

Higher and higher he took them. With each penetration, he united their hearts for eternity.

As their loving spiraled into a deep, soul-rending climax, his passion collided with hers and she surrender to his frantic, dominant claiming.

It was right, perfect, and Luke knew it was the beginning of their new life.

Together.

For always.

The End

About the Author:

Christa Paige started her writing career as a critique partner for aspiring authors. Prompted by the crit-group to attempt writing her own, she embarked on the fascinating journey of being a novelist. She has a passion for the paranormal genre and decided to create a unique twist on vampire lore.

A Southern California native, she is happily married to her very own alpha male. Together, they restore classic cars and often go RV-ing. When she isn't writing, she is a busy mother of two little girls. Her days are spent home-schooling. At night, she continues working on her contemporary and paranormal series. For more about Christa, visit her website www.christapaige.com.

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