



**Lyric's Gift**

Gray Falls Trilogy

Trina M. Lee

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## **Blurb**

Psychic burlesque dancer, Lyric Morrison, can't believe she was attacked on the street and a vampire came to her rescue. Jade is enchanted the moment he lays eyes on her, but a dark past prevents him from letting himself love a human woman after centuries of walking alone. Though he is drawn to Lyric, he doesn't trust himself or his eternal bloodlust.

When Lyric has a vision that Jade may become endangered, she goes out of her way to reunite with him. Unable to get her off his mind, he is overjoyed to learn that she is looking for him. However, somebody else is also seeking him out with a serious need for vengeance. Can Jade finally let go and learn to love again, without fear?

## **Dedication**

To my mom, Denise.

## Chapter One

It was quiet. Too quiet. Not a dry autumn leaf crinkled nor a dog barked. The cold night stood in near silence. How deceitful. Beneath the stark illusion lay a world of darkness where things grew and pulsed, thriving on horrors and death. Creatures from the expected to the impossible nightmare existed solely to extinguish life and love.

Blood thirsty and exhausted, Jade Kenyan walked in shadow. Alone, for tonight anyway. He was growing bored with the women that he'd begun using to fill the empty space at his side. They did nothing to soothe the real longing, the pain of so many years. On this night, more than any other, the ache of several long decades cut him so much deeper; another year had passed already since he'd last mourned the anniversary of the death of his wife.

Tonight he hunted without care. He stalked the streets of Gray Falls with only one thing on his mind now: an easy kill that no one would miss. Plenty of those were on this side of the city. It was just a matter of singling one out.

Cars continued to pass by but no longer in droves like during the peak hours.

Jade tried to blend in with the few people walking down the street. Nobody cared enough looked twice at him anyway. Long hair tied back neatly, well dressed in a black Italian suit, he looked like one of many men who worked in the business district ten blocks away. They often strolled for a little after-hour's action from the girls on the strip. In no time at all, he should be satisfying the bloodlust, if nothing else.

A few working girls called to him before Jade spotted the one he wanted. After only a moment, Jade realized that she wasn't a working girl at all. Rather, she appeared to be waiting for the bus. He slowed his pace and pretended to check his phone. He wanted a better look at the raven-haired woman half a block away.

What was she doing out here so late if not working? Most women out after midnight in this end of town were looking for trouble of one kind or another.

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Lyric Morrison dug her cell phone out of her bag and double-checked the time. If she'd missed the last bus, she was screwed. This was the last time she agreed to accept payment by check; she doubted that she had enough cash on her to take a cab home. She hated being out alone like this, but her car had recently died so public transit had become the temporary alternative.

She should have caught a ride home with one of the other dancers. Maybe she should try Storm again and pray for an answer. She'd already left two messages. If anything, her friend had gone to one of her noisy, late-night hangouts. The music would be too loud to hear her cell phone. Why couldn't she just use vibrate like everybody else?

Lyric searched for a cigarette, discovering an empty pack. Well, she was trying to quit anyway.

Cursing, she redialed her friend. No luck and still no bus.

Shit! People were walking toward her. *No big deal*, she told herself. *It's cool*.

Pulling her long, faux-fur coat tightly around her, she worried that the five-inch stilettos made her look as if she was out to turn tricks. Lyric was actually a well-trained burlesque dancer. She was in this part of town only because she and the girls had

performed at a birthday party for a rich, aging millionaire.

Something didn't feel right. She watched the people nearby suspiciously. For Lyric, being psychic didn't mean being able to know everything about everyone, but her visions did occasionally give her substantial insight.

A man in an expensive suit lingered half a block away. Tall, dark and handsome. Her gaze lingered on him. Probably on the prowl for what he wasn't getting at home. A couple had turned off down another street, and the atmosphere seemed to grow cold. Another man, much closer, seemed to be fumbling with something in his pocket. A gun?

His eyes were fixed on her, and his lips moved, but the sound he produced was slurred and inaudible. Lyric watched him, frozen. She saw it then as the vision flashed before her eyes. The glint of the knife as it sliced through the air to bury itself fatally in her abdomen. The drug fiend was out to rob what he thought to be a prostitute with a few bucks in her purse.

The man charged her suddenly, and she threw her hands up to ward off the blow. The knife was there in his hand, but he didn't swing. Reeking of cheap booze and days old sweat, he groped wildly for her bag.

Lyric tried unsuccessfully to defend herself, balancing precariously on her impossible shoes. Fully expecting a blow from the blade that glittered in the streetlight, she'd barely gotten a scream out when her attacker was snatched away.

The man in the suit, his eyes glowing with a feral light, held her attacker immobile. With the unmistakable snap of bone, the man was disarmed. Her rescuer silenced the resulting pained howl with a hand, dragging him into the shadows between two buildings.

Lyric stared open-mouthed into the shadows. Vampire. Gasping to catch her breath, she could only shake her head. As a true psychic, she'd learned to identify vampires early on. Those with supernatural abilities could often sense one another. The gift had run in the women of her family for generations, each of them possessing something uniquely her own. Lyric's abilities encompassed spontaneous visions of the future.

She hadn't felt him as a vampire at first. He must naturally shield hard, which one had to when possessing any kind of mental capabilities of the sixth sense. However, the fact that she'd had no sense of him whatsoever meant he was certainly a powerful one.

He was incredibly handsome. She had never seen a man with such amazing hair: the deepest brown and just past shoulder length. Common sense told her to run, but something else made her stay. She strained for a better look into the dark, asking herself what the hell she was doing.

Her eyes focused on the moving shapes beyond the street front. The vampire fed voraciously. There was a strangled groan and then silence. Lyric couldn't tear her eyes away from the shadows. She would be damned if that bus showed up now.

It felt like ages before the vampire stepped into the glow of the street light. He had not even a hair out of place. Green eyes rimmed in gold met Lyric's uneasy gaze. If he came for her, there wasn't much she could do.

"Are you ok?" The vampire asked. He held a hand out to her, as if he were harmless. She didn't budge.

Looking into her storm-colored eyes, he wore a solemn expression. It struck Lyric as strange, but she was inexplicably drawn to the shadows that danced behind his eyes.

She was shielding so tight that she knew he couldn't help but be even more aware of her. She was a gifted human, rarer than the average fortuneteller would have you think.

"I'm fine, thank you." Her voice was soft and breathy as she studied him. "You just saved my life."

"What are you doing out here alone? This isn't the street you want to be walking after dark." He was careful not to address her statement, as if he was nobody's hero.

"I know," she replied, shivering in the cooling night air. "I just did a show. I'm a dancer. A trained burlesque dancer, not a triple x dancer." She was adamant about the kind of dance she did. It was artistic and took a lot of training and hard work. Nudity was brief and minimal at best. "I didn't think I'd get stuck out here. My damn car just broke down. Last import I'll ever buy."

"I think you missed the bus." He looked up and down the street. Only a few cars went by. The night was dying down.

"Yeah, that figures." She glanced up and down the street uselessly. Strangely, she didn't feel so afraid anymore.

"Do you live far? Why don't you let me get you a taxi?"

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that." She protested.

His eyes barely left her ruby red lips. He watched her with a transfixed look. She knew that her jet-black hair and those bad-girl heels invited him to guess what was beneath the faux-fur coat. Desperately, she began to punch numbers into her cell phone.

"You didn't ask. And really, it's nothing ... Just to ensure you get home safely."

Though everything about what he said was genuine, Lyric couldn't resist teasing. "Your gesture is appreciated Mr. ... Vampire, but how am I to be sure I won't be your next midnight snack?"

He gave her a look of obvious surprise. He apparently hadn't expected her to recognize him for what he was.

"Why don't you tell me?" he asked. There was no mistaking his meaning. She wouldn't have expected a vampire not to know that she had metaphysical abilities. However, a level of safety lay in the fact that he could not know the extent of her ability, unless he chose to test her.

She knew damn well this creature had just killed a man in cold blood. Still, it wasn't the first nor would it be the last murder she'd witnessed; her link to the supernatural world had resulted in many such incidents. Perhaps his chivalry didn't work quite right for the human world, but he had saved her, and having only that to base her decision on, she slipped her phone back into her bag.

"Thank you. I will gladly and gratefully accept a taxi ride home." She now offered him her hand. "I'm Lyric."

"Jade Kenyan," he said, accepting her offered hand gently, as if it were made of fragile glass. "I'm incredibly pleased to meet you, Lyric. That is a beautiful name. Your mother must have been a singer."

"She was," Lyric nodded. "She was a flower child of the sixties. To this day she claims to have jammed with Hendrix."

She laughed then and pulled her hand away. Jade's touch was just too warm and inviting. He was nothing but a stranger to her. He chuckled along with her but reacted subtly to her sudden change in demeanor.

"I'd better be going," Lyric glanced down the street, looking for the glow of an approaching taxi. "If you'd like to give me a way to reach you, I'd like to pay you back. At least for the cab." She doubted there was any way of thanking him for her life.

Jade raised a hand to flag down the next cab to come down the block. As it eased up to the curb next to them, he pressed a handful of bills into her palm.

“Consider it a favor. No worries.” He flashed a smile and opened the car door for her. When she was inside, he spoke through the open window. “Have an evening as truly beautiful as yourself, Lyric.”

He stepped back, and the car pulled away quickly. Too quickly.

She glanced back at him for one last look before he was out of sight. Strange. Lyric couldn’t deny that he was mesmerizing but definitely dangerous, no matter how nice he’d been. Opening her closed fist, she carefully unfolded the crumpled bills. Her eyes widened.

He’d given her more than a hundred dollars for a forty-dollar cab ride. He might not have been born in this century, but he existed in it. Surely, he knew the average cost of a cab ride across the city. It was more than generous. She would definitely have to pay him back.

Though, she wasn’t sure how. He’d avoided giving her too much information about himself. Jade Kenyan. She didn’t recognize the name. However, Lyric knew well that life worked in mysterious ways.

Jade had been in the right place at the right time to save her life. If their paths were meant to cross again, they would. Until then, she owed him one hundred dollars.

## Chapter Two

“I’m not kidding you Storm; I’d be dead right now if he hadn’t been there.” Lyric finished retelling the previous evening’s events to her friend as the two talked over morning coffee.

Storm listened attentively, her hazel eyes wide. She’d been completely distraught when Lyric told her about the street vagrant attacking her. Lyric’s reassurance that Storm wasn’t at fault for missing the call did little to erase the guilty frown she wore.

“That’s a bit odd though, isn’t it? You don’t usually have visions that don’t come to pass.” Storm observed.

“I don’t usually have visions regarding myself either. Not like that.”

“Interesting. What do you make of it?”

“I can never be sure. Questioning what happens to me never helps. I just go with the flow.” Lyric had learned long ago that it wasn’t worth asking why it worked the way it did. Over the years, she’d realized that, that wasn’t the important part.

Storm seemed to contemplate this, nodding. “Are you going to see him again?”

Lyric gave a surprised laugh before chewing thoughtfully on her lower lip. “For one, he’s a vampire.” She paused and gave the other girl a teasing look. “So no, not for what you’re thinking. And for two, I don’t have any information on him other than his name.”

“And monster status,” Storm was quick to toss in with a grin. She flipped her long, blonde hair back over her shoulder and stood, ready for a refill. “That’s hardly an excuse. I could try a tracking spell.”

Storm was a witch. She and Lyric had met in a small occult and paranormal research group on the community college campus. That had been almost five years ago, and they had been close friends ever since. It wasn’t everyday that they met someone who really did understand what it was like to be different, at least, not the way that they were different. The basis of their friendship certainly wasn’t afterschool-special material.

“I don’t know about that. Might not be a good idea. Maybe he doesn’t want to be found. He didn’t exactly give me his business card.”

“Then why tell you his name at all?” Storm countered.

“To be polite?” Lyric offered lamely.

“Did you give your last name?”

“No.”

Storm gave her friend a raised eyebrow expression as she returned to the table. “So? Tell me what this sexy vampire looked like.”

“I never said he was sexy,” Lyric said, a faint blush creeping up over her cheeks.

“No, but you haven’t stopped glowing all morning. Nothing gets the blood pumping like a run-in with a sexy man. Now talk.” Storm stared expectantly at her until she finally broke the silence with a girlish laugh.

“Ok, ok. I’ll tell you, but only because you’re right, he just happened to be amazingly gorgeous. Although, I’m sure it hardly matters because I will probably never see him again anyway.”

\* \* \* \*



Across town, in a three-level split much too large for one man, Jade Kenyan sat in quiet contemplation. For the first time in a long time, the windowless den in which he spent much of his waking daytime hours began to feel more like a prison than a sanctuary. This wasn't the first time in all these years that he'd asked himself why he couldn't let go.

Jade seldom met a woman like Lyric. She gripped his lifeless heart and caused him to remember what that rush of infatuation felt like, that first meeting when he knew she was the one. Clenching his fists tight in anguish, Jade longed for the rush of love for the first time in more years than he could recall. And, the loss cut deeper because love had nothing left for him.

That which was full of life would wither beneath his touch as, eventually, he took it away. The bloodlust dominated Jade's existence. Not only could he not deny the need to consume the lives of women like Lyric, he didn't really want to. He could look into the eyes of a beautiful, lively woman like her and see only blood and death. At his hands, that death would lay claim to her as it had to so many. That first hot splash upon puncturing the skin, the living energy within her blood and the promise of passion in death, just thinking about it caused him to grow hard.

Little voices inside his head nagged him from each side. He almost regretted not giving Lyric a way to reach him. Almost. It was like a kick in the groin to know that she'd known exactly what he was and she hadn't run screaming from him. Not to mention, her own abilities set her apart. Yet, he himself was just as likely to become her attacker as any human man on the street.

*It's just a fantasy*, Jade thought. He needed to get his head out of the clouds. He had been there by coincidence, just a passing moment in time. Already gone. He certainly was no hero. Entertaining the thought of seeing her again was trouble. It wasn't an option.

As the sun rose higher and hotter in the sky, Jade sought out the comfort of his basement bedroom. Fitful and uneasy, he tossed and turned in bed, tormented by his own forbidden desires.

\* \* \* \*

Lyric's day was off to a typical start. She missed the bus so she was twenty minutes late to dance practice. That day her troupe, The Scarlet Ladies, was supposed to be working on a new cabaret routine. They were the regular house act at a very popular city club. The routine was supposed to debut in two weeks time, which shouldn't be a problem if Lyric could avoid missing the rehearsals.

Most of the dancers had families and other jobs to tend to as well, so the time devoted was strenuous and often resulted in plenty of at-home practice. Two-hour rehearsals with the group three times a week didn't sound like much, but they crammed a lot into that time. They had just enough time to learn all of the song and dance routines and fit the costumes.

The costumes were one of Lyric's favorite aspects of her chosen career. They weren't always comfortable or easy to dance in, but they were always elaborate and had a way of making her feel like someone she was not. She loved being part of such spectacle. This was why she now ran down the street, clad in a black tracksuit, to the building at the end.

Much to her relief, she discovered upon her arrival that their choreographer, Brit,

was indeed late as well, caught in traffic, so the class had yet to start. Lyric wondered to what she owed her recent luck. Considering she had seen her own death and then had the outcome completely changed, she was making no assumptions. She certainly wasn't one to believe in coincidence; the odds didn't stack up, and the outcome was immeasurable. Lyric had no doubt in her mind that a much bigger force was in charge here.

Much later that evening, Lyric could not keep her eyes open any longer. She'd danced hard that day, and Storm hadn't been around to keep her awake with her lively chatter. Sleep enveloped Lyric, and she sank gratefully into unconscious bliss. She floated along for hours in a comfortable state, but shortly before dawn, the dreams began.

Images danced in her mind's eye like the seizure-inducing flicker of a strobe light. Many things passed before she was able to make sense of them, but not all of it escaped her. When a vision came to her, the heart of its meaning didn't always find a way through.

Jade was suddenly there, as clearly as if he'd been right in front of her. He was spattered with blood and frantic; his eyes, wide and filled with anguish. The vision revealed little else. They rarely did.

Startled by the shrill screaming of the alarm clock, Lyric awoke to nothing but her bedroom. Her heart thundered, and perspiration lined her forehead. The image of Jade still burned behind her eyes.

Jade Kenyan, wherever he was, could soon be in very serious trouble.

## Chapter Three

Taylor Steele realized that his fiancée, Charity Evans, was not happy. Since he had become involved with the paranormal research group, she'd barely seen him. It seemed that all he could think or talk about was vampires.

Her eyes went to the clock on the wall where the hands ticked past eight pm. Taylor had expected her to give him the run around again. For three Fridays in a row, he'd ruined their dinner plans. Charity had warned him that she'd rip him a new one if he thought he could do that to her again.

Pulling out her compact, she applied more cranberry lipstick to her full lips and powdered her face. He watched her with little interest. All he could think about was Cry, the vampire club that he'd uncovered months ago after countless nights of research and hitting the pavement. He'd been visiting regularly but not as often as he'd like.

"How do I look?" Pursing her lips, Charity turned her face for his scrutiny.

"Baby, you look great." He leaned down to kiss her cheek. He couldn't stop thinking about the old abandoned building on the edge of the city. He'd been overjoyed at the discovery. However, Charity rarely shared his enthusiasm, so he hadn't told her about it. She had little interest in the supernatural world that drove him, so he'd been going alone without her knowledge.

"Thank you, Taylor. Are you ready for dinner?"

"More than ready. I had a great day, and I'm ready to have a great night."

His eyes were lit up with excitement, and he pretended not to notice her sour expression. Sure, Charity believed in the supernatural, but she didn't really give a damn about it, regardless of what it meant to Taylor. He'd spent years searching for evidence, a link, anything that could connect him to the vampire world and possibly, to the one he'd encountered so many years ago.

"Well, don't forget about that new restaurant I want to go to. You have to make reservations." She raised her face to meet his lips before getting to her feet and gathering her purse.

"Consider it done," he replied with an affectionate smack on her bottom. "What are you in the mood for tonight?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe seafood, what do you feel like?"

\* \* \* \*

Lyric had woken up with an uneasy feeling that she hadn't been able to shake. The image of an injured Jade Kenyan would not fade from her mind's eye. The moment that she'd seen had not yet come to pass, she knew that. Still, it might, at any time.

She'd been living with her gift long enough to know that a vision was not set in stone. Nor was it always what she thought it was. It could be changed at any time if the cards were played right. In cases like this, that was often the point in her having them in the first place. She'd prevented deaths and had even helped more than one lost spirit find rest, though thankfully that was few and far between.

It looked like she would be taking Storm up on that tracking spell after all.

Hopefully, Storm's magic would be able to lead them to Jade. Whether he would believe her vision or not was another thing, but first things first.

It was half past seven, and Lyric paced the length of her apartment, clutching a cup of hot cider. Occasionally she paused to glance out the window for a sign of Storm's car below. The young witch had stopped at the south side magic shop in need of a few supplies. It was the best one in the city.

Lyric was more concerned than she should be for someone with whom she had no personal attachment. Of course, try as she might, she couldn't escape the feeling that caused her pulse to quicken when she remembered his parting words. A part of her had wanted to leap out of that cab. Call her crazy, but she wasn't going to deny that she was more than excited to have a reason to see the mysterious vampire again. Although, had it been her choice, she never would have gone about it like this.

"Have I lost my mind?" She asked herself aloud. There was nobody to hear her except the black and white cat that turned a lazy eye toward her before drifting back to sleep. "No comment needed from you, Frisk." She turned away from the lazy furball at a knock on the door.

"Whew!" Storm exclaimed as she breezed inside. "Got there just in time. Violet was just about to lock up when I ran in."

"She let you in?"

"Of course. I'm one of her best customers."

Lyric watched as Storm spilled the contents of her shopping bag onto the kitchen table. The array of items included everything from candles of all colors to herbs and trinkets that Lyric couldn't identify.

"Do we need all of that for a tracking spell?" She lifted a surprised eyebrow at her friend.

"No. I just needed to stock up on a few things. What we will need, though, is something to do with the vampire himself. Do you still have one of those bills he gave you?"

"Yeah, I have a few." She hadn't spent a dime of Jade's money on anything other than the much needed taxi ride home. Producing one of the twenties from her purse, she handed it to Storm anxiously.

Lyric watched as her friend drew a circle on the kitchen floor, chanting a small request for protection as Storm settled herself to focus on grounding. Lyric had seen Storm do magic many times before, but now Lyric held her breath because this time it was for her.

Storm spoke slowly and carefully, the twenty-dollar bill placed on the floor in front of her. When her words stopped, they waited, and Lyric thought for sure that it wasn't going to work. She didn't know what she was expecting to happen, but suddenly Storm's eyes closed and her head snapped back. To Lyric, she appeared to be listening to something.

A cold chill stole over the room, and when Storm reopened her eyes, they were completely white from the magic flowing through her. She fixed that eerie alabaster gaze on the dark-haired psychic who watched her expectantly. Touching one hand to the twenty, she slowly pointed at Lyric with the other.

The projected energy hit Lyric, and an image formed inside her mind. She saw him then.

\* \* \* \*

Jade Kenyan prowled a downtown nightclub in search of a bite to ease his insatiable hunger. A day filled with tortured dreams had left him irritable and reluctant to stay home a moment longer than necessary. Tonight, the false comfort of meaningless company would do. The temporary touch of a warm body to pleasure and sustain him was an age-old cure for loneliness.

It was a shame that it didn't really work. As long as the bloodlust screamed through his veins, he was nothing but a vampire. Once that thirst was sated, the haze cleared, and he saw again through sober eyes.

The dimly lit club pounded with the bass beat of a Gothic techno song. The dance floor moved with a swarm of black-clad bodies glittering with spikes, chains and a variety of fetish wear. The longer Jade watched them, the more they appeared to move as one giant mass.

It wasn't as easy to select a choice victim in a place like this; it was just easy to walk out with someone. Most of the people occupying the place were strictly role players out for some fun at the local Goth bar. They made it almost too easy for vampires seeking easy and fast pickings.

Jade didn't care to visit the establishment often, but it certainly was a vast improvement over the real vampire club, the one on the city's border. Any human that dared to step foot in there was nothing more than an animal going willingly to slaughter. He made it a point to stay away from the place, known only as Cry. It wasn't like any other club; it was nothing short of a blood-bath orgy. A regular place like this was perfect for an easy victim without the mess.

Sidling up to the bar, he could feel eyes on him. Somebody was studying him hard. He didn't want to turn too quickly and alert whoever it was.

Jade was careful to shield his thoughts hard under the intense scrutiny. A psychic attack was unlikely but not uncommon. He focused on those around him, feeling for the unseen eye that watched.

A young woman sitting at the bar caught his eye and smiled. Like many of the patrons, her hair was black, and her face, heavily made up in dark makeup. Briefly, he pictured Lyric. None of these girls could have held a candle to her.

Lyric. He shoved the image of her from his mind. He didn't even know the woman, and yet he couldn't get her out of his head. The thought of her mingled with his hunger, fed his fantasy, and he couldn't help but imagine sinking fangs into her delicate, pale skin.

Now seemed like just the right time to go over and buy a drink for the young lady of the evening. With a wickedly delicious grin and a wink, Jade made his way to the bar.

## Chapter Four

Lyric burst through the doors of the downtown Goth club with her heart in her throat. She searched frantically for a glimpse of the dark-haired vampire. In a place that was dominated by those clad in black from head to toe, she was forced to look over every face in turn. He wasn't there.

She turned to Storm at her side, a shake of her head informing her friend that they were too late. He was no longer in the eccentric nightclub. Though Storm appeared to be right at home in the alternative style bar, Lyric found it to be suffocating and a little scary. When she didn't spot Jade, her hopes took a nosedive.

"He couldn't have gotten far," Storm shouted to be heard over the loud music. "Do you want to look for him? I could try another spell."

Lyric studied Storm, considering her offer. If Jade had been here, he was likely looking for a meal. She wasn't sure if pursuing him now would be a good idea. She pressed her red lips together, debating what to do.

"No. I think he came here to hunt. It may be safer to wait." She glanced around the inside of the crowded club again, fearing that she might have missed him. No, she was sure she would know if he was still there. Feeling discouraged, Lyric turned to go.

Storm stopped her with a warm hand on her arm. "Are you sure you don't want to stay for a few minutes? Just to see if he comes back?"

Lyric was pretty sure her friend just wanted to scope out the darkly clad single guys, but a few minutes couldn't hurt. Could it?

They took a seat at the bar, on the end where they could clearly see the door. Storm ordered a drink, but Lyric asked for ice water with a slice of lemon. She didn't like to consume intoxicants. She hated the way alcohol made her head foggy and dulled her sixth sense.

Stirring the ice in her drink with the little cocktail umbrella the bartender had slipped in, Lyric gazed around the bar, carefully keeping a nonchalant expression as she took in the various characters surrounding her. She knew better than to make eye contact with anyone lurking nearby. Though they didn't hang around long, more than one man dared to get close enough to check out the two of them.

Checking the time on her cell phone, Lyric decided to wait another fifteen minutes before giving up for the night. Maybe she never would find him; maybe her efforts were fruitless.

"Now this is definitely a hell of a place," Storm commented as her eyes wandered around the vicinity. "Some of these gothy guys are really hot."

Lyric made a lame attempt at ogling the male patrons, but they just weren't her type. In fact, she didn't think anyone would ever be her type again. She sighed and shook her head. She felt so ridiculous to be so smitten from one encounter, and a brief one at that. Lyric wasn't easily impressed by a man, but Jade was clearly like no other.

She didn't think that he was coming back here tonight. How was she going to find him if every time they did a tracking spell, he was gone by the time they reached his location?

She never sensed the supernatural energy of the vampire that took the seat on the

other side of her until he leaned in close, openly taking a large sniff of her scent. She almost leaped out of her skin as the adrenaline slammed through her. The way he was leering at her with solid black eyes had her stricken with fear. His short blonde hair made his eyes appear that much darker.

"I couldn't help but notice a pretty thing like yourself. Can I buy you a drink?" He leaned even closer, a lecherous smirk tugging his lips into an ugly attempt at a smile. His sharp, pointy fangs were clearly visible with every word he spoke, as if he wanted her to see them.

"You're kidding, right?" Lyric stammered, glancing quickly to Storm on her other side who wore an anxious frown.

The vampire made a show of looking over both Lyric and Storm in turn. "You look like you could use a drink to me. Do I look like I'm kidding?" When he bared his fangs with undeniable menace, Lyric gasped and glanced around as if seeking help.

The blood drained from her face, and she felt lightheaded. What she wouldn't have given to have Jade walk through the door then. She mustered all of the courage she had and met the eyes of the predator who stared at her as if she were a piece of raw meat.

"Actually, we were just about to leave." Lyric's voice shook, and she quaked beneath the stare of the creature. His eyes were filled with hunger, and he sought to draw her in with his powerful allure. She could feel his hypnotic pull but, due to her own gifts, was thankfully able to shield the worst of the effects.

Vampires were especially adept at using their wiles on humans in order to make them complacent during a feed. The more powerful the vampire, the stronger the pull would be. Once he realized it wasn't working on her, he might resort to more drastic measures.

The blood fiend actually dared to reach out to touch her, and she jerked out of his reach, almost falling off her stool in the process. "Don't touch me!"

"Or else what?" His eyes narrowed, and his expression grew fierce. Lyric doubted that he was used to being refused. "You can't deny me. You're just a human. An unclaimed one at that."

Lyric knew she shouldn't have allowed Storm to talk her into staying. It hadn't occurred to her that they might find more vampires here than the one they sought. Many of the other patrons were practically begging for this kind of attention. Why her? She concentrated hard on resisting him. She'd rather die than allow him to lay a hand on her. The bluff spilled out from between her lips before she had even fully formed it in her mind.

"I'm not unclaimed. If you touch me, Jade Kenyan will have your head." She winced inwardly, praying that her lie wouldn't come back to haunt her.

It seemed to stop him from reaching for her though. He paused to consider her words, analyzing them for the truth. From the smallest glimpse of uncertainty in his eyes, she knew that Jade was known to him. She clung to that, hoping it would be enough.

"Jade Kenyan has already been in here tonight. He left with a young thing, not quite as nice to look at as you, though. So, I'm sure he won't miss you."

The sensation that struck Lyric with nausea could only be defined as outright, bitter jealousy. Despite knowing that Jade had quite possibly sought only a willing victim, she couldn't shake the green-eyed monster that came to life inside her. It gave her a burst of fury, which she turned on the fair-haired vampire intruding into her personal space.

“How bad do you want to find out?” Lyric glared into his face with all of the venom she could shoot with her eyes. She knew her pounding heart would likely betray her, but she wasn’t going to give in to this predator without one hell of a fight.

The vampire’s large pupils seemed to glitter like black diamonds, and he smiled. She shuddered as she watched, wishing she could snatch back her last words. This was not looking good.

He moved quickly, a blur of speed. His thick fingers enclosed on her wrist in a crushing grip. Lyric thought for sure her wrist was going to snap. He got up in her face, holding her so that she couldn’t escape him. “That was the wrong thing to say, little girl. I’m going to enjoy draining every last drop from your luscious body.”

Before he could do anything further, a hand reached out to grasp his forearm in a bone crushing hold. The vampire let out a yelp, and Lyric looked up to see the man that had come to her rescue. He was another vampire, one that she’d never seen before.

“Jade Kenyan is a dear friend of mine, Dexter, a brother if you will. If the girl says she is with him, then I’d advise you to move along before he finds out. I assure you that no man who dares to lay a hand on Jade’s woman will live to tell the story.” The promise of trouble was heavy in the smooth voice of Lyric’s rescuer. She stared up at him, taking in the black hair that curled ever so slightly and the deep gold eyes that were fixed on the blonde vampire harassing her. Could it be that this vampire really knew Jade?

Dexter flashed a hateful look at her before turning his black gaze to the one who held him. Getting up from his stool, he jerked his arm away from the dark-haired vampire with a snarl. “Get your hands off of me. I didn’t even touch her.”

“Let’s keep it that way. If you’re so hard up for a bite, head over to Cry. Stay out of here, or I won’t be so nice next time.” After giving Dexter a forceful shove, he released the other vampire and turned to Lyric, taking note of Storm as he did so. The blonde vampire scowled but slunk away into the crowd.

Fighting to calm down, Lyric took a sip of her lemon water. She couldn’t help but wonder what Cry was. It didn’t sound like any place that she wanted to be. Her anxiety waned but didn’t disappear when her rescuer sat in Dexter’s vacated seat.

“Are you alright?” When she didn’t answer right away, he held out a hand. “I should introduce myself. My name is Griffin. I really do know Jade. Are you expecting him?”

She accepted his hand gratefully, believing he told the truth. He greeted Storm as well, who flushed several shades of red when he gently took her hand. Lyric sensed no animosity in him at all, merely curiosity.

“Thank you, Griffin,” she said. “It was getting ugly there. I appreciate your help. And no, I’m not expecting Jade. I’m actually looking for him. I don’t suppose you’d know where to find him.”

He studied her until she felt uneasy and exposed. Those deep gold eyes seemed to stare into her soul. “You aren’t really involved with Jade, are you?”

“No,” she admitted with a shy smile. “But, I do know him. And, it’s important that I find him. He saved my life the other night, and I need to speak to him.”

Griffin gazed at her intensely, and she got the feeling he was searching her for dishonesty. Lyric smiled tentatively at him, hoping that he would be her link to Jade Kenyan. Coincidence? Not likely.

\* \* \* \*



Jade would never have guessed that his dear friend had just helped the very woman that he himself could not get off his mind. The image of those perfectly ruby red lips continued to haunt him. More than once since he'd put Lyric in the taxi, he had imagined kissing those lips, running his tongue over and between them. With a sigh, he glanced down at his sleeping victim and the two tiny puncture wounds in her throat.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to bed this one. He often did, satisfying all urges at once. His body had refused to co-operate, and he'd had to settle for feasting on the lively human blood while visions of Lyric standing at the bus stop flashed behind his eyes. God help him, but the woman was absolutely divine.

Climbing from the sprawling, king-size bed, Jade was relieved that his victim slept. Now he could simply leave in silence and be on his way. As he gathered his jacket and keys, he cursed himself for such weakness. No woman had dominated his thoughts like this in years, centuries!

The brunette on the bed moaned and stirred, reaching as if searching for him. His steps quickened, and he fled the room with stealth and silence. The last thing Jade needed now was to explain to her why he had little desire to touch her any further. He wanted nothing more than to be out, beneath the city sky.

If the night air held a chill, Jade did not feel it. With a beep, the door to his sleek black Mustang Shelby Cobra unlocked, and he slid onto the leather seat with a sigh. When he turned the key and the radio blared to life, Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" made him shake his head in wonder. It had to be a coincidence.

Jade's mind replayed the moment that Lyric told him about her mother's claim to have jammed with Jimi Hendrix. He could recall the way her full lips had lifted in a gentle but embarrassed smile. Staring at the radio, he shrugged heavily. What he wouldn't do to see her again.

As he drove through the city streets, the song accompanied his thoughts. His existence was a lengthy series of events, many of which he would like to forget. Though Jade wasn't one for self-indulgent melancholy, he couldn't help but think about his wife. He still carried the guilt surrounding her death; it continued to haunt him.

Now that he couldn't get Lyric out of his head, he felt a fresh wave of guilt, as if he shouldn't dare to care for another woman after what he'd done. What was he thinking? He couldn't allow himself to feel for a human woman. That would only endanger her. She might be gifted, but she wasn't cut out for his world.

*Sure, keep telling yourself that.* The thought came unbidden, and Jade's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He desperately wanted to listen to his conscience, but fear held him back, fear that he would destroy Lyric's beautifully fragile life, corrupt it in ways she had yet to know. He'd left her with a brief image of himself that he didn't want to tarnish.

How would he even begin to seek her out in a city this size if he wanted to?

Of course, she was a burlesque dancer. She had to be almost as nocturnal as he was, if only because her career demanded it. He knew enough about her with that tidbit of information alone that he might be able to find her. Would she think he was stalking her, or would she be glad to see him again? The question tormented Jade throughout his entire drive home.

When he finally sat on the edge of his own bed, clad only in silk pajama pants, he knew that Lyric had stirred something within him that no other woman had in all this

time: the desire to be needed, to be loved, to have her look at him like he was her whole world.

Why her? And, why now? He didn't know nor did he really care. Jade only knew that, undoubtedly, he had to see her again.

## Chapter Five

The door swung open silently, and Jade peered out into the night. A grin spread across his face. “Griffin, you sneaky son of a bitch! How are you doing? I thought you were still in Europe.”

Jade stepped back to allow his old friend entry. Griffin gave the foyer a once over before turning to the other vampire. “I was. I just got back into town. What's new with you, my friend?”

Ushering Griffin down the hall, Jade ran a hand through his long, loose locks. The truth was, he hadn't been traveling the world and taking advantage of technology in all of its glory like Griffin had. Jade had been more than happy to hang around in the city he'd been haunting for decades.

“I can't say I have been enjoying as much excitement as you have. I've been doing a lot of reading, writing ... that kind of thing.”

Griffin nodded knowingly and smiled. “So you've been lurking around this city like the creepy old vampire that you are, when you could have the world in your hands? Why am I not surprised?”

“Very funny.” Jade rolled his eyes and grinned at his friend. “So, what brings you by? Don't tell me you're bored and looking for a partner in crime. I haven't done that in years.”

The two of them had gone on some serious feeding-frenzies in their time. Their bloody sprees of violence, only a vampire could appreciate. The memory of some of the things they'd done almost shamed Jade now.

Griffin chuckled and nodded in remembrance. “We had some damn good times if I do say so myself. And, I do. But,” his expression quickly grew serious. “I'm here about something else. To say hello, of course, but there's more. A particular raven-haired woman to be exact.”

“Raven-haired?” Jade stiffened, pausing in the doorway to the kitchen. His mind immediately went to Lyric, but what could Griffin know about her?

“Oh yes,” Griffin smiled and nodded when he noticed Jade's interest pique. “Lovely young thing with the most amazing blue eyes, a rack to die for and a blonde bombshell of a friend. I ran interference for her when one of the local whelps was harassing her. She told me that her name was Lyric. And, that she was looking for you.”

Jade felt as if someone had slapped him across the face. His pulse quickened at the very mention of her name. If Griffin had seen her, he needed to know everything.

“She was? Is she ok?” He struggled to prevent his concern from showing. Feigning nonchalance didn't come naturally to him.

“Who is she, Jade?” Griffin asked, his curiosity obvious.

As Jade recounted the night that he had met Lyric, he found himself going back in his mind. The scent of her was something he would never forget. Griffin listened as he spoke, nodding here and there knowingly. Jade knew he sounded like an enamored fool, but he didn't care.

Griffin waited until Jade had reached the end of his tale before slipping the business card from his pocket. Pressing it into the other man's hand, he said, “Here. She gave me

this, for you.”

As Jade turned the bright red card over, he read her name, number and website information. Relief rippled through him, and he sighed. What could he do with this? Go to her? Was that really the best idea?

“I can't thank you enough for stepping in for her,” Jade said, choosing his words carefully. “It sickens me to think of anyone laying a hand on her.”

“And?” Griffin eyed Jade expectantly. “You are going to go to her, right?”

“Should I?” His friend's watchful eye was enough to make Jade want to turn away. He sounded like such a coward. “I mean, I don't want to hurt her.”

“Are you kidding? You're her knight in shining armor right now, pal. Why wouldn't you want to look her up? If nothing else, you should take advantage of the sexual aspects. She's bound to be grateful and willing.” Griffin inclined his head to the side and studied Jade.

Jade shook his head vigorously. “No. It's not like that. She is more to me than that.” He was fully aware that Griffin would read the shadowed look in his eyes and know he was smitten with a human woman.

“After one short encounter?” Griffin was skeptical, but then again, he wasn't too familiar with the magical rush of love.

“Surprisingly ... yeah.” Jade pondered it himself, wondering what he was thinking. “There's just something about her, Griff; she's special. It's not just that she's psychic and knows about vampires; there's something else.”

“Well, then do what you have to do my friend, and don't let her get away,” Griffin said after a long contemplative pause. “Make sure that you hunt first. If your energy is any indication, you haven't been feeding well.”

Jade fixed Griffin with a warning look. “I've been feeding.” He was ashamed to admit to his friend that he hadn't killed since the night he met Lyric, as if he thought that by abstaining he would somehow become more worthy of her.

“Don't be delusional Jade. You can't let this mortal girl cow you into acting like a neutered animal. I don't have to tell you that it's likely to work against you.”

Jade frowned, annoyed but aware that Griffin spoke the truth. The kill wasn't necessary for survival but denying it would risk his control. Vampires were nothing if not killers. Yet, Jade couldn't help but feel that he wanted to be the white knight for once. For her.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't worry about me, Griff. I'm not going to drive myself into a frenzy.”

Griffin raised a dark brow in question. “Just don't make the mistake of thinking that it will benefit her in any way. Staying sane will work far more in your favor.”

Jade nodded, his eyes downcast as he studied the pattern on the kitchen floor. The bloodlust ruled him, and if he denied it, he risked losing all control. The thought of that happening with Lyric chilled him to the bone. He was a fool to think avoiding the kill would do anything but put her in danger. Frustrated, Jade swore. The urge to hurt something was strong.

“Look,” Griffin spoke, disrupting Jade's moment of personal torment. “You and I are going to go on a little excursion. And, when we're done, you're going to feel like the powerful vampire that you are. The man that you are.” Griffin flashed Jade a warning look, expecting him to protest. “Then, you are going to go find this lovely young lady

that has been looking for you.”

\* \* \* \*

Taylor knew that Charity would be pissed that he was late again. He had purposely failed to mention his plans to her; she would never understand his fascination with the vampire bar. Taylor had been visiting the club regularly in recent weeks without her knowledge, and he did not intend to let her ruin it for him.

Since discovering the existence of the strange club known only as Cry, Taylor had been anxious to scope out the place. His fiancée's feelings definitely mattered to him but so did the agony of the last several years. Ever since the night he watched the woman he loved die at the hands of a vampire, Taylor had been virtually obsessed with getting closer to the creatures of the night. He could hardly think about anything else.

That memory would never fade. It was always as crisp and clear as if it had happened just yesterday. Twenty-one year old Taylor had approached his girlfriend's house late one night after work. Shocked, he'd discovered a strange man locked in an embrace with Lisa, the first woman Taylor had ever loved. He'd stopped dead in his tracks, watching as the man kissed her mouth, moving to her throat.

The jealous rage that filled Taylor had quickly died when the man peeled back his lips to reveal fangs. Taylor had been unable to tear his eyes away when those sharp fangs plunged through the tender flesh of Lisa's neck. She hadn't even screamed. Instead, she'd swooned and crumpled against her attacker.

When the vampire's head had snapped up suddenly to scan his surroundings, Taylor's instinct had taken over, and he'd ran. The nightmares had lasted for months, but the guilt had plagued him for years. He could never forgive himself for running and leaving her like that. Yet, Taylor couldn't shake the fascination that had developed since that night.

He knew that he would never forget those eyes that seemed to glow with a deadly hunger. Even now, so many years later, a shudder rippled through him at the memory.

As Taylor crept along the empty street toward the dimly lit building, two young women stumbled out the front door and down a side street that led nowhere. He paused, watching them go. He considered them, deciding that they didn't look so bad for just leaving the place. He had seen people fumble their way out of there at a crawl.

The building resembled a small warehouse. It was tall with numerous cracked and broken windows. If he didn't know there were people inside, he would have assumed it to be abandoned.

Hoping that he blended in well enough, he approached the door casually, as if he belonged there. Dressed head-to-toe in black, he had worn attire that was dark without being overtly obvious. He was hoping to go unnoticed, for the most part.

Getting inside was always easy. Taylor kept expecting some beefy doorman to stop him in his tracks, but it never happened. Incense and cigarette smoke greeted him, along with the heavy industrial sound of some band he had never heard before. Though he was tempted to linger near the door in observation, he knew that would draw attention. His safest bet was to order a drink and feign casual.

It looked like a warehouse inside as well. It had likely been one before the vampires got their hands on it. There wasn't much at all to the place. A handful of tables, a small area that looked like it was supposed to be a dance floor and a bar made up the entire establishment. But, Taylor knew there was much more below, in the building's basement.

The place was dimly lit. The pale glow of lanterns, hung here and there, cast just enough light to show the way.

Taylor made his way towards the bar, taking the opportunity to look over his fellow patrons. He'd learned enough to know that if he allowed the anxiety to rule him, it would draw them like moths to a flame. Taking a deep breath, he pushed his short brown locks out of his eyes and ordered a beer. The man behind the bar was no vampire. Taylor could tell immediately, not that he was an expert. The lack of obvious fangs was one indicator.

The bartender didn't give him more than a cursory glance. Spinning around on his stool, he pretended interest in the dance floor and its female occupants. He didn't want it to be too obvious to any vampires that he was looking for some action. Taylor wasn't an overly picky guy, but when it came to being a vampire's willing feast, he had to have standards.

As far as he was concerned, the possibilities in this place were endless. More than anything right now, he just wanted to see them in action, to confirm what he saw all those years ago as a kid.

The cool hand that grasped his shoulder had his heart pounding like a jackhammer in his chest. He spun around to find himself face to face with a smoking hot redhead that grinned at him as if he were a new play toy. Taylor couldn't help but stare in wide-eyed wonder at the two razor sharp fangs she flashed him. He must look like such a newbie, though he considered himself almost a regular.

"Sorry about the instant take down, honey, but if you don't nab 'em when they walk in the door, someone else will." The vampiress batted long lashes and eased onto the stool next to him. "They don't stay fresh for long. And, you are about as fresh as they come."

Taylor swallowed hard and forced himself to look into her eerie blue eyes. "Oh, I just stopped in for a drink." Oh shit, he thought. Could that have come out any lamer?

"Sure," she nodded, inclining her head and giving him a once over. "That's what they all say, at first."

Of course, she would assume he was there to play. It was, after all, the only reason humans came here. Though this wasn't Taylor's first time at Cry, he hadn't planned to stay long. However, she was here and offering...

"No, really." He shook his head and swigged from his beer, hoping it seemed natural and not forced. "I'm engaged. I should be getting back to my fiancée."

The redhead fixed him with a drowning blue stare, drawing him in. Taylor gave his head a shake but couldn't free himself of the sensation that he was falling into her eyes. Try as he might, he was unable to look away.

"She wouldn't have to know. If you want to stay, that is." Offering him a dainty hand with long, red nails, she said, "I'm Sadie. And, I would love to play with you tonight. If you change your mind." With a wink, she made as if to leave.

"Wait," Taylor heard himself say, and he winced inwardly. His pulse pounded but in anticipation rather than fear. "Can we make it quick? I'm in a bit of a hurry."

Sadie's smile grew wider, as if she knew that she had him. Crooking her finger, she indicated for him to follow her as she sauntered away.

Taylor watched her, admiring her tight curves in the leather pants she wore. He knew he was a fool if he didn't head for the door. Nevertheless, he'd been here enough times to know that staying was worth his while. Slamming back the last of his beer, he set the

bottle on the bar with a clatter and followed the gorgeous vampiress with the crimson colored locks.

## Chapter Six

The sound of grinding gears reached Lyric, and she cursed. What had she been thinking when she'd agreed to a rental car with a manual transmission? The rental agency in her neighborhood only had manuals left, but she could have gone elsewhere. She regretted the many years that it had been since she'd driven a stick. At least the little silver Honda was a cute car.

Tapping her fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the song on the radio, Lyric's mind wandered. A certain dark-haired vampire had not been far from her thoughts in the past four days. She'd given her card to Griffin though, and now all she could do was wait to see if Jade came to her.

She couldn't help but fear for him after the vision she'd had. If something happened to him, she might never even know.

Giving her head a shake, she forced her thoughts elsewhere. She had a performance to concentrate on; in little more than an hour, she'd be onstage. The Scarlet Ladies were the headlining act at a local nightclub for their "Tribute to Burlesque" night. She had been anticipating it since they'd booked the gig.

As she drove to the venue, Lyric grew excited. The costumes she and the girls had designed for this event were beyond sensational. The glorious combination of feathers and velvet made her feel like the epitome of sexuality. She hoped the audience would enjoy it just as much as she did.

Pulling into the parking lot of the nightclub, she was glad to see that a few of the other girls had already arrived. The anticipation swept her, and she giggled to herself. She had the best job ever.

Lyric entered through the back staff door into a narrow white hallway. She had performed here once before so she knew the way to the dressing room. Pushing the door open, she smiled at Storm who looked up from her place in front of the mirror.

"Hey Lyric, honey. How are you today?" Storm greeted her with a beaming smile. "Ready for the show tonight?"

"You know it. I've been waiting for this one since we booked it." Lyric tossed her duffel bag down and shrugged out of her light sweater. Sitting heavily in the seat next to Storm, she pawed through the bag for her makeup and hair accessories.

"So, I assume you haven't heard anything yet. Have you?" Storm glanced over at Lyric, pausing mid-motion with her mascara wand in hand.

Lyric sighed and rolled her dark blue eyes at her friend. "I wish. Still waiting, impatiently."

With a toss of her long blonde waves, Storm fixed Lyric with a pointed look. "Well ... I want to know the moment that you hear from him. And, you will, I'm sure of it."

Lyric smiled to herself but chose not to directly address Storm's comment. When she knew that she would see him again, then she would deal with Storm. For now, she was just hoping for some kind of sign that her vision was wrong.

The dressing room quickly filled up as the other dancers started to arrive. Lyric was grateful because it allowed her to avoid further conversation, which would only cause her anxiety. She needed to focus on getting ready to dance. Nearly an hour later, Storm was



helping her to secure large red feathers in her highly pinned black hair. Yet, despite everything that she had to concentrate on, Jade was still at the forefront of her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Staring out onto the crowd, adrenaline coursed through Lyric's body as she waited for the music to begin. They were more than halfway through their performance, and the audience was enthralled. Only one thing would have made her happier...

She gripped a large fan, half the size of her body. It was made up of the most beautiful red, purple and black feathers. The fan covered her scantily clad top half while allowing the crowd a peek at her fishnet covered legs. When the music began, she ever so slowly moved the fan to reveal a glimpse of the red velvet corset that pushed her breasts up for all the world to see.

As she danced, Lyric allowed the music to move her. The feeling of absolute freedom swept her up in a warm glow. A sensual atmosphere settled on the stage with her as she took the center for her solo dance.

The lights dimmed, casting the rest of the girls in darkness where they stood at the back of the stage. A lone spotlight illuminated her. Lyric's glossy black hair shone with a blue hue in the light. The piano music began with a rich and moving dark melody. The silence was thick as the crowd watched with awed amazement as she moved with a tranquility and grace more akin to a creature with wings than a human.

When the tempo quickened, Lyric added some tease to her dance. She worked the large feather fan, swirling it around her body as she gyrated and glided along the floor. Ever so slowly, she worked one long, elbow length glove down her arm and threw it off without care. A small cheer went up from the audience when she proceeded to follow up with the other glove.

Lyric continued to dance, twirling and shimmying as she slowly reached up to pull the pins from her hair. A few whistles rang out, and she smiled to herself. As the last pin pulled free, the feathers in her hair gently cascaded to the floor. With a shake of her head, her long black locks fell all around her, cloaking her in darkness.

Looking out over the crowd, Lyric felt a slight shift in the atmosphere. Caught up in her performance, she couldn't isolate what she sensed. It was completely impossible to tune in at a moment like this.

Tossing her ebony hair over a shoulder, she swung the fan to one side, allowing the audience a glimpse as she began to unfasten the tight corset that held her bound. A hush seemed to gather as everyone waited for the big reveal. But, this was all about the art of the tease, and Lyric knew how to work it to the max. Fixing her eyes on her audience, she slowly peeled the corset away from her flushed skin.

\*

If he didn't want her before, he most certainly did now. As Jade watched Lyric dance from his place at the back of the building, a longing stirred within him. It seemed to touch him in every way. Not only did it cause an undeniable ache in his loins, it also created a hunger in his heart.

As Lyric stripped the red velvet corset from her body and cast it aside, his still heart jumped. She carefully used the fan to hide what lay behind it. Jade was beside himself waiting to see what she would reveal.

With only a look at her website, he'd known she would be here tonight. He couldn't

have stayed away if he'd tried. Common sense wasn't having any part of his decision. Instinct called him, and he answered.

He wondered if she knew that he was there. He couldn't tear his eyes from her alabaster skin and midnight-colored locks. What he wouldn't give to touch her!

Jade's green and gold eyes widened, locked on Lyric as she swept the fan away from her body in a grand gesture. The bloodlust and his own personal desire rose up with a vengeance as he drank her in. Lord, she looked glorious, beyond all reason.

Her skin was creamy, like the whitest marble. Her full breasts were bare but for the star shaped pasties covering her nipples. They sparkled as the light hit them, and Jade leaned against the wall at his back, enamored by her entrancing beauty.

His cock grew hard watching her twirl and glide. He had been looking forward to seeing Lyric in action, but this was beyond his expectations. As she worked the crowd, Jade found that he was just as manipulated by her actions as anyone else. As Lyric shimmied and twirled, Jade began to feel as if his pants were just a little too tight in places. The woman was driving him mad!

He could focus only on was the way her body moved. It seemed to beckon to him, calling for his attention. He was dying to touch her. He couldn't recall feeling this urgency for any woman. It was both confusing and welcome.

A part of him wished that he could hide her nudity from the men in the crowd, keep it all for himself alone. Yet, another piece of Jade was proud of the looks they gave her, and he realized with shock that he already considered her to be his. There was no going back now. He ached for her, and he would be damned if he couldn't have her.

Towards the end of her solo number, she began searching the crowd, looking for something or someone. Jade tensed when her dark blue eyes landed on him. The glow of the lights made it hard for her to see each member of the audience clearly, but the look on her face was priceless. No doubt about it, she had easily identified him. If he'd been tempted to slip out before she knew he was there, it was too late now. Not that he wanted to, of course.

Lyric appeared momentarily confused as the other dancers moved up beside her. The music changed, and she recovered, tearing her eyes from him. Jade couldn't help the grin that stole over his chiseled features. As he watched her dance, that smile never left his face. The hard on in his pants also refused to vacate. It was killing him to have to wait until she finished to approach her. But, that wait would be well worth it.

\* \* \* \*

Back in the dressing room after the show, Lyric hastily pulled a brush through her long hair. Her heart had refused to slow down since she'd spotted Jade Kenyan in the crowd. He came ... he really came! She couldn't believe it.

She dug through her bag, wishing she had brought something nicer to change into than gray sweatpants and a tank top. She'd been planning to leave through the back staff door, but now that idea was shot. After a moment of panicked consideration, she opted to wear some of her dance gear. There was no way in hell she'd let Jade catch her in sweats after what he'd just seen her in.

Choosing the most comfortable outfit in her repertoire, she slipped into black leggings, a tank top and a long, dressy velvet robe. Not all of the deep breaths in the world would have slowed her racing heart. Careful not to leave Jade waiting too long, she

avoided conversation with Storm and ducked out of the dressing room. She didn't want to tell Storm that he was here until she'd spoken to him herself.

No sooner had she stepped through the door than he was just there, before her. Her breath caught, and for a moment, she was speechless. Jade's presence dominated her focus so that everything else around them seemed to fall away. He gazed down at her with eyes that peered into her soul. A slow grin spread across his face as he drank in the sight of her. It had only been a few days, but it had felt like forever.

"Lyric," he said her name as if it was the sweetest honey on his tongue. "How are you? I'll kill the stupid bastard that thought he could lay a hand on you."

Lyric laughed despite the gravity of his words. So, he knew about Dexter. She was filled with a combination of relief and gratitude towards Griffin. She owed him one. And, she wouldn't forget it.

"I'm fine, thank you," she smiled, secretly pleased with his concern. "I hope you enjoyed the show."

"I most certainly did. You're absolutely enamoring." He grinned then, and her stomach dropped. "I don't want to sound lecherous, but I'd be lying if I said otherwise. You were heart stopping."

Blushing profusely, Lyric cast her eyes towards the floor. "Then it's a good thing that's something you don't need to worry about." She immediately felt ridiculous over cracking such a bad joke. Was a lack of heartbeat a laughing matter? She missed the way Jade's gaze roamed over her, a strange light in his eyes. Meeting his entrancing stare again, she murmured, "I mean thanks."

"Oh," she said suddenly as a thought struck her. Digging in her purse, she produced a small wad of bills. "Here's your money. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you did for me the other night."

Surprise crossed Jade's face, and he held both hands up in refusal. "You've got to be kidding." He chuckled, and the low sound sent a tickle down Lyric's spine. "I never expected the money back. It's nothing to me. It meant more that you got home safely."

*Could he be any more amazing?* Lyric wanted to pinch herself to see if she was dreaming. Of all the men she'd met, none of them had elicited this response in her. She was drawn to him, to the warmth she sensed in him despite his cold nature. Vampire or not, he had a worldly charm that Lyric couldn't help but respond to.

"Please." With a shy smile, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and chewed her lower lip nervously. "I want to pay you back. It's the least that I can do after what you did for me." Lyric wasn't usually one to play the shy type, but something in his expression caused her stomach to knot up and her heart to pound in her ears.

With a slight shake of his head, Jade gently pushed her hand back towards her purse. She could see it in his eyes that he wouldn't be swayed. The money had been a necessity at the time, and it had been something that helped to draw them together yet again. Beyond that, it wasn't important.

"Let me take you out." Jade insisted. "It would be worth so much more to me than any dollar figure."

*Was he nervous?* Lyric couldn't tell for certain, but by the way he suddenly fidgeted with his car keys, she thought so. Nothing else betrayed his nerves. Jade's gaze was steady as he looked into her eyes. She studied him as closely as she dared to without being obvious. His aura felt strong and dark. Everything about him oozed cool, calm and

collected.

“Right now? Where would we go?”

“Wherever you like.”

Lyric had only to think about it for a moment. Was she crazy to run off with a vampire in the middle of the night? Oh yeah. It could get her killed, but she trusted him. More than that, she undeniably wanted him. Without a care, Lyric embraced the strange mix of desire and intrigue roiling about inside her.

With a beaming smile that touched Jade in ways unknown to her, Lyric nodded.  
“Alright. Let's go.”

## Chapter Seven

The candlelight glinted off Lyric's glass, creating dancing beams of fire in the blood red wine. Jade watched as she swirled the fine liquid before raising the glass to her tantalizing crimson lips. The bloodlust stirred deep inside him with his fascination for this delicate creature. Watching her drink the scarlet fluid had him beside himself with a wanton lust he could only describe as carnal.

They had come to this restaurant at her suggestion. He'd insisted on treating her to wine and dessert, if nothing else. Though reluctantly, Lyric had relented and told him about the quaint little restaurant hidden in amongst some big name food chains. Mario's was a nice place, one that Jade enjoyed despite his inability to sample the delicious menu items. With Lyric seated across the small table from him, nibbling at a slice of cherry pie, he had no need of anything else.

Try as he might, Jade couldn't shake the image of her on the stage from his mind. It was scorched into his memory. This woman was mesmerizing. She didn't seem to be aware of what she was doing to him, and that only enhanced his attraction to her.

"So, what's your story?" Lyric asked, startling him out of his thoughts. Scooping another bite of pie onto her fork, she grinned. "You've gotta have a good one."

Jade watched her slide the fork between her lips and lick the crumbs sensually from the corner of her mouth. A throb began between his legs. "I only wish that I did. Unfortunately, Griffin is the one with all of the exciting stories. I've spent the better part of the last five decades in this city. I spent several years visiting the places I longed to go, and soon after, travel lost its appeal."

She gave him a look that said he was clearly crazy. "Fifty years in this hell hole? I can't wait to get out. What the heck do you do to pass the time?"

"A lot of reading and writing, people watching." *And killing*, he added silently. "You'd be amazed at the observations you can make when you have all of the time in the world to watch." He cast a glance around the room, taking note of their fellow patrons. "Actually, it's not all that wonderful a thing, being unable to pass on to the next plane of existence, whatever that is."

She studied him with eyes the color of the sea during a tropical storm. Jade could have stared into those eyes all night. "Yeah, but it's not like you couldn't escape it, if you really wanted to. Right?"

How many times had Jade contemplated walking out into the morning sun as dawn broke over the horizon? Too many to even count. He'd never done it, of course. Whether it was the fear of dying or the fear of what lay on the other side, Jade didn't know. He knew only that he could never bring himself to do it. The unknown was one thing that even vampires dread.

He had been caught in limbo for far too long. Night after night, he hunted, and sometimes he killed, and for what? For her. He'd been waiting for her, and he hadn't even known it. And, now that she was here, really here, he knew it as certainly as if it had been written in the sky.

"What about you, Lyric?" Jade carefully avoided her question, preferring to steer the conversation in another direction. "How does a young psychic girl grow up to become a

burlesque performer? And, a damn good one at that.”

A blush colored her cheeks, and Jade grinned, loving it. He could sense the way her heart picked up speed, sending the blood crashing through her veins. His instincts instructed him to take her, to sink both his fangs and his cock deep inside her, to make her his in every way. Frustration quickly followed those sensations, washing them away in a waterfall of guilt and shame.

“Aw, you're sweet.” Lyric swept a hand through her thick, glossy black mane. Her smile was shy, the timid side of her showing again. “I grew up doing ballet and jazz dancing. It just kind of, evolved over time. I turned eighteen and decided I wanted to explore a different side of dance, the art of the striptease really appealed to me. I was scared as hell the first time I danced burlesque, but it felt amazing. That was almost seven years ago.”

“You're twenty-five?”

“Twenty-four actually, for a few more months.” She made a face when she said it, as if birthdays were the devil.

She was so young, so fragile still. Jade had no business getting involved with her, and he damn well knew it. Yet, here he was.

“And, your gifts?” He asked, curiosity getting the better of him. “Is that something you have always had?”

“My entire life.” She made an exasperated sound before laughing lightly. “It's not so bad really, but it can get a little overwhelming when you have ghosts begging you for help or dreams about death and destruction.” She shrugged then and looked down at her plate. Jade didn't miss the slight tremble of her lower lip.

He was dying to ask her what was wrong but feared crossing any personal boundaries. So, instead he said, “I imagine that must be hard. I'm afraid I can't quite relate to that at all. My powers are very different.”

A fearful energy rolled off her, teasing and taunting Jade's bloodlust. It was a hellish combination when paired with the physical desire he had for her. He was about to ask her if she would like another glass of wine when Lyric fixed her gaze on him. She was serious and solemn all of a sudden.

“I had a dream about you, a vision.” She didn't pause to wait for his reaction. “It was very vague; they often are. But, you were in danger, you were hurt and ... I can't help but think that it was because of me.”

Jade was temporarily dumbstruck. The look on Lyric's face was painful. She had this raw hurt in her eyes, as if tormented by her own words. She was dead serious; there was no doubting that.

“Are you sure?” Jade was wary. He didn't know what to make of the dreams of a psychic, but he knew better than to dismiss them without thought.

She nodded, chewing her lower lip in a way that drew his attention and again had him aroused. “I don't know any of the details, like where or when or anything else. I just know what I saw.” She repeated to him the short dream she'd had right after their first meeting. As she spoke, Jade was spellbound.

He pondered what she was saying. As far as he knew, he had little reason to fear any danger. Jade couldn't even recall the last time he was truly afraid. Yet, he felt inclined to take her warning to heart, if only because it came from her.

“Don't worry about me, Lyric. I trust your vision to be authentic, but many of those

things can be altered before that time comes.” Lowering his voice, he boldly reached across the table to capture her hand in his. “If anything, I am the one that is a danger to you. You shouldn't even be here with me.”

Her pie forgotten, Lyric glanced down at their joined hands. Jade had felt the tender flesh of many mortal women, yet none of them sent a shock through his system the way she did. It was confusing but, somehow, natural.

Lyric met his gaze, unflinching. “I feel safe with you, Jade. You may be a monster as far as definitions go, but you are not one without conscience.”

“I hunger for you.” The words spilled out of Jade's mouth before he could think to censor them. Why was he telling her that? “I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. It scares me because I don't want to hurt you.”

“I don't believe that you will.” She smiled at him with such trust and acceptance. If he'd been questioning the extent to which she felt their connection, he had just gotten an answer.

Could it really happen like this? Centuries had passed as the hole inside Jade continued to grow, and just like that, one day he finds her. He found the source of comfort that he hadn't fully realized he'd been seeking. Was it too good to be true? Love often was.

As they talked further, Jade began to get the feeling that Lyric had been made for him. Presumptuous as it might be, he considered her to be his already. And, he would do whatever it took to keep it that way.

\* \* \* \*

As he ushered Charity through the doors of the small Italian restaurant, Taylor fanned himself with a hand. He'd been broken out in a cold sweat since they left their penthouse apartment. He shouldn't have gone to Cry so soon after his last visit.

He couldn't stop reliving the night in his head, though. It had been amazing. When Sadie had wanted to take blood from the inside of his thigh, he hadn't said no. In fact, he'd gotten so turned on that he had exploded the moment she pierced his flesh with her teeth. The climax had been immediate, especially powerful considering she hadn't even touched his cock. She hadn't had to.

The rush of the experience was enough to tempt him back to Cry tonight. What lay downstairs, below the main floor, was an orgy to beat all others, a blood fest really. Beyond the heavy security doors was nothing but a sprawling room that invited one to lounge around.

Velvet and suede sofas provided ample space to enjoy oneself. Taylor couldn't believe his luck when the vampiress had led him into the blood den. He'd been to Cry several times now but never down there. Both vampires and humans had been writhing like snakes all over one another, engaged in sex and bloodletting.

“Taylor?” Charity was studying him, her lips pursed in displeasure. He realized she was awaiting his response to a question. He'd merely followed her to a table and sat down. Taylor didn't have a clue what she'd said.

“Yeah, baby? I'm sorry, I spaced out. What were you saying?” He smiled and glanced up at the waitress who hovered over them, a pen and notepad in hand.

Charity rolled her eyes and made little attempt to hide her look of disgust. “She's waiting to take your order. What do you want?”

“Oh,” Taylor glanced at the menu that lay unopened before him. “Fettuccine Alfredo for me. And, a beer. Thanks.”

With a nod, the waitress turned on her heel and silently stalked away. Charity tapped out an annoying rhythm on the tabletop with her fingernails. He tried not to frown in response, knowing she'd notice immediately if he did. She'd been super bitchy all day, and he was tired of dealing with it. However, he knew he was partly to blame so he kept his mouth shut.

“So will you be staying home for the rest of the night?” She asked all of a sudden, and he knew that she was baiting him. “It's been a while since we got cozy at home and watched movies. I miss it.” She put on her best pout, and Taylor's eyes were drawn to her plum-colored lips.

“We can do whatever you want, baby.” Reaching to pat her hand, he stilled it beneath his own, silencing the noise her nails produced.

Charity seemed to consider him carefully, and he squirmed beneath the weight of her gaze. She looked suspicious. “Can we take a bubble bath with a bottle of wine like we used to?”

It was Taylor's turn to take an analytical look at her. Her pale blue eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint. Maybe he was imagining her suspicion. She couldn't possibly know anything about his little outings to the vampire bar.

“Of course.” Taylor's mind raced. A bath was no good, not until his wound healed. It stung as he thought of it, bringing his mind back to Sadie. “We still have that fancy bubble bath I brought you from Paris.”

“I want to save that for a special occasion.”

Losing interest in the bath, she began to chatter on about their upcoming nuptials. He smiled and nodded as she went on about a trip to Italy for the honeymoon. His dick was hard, and in his mind, he saw the ginger-haired vampiress as she leaned in to kiss him, a chaste press of her cold lips to his. Oh Lord, how he had wanted to fuck her. If only she hadn't given him an open invitation to keep coming back...

The waitress soon returned with their drinks and appetizer salads. Taylor encouraged Charity's chatter by asking questions and making comments at the right moments. The cool sweat that had afflicted him got steadily worse, and he rubbed the back of his neck absently.

“Are you feeling alright, hun?” Charity paused, her fork held aloft. “You're looking kind of pale.”

“Really?” Taylor slid his chair back and got to his feet. “I find it a tad hot in here. I'm just going to use the washroom. I'm fine; I'll be quick.” He grinned to reassure her, but he wasn't so sure himself.

When he reached the men's room, he went straight for the sink. Splashing cold water on his face and neck did little to help. Staring at his reflection, Taylor noted that he did indeed look incredibly pale. His short, chocolate brown hair and brown eyes made his skin look all the whiter.

The bite on his leg itched and tingled so he went into a stall to take a look at it. It looked fine. In fact, it looked as if it was healing a lot faster than any other puncture would. When he grazed his fingertips over the wound, a jolt of pleasure shot to his groin. He half considered jacking off to ease the sudden need but dismissed the idea. Knowing Charity, she would come looking for him if he stayed away too long.



After washing his hands and running his fingers through his hair, he turned to exit the washroom. Taylor hadn't really taken in his surroundings upon entering the restaurant. He'd been too caught up in the memory of being with the redheaded vampiress. As he headed toward his table, he casually glanced around, admiring the décor and the delicious looking meals on some of the tables he passed.

The strangest chill slipped down his spine, as if someone had just danced on his grave. Turning slightly to look behind him, Taylor tried to assess what was giving him the eerie sensation. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he bit back a small cry when his eyes landed on the couple seated on the far side of the room.

Taylor was almost beside himself as he took in the dark-haired man and his raven-tressed companion. He didn't recognize the woman at all. But, the man! Those golden-rimmed eyes sparkled across the distance, and Taylor's gut clenched. It was him. It had to be.

He stood dumbstruck, staring at the vampire he'd watched kill Lisa all those years ago. Here was the very creature that had changed everything for him, every belief, hope and dream. Taylor was stricken with as much horror and fear as he had been that night as he ran in terror through the darkened streets.

It made no sense, as the man he watched sat casually with a woman, leaning in with interest to hear what she had to say. Was she one of them, too, or just another meal to be had?

The blood drained from his face, and he felt faint. Was his mind playing tricks on him? Wishful thinking? No. That was him. There was no doubt in Taylor's mind that he was the same vampire, the one Taylor had thought he would never see again.

When the people at the table closest to Taylor gave him a questioning look, he forced his feet into action and returned to his seat. His heart was pounding, and his hands were shaking. He couldn't be mistaken. He would never forget that face.

The waitress had brought their food in his absence. Charity looked up from her plate and raised an eyebrow as she took in his appearance. "Taylor, I think you need to lay off the vampire hunting and start getting some sleep. You're not looking so hot."

A partition separated their side of the restaurant from the side where the vampire was. Taylor was dying to lay eyes on him again, but he managed to remain in his seat. "Yeah, I just need to get a night of good sleep," he replied absently, his eyes staring at the partition as if willing it to disappear. "I told you. I'm fine."

Charity eyed him but shrugged. "If you say so."

She would never understand. Taylor knew that. He had told her about what had happened to his former flame, and for the most part, she seemed to believe him. However, something prevented him from mentioning it to her now. Fear that she would laugh at him or maybe that she would want to approach the vampire at his table to see for herself. All of the possible scenarios that played in Taylor's mind had to be avoided.

Taylor began to eat despite his lack of appetite. All he could think about was being this close to the monster that he had been consumed by for years and being unable to do a damn thing about it.

His eyes continued to flick towards the restaurant exit. It was the only door so Taylor would see the vampire and his woman when they left. Then what would he do? Chase them out into the street? Ludicrous. If only Charity wasn't here, then he could tail them. He felt bad for having the thought, but it was true. This might be the only chance that he

would ever receive to get close to this vampire.

"Got a big date or something?" Charity asked, a humorless smile on her pretty face.

"Huh?" Taylor's cheeks grew warm as he realized she had caught him spacing out again.

"Why are you staring at the door? In a big hurry to leave?" She sipped from a pale pink cocktail and frowned. "Let me guess. You're thinking about the vampire bar that you've been visiting lately."

Taylor felt as if she'd slapped him across the face. "What?" How the hell could she know about that?

Charity looked absolutely insulted. "Give me a break, Taylor. I cracked the password on your computer a year ago. Do you really take me for that much of an idiot?"

"Of course not!" Heat flooded Taylor as he grew angry. So, she'd been snooping in his files. That meant there wasn't really anything that she didn't know by now.

"Then, why are you still hiding things from me? I thought this was about being a team."

They had both abandoned their forks now, staring intently across the table at each other. Taylor was in agony, resisting the urge to look towards the exit every time he heard the door chimes.

"We are a team, Charity, but you don't believe half the shit I tell you. And honestly, I don't think you really give a damn about any of this." His voice rose as he spoke, and he had to concentrate on keeping his cool. He didn't want to fight about this in a public place. It was bad enough at home.

Her blue eyes welled up, but she didn't cry. Instead, she picked up her purse and stalked out of the restaurant. Taylor watched her go, his mouth agape. What was it with women? Shit! You can't hide anything from them, but you can't share either. Not without paying for it with your balls.

Leaping to his feet, Taylor pulled enough cash out of his wallet to cover the bill before rushing out after her. She was just closing the door to a cab when he emerged onto the street. Dammit! He ran a hand through his hair in frustration, watching the taxi drive off. He would have to come home with his tail between his legs this time for sure.

Taylor and Charity had been together for five years, engaged for two of them. It was only in this past year that things had begun to break down. She thought that he was too self-involved and obsessed with the supernatural, and he found her to be a nag that showed little interest in anything but shopping and talk shows.

She had been a law student until her father died, leaving her a load of cash. Taylor had worked as a security guard for a private company, making a decent living. After the inheritance came, they each had more time for doing what they truly desired. They also had more time for bickering and driving each other crazy.

He turned to go back to the restaurant, to the parking lot where his car sat. He had almost passed the restaurant entrance when the door swung open and the knockout with the long black hair exited, followed closely by him, the vampire. Taylor almost stumbled to a halt as they brushed past, neither of them taking much notice of him.

Suddenly, his airway constricted, and he felt as if his breath caught in his throat. A hurricane of emotions battered him, and Taylor found himself turning to watch them. The vampire reached out, tentatively taking the hand of the fox at his side, and Taylor realized that they were on a date. Certainly, a monster out for a feed wouldn't go to all of this

trouble first.

He didn't know what to do. The curiously obsessed side of him wanted to follow them down the street, creeping along in the shadows so he could get a better look. The realist in him snapped into action, and he ran for his car, hoping he wouldn't lose them completely.

Taylor all but dove into his silver BMW, peeling out of the parking lot like a mad man. They couldn't have made it all that far. With the sound of his pounding heart in his ears, he ignored the middle fingers and horns that followed him as he raced through traffic.

Nothing. He couldn't find them anywhere. How was it possible that he had lost them that fast? Taylor was so caught up in his panicked assessment of their disappearance that he never noticed the jet-black Mustang Shelby pass through the intersection ahead of him, traveling opposite his own direction.

Circling the block for the next ten minutes proved to be useless. Wherever they were now, he wasn't going to find them. He'd lost his moment. The realization was numbing. A part of him wanted to weep and rage at his loss.

However, the fact remained that his vampire was here in the city. And, Taylor didn't plan to forget about that. Every suspicion and dark secret he had lived with for almost ten years had been confirmed. There was no chance in hell that he would lay this pursuit of the past to rest. In fact, it was just getting started.

## Chapter Eight

The headlights of the Shelby illuminated her rental car. Lyric licked her lips nervously, wishing she didn't have to leave the comforts of Jade's car. The Honda sat right where she'd left it, outside the club where she'd performed earlier. The time had flown since she'd been with him. It was hard to believe that it was already pushing three in the morning.

They had been talking for hours with an easygoing, natural repertoire. One moment they'd been making small talk while she sipped wine; the next she'd been laughing with a carefree ease that had surprised her. It felt like she'd known Jade forever. Nobody else had cajoled almost her entire life story from her. Before long she had told him all about growing up gifted, what that had been like and how she'd grown accustomed to it.

Sharing with Jade had felt right though, comfortable. It was a complete relief to her that he had accepted her vision so well. He hadn't acted as if she was out of her mind. It was refreshing not to have to worry about that, to be in the company of someone far more outlandish than she was.

"So?" Jade looked over at her, his eyes shining in the dim lighting. "Would it be completely inappropriate if I asked you to come back to my place?"

She couldn't hide the smile that lit up her face, curving her lips in manner that was more enticing than she realized. "I guess that depends what you have in mind," she teased. Lyric couldn't deny the incredible attraction that she had to Jade. He made her pulse pound in a way that no human man ever had.

Common sense told her to go home. Personal desire banished that idea. She knew if she said no to his request, she would live to regret it. And, not a single part of her wanted to leave him.

Jade raised an eyebrow and winked playfully. "I promise not to bite." He looked away, out the driver's side window at the night. His voice was low and smooth when he spoke again. "I'm not ready to let you go yet, Lyric. I'm enjoying your company far more than I should be."

"Why do you say that?" She waited pensively for his response, fearing that he would change his mind. After the past few days with him dominating her thoughts, she wasn't ready to let him go either.

When his gaze swung back to her, an icy chill slammed through her, like death itself. His pupils were deadly black and huge, obliterating any other color. Lyric's heart increased its tempo, but she wasn't truly afraid. Not yet.

"I'm a danger to you. The last thing I want to do is hurt you in any way." Jade gripped the steering wheel, his jaw clenched. Only the trembling of his hands indicated to Lyric how difficult this was for him. She was confused yet taken with the urge to comfort him.

"You saved me." It was all she had to offer, but in its simplicity, it seemed to be enough. Lyric was dying to touch him. She didn't dare try it though.

He seemed to be battling a war within himself. Lyric watched as a series of emotions swam behind Jade's predatory gaze. She saw that there was something more he wanted to add, but instead he nodded and said, "You don't have to come if you'd like to get home."

Lyric studied him, trying to analyze his body language and personal energy. He was nearly impossible to read. She felt like a smitten high school girl on her first date with the most popular guy in class. Of course, that was a scenario that Lyric had never experienced herself. She had always been the quiet, awkward girl. Always the best friend but never the chosen one.

“There is nowhere else in the world I would rather be right now, than here, with you.” Was that too much? Total overkill? She hoped not. It was how she felt, but whether it was right or not was another matter entirely.

Jade broke into a grin, and the sight of his sharp fangs in the dark interior of the car sent an excited tingle through Lyric's body. It was sensual and spoke to the woman in her, seducing her with the promise of more.

“Well then,” he gave her a smoldering look that turned her insides to jelly. “Let's be on our way.”

Though she'd worked hard to conceal it, Lyric had been terrified at the thought of never seeing Jade again. Was it unnatural to have been so heavily impacted by their brief first meeting? Perhaps she was influenced by the fact that he'd saved her. He was her hero.

Regardless of all of that, Lyric felt a calling to Jade, one that she had every intention of answering. He feared that he would hurt her, but she already knew better than that. He'd had hours in which he could have drained her dry. It wasn't going to happen.

Lyric had been known for her boldness in the past. Yet, she had never done something this potentially dangerous. Walking into the house of a vampire in the middle of the night was beyond stupid. And, she was going to do it.

Vampires. Who would believe it? She was grateful to have a few people in her life who did. Growing up gifted had been hard, especially before meeting Storm.

Though Lyric hadn't had personal experiences with vampires, she had been able to sense the difference in them, the undead presence and absence of living energy. Her grandmother had advised her to go out of her way to avoid attracting the attention of creatures like vampires and demons. That warning had been taken to heart.

Until now, she'd wanted nothing to do with creatures of the night. Ignorantly, she had believed that they were pure evil. Jade had disproved that assumption. Lyric knew that she might be rushing into this blindly, stupidly. However, if she didn't, she would always wonder about Jade Kenyan and what might have been.

When they pulled into the driveway of a moderately sized house with a gorgeous yard, she realized that Jade was entrusting her with his most vital, sacred piece of information: his personal resting place. That kind of information could make him very vulnerable. She was overcome at the realization.

“Are you sure you don't mind leaving that rental car until morning?” Jade climbed from the car and came to take her hand. His skin was cool to the touch yet left a warm tingle where it touched Lyric's. His touch sent a rush of blood to her sex that left her breathless.

“Not at all,” she murmured, allowing him to lead her up the flower lined walk. Lyric was impressed with the lengths he clearly went to in order to make his home lovely. She said as much, admiring a giant rose bush next to the front step.

Jade made a dismissive noise, as if it wasn't worth mentioning. He paused at the top step, reaching to pluck one of the vibrant red roses. Twirling it in his hand, he handed it

to her with a grand gesture. "For you, my dear. Though, it certainly pales in comparison to your beauty. I can't imagine anything that wouldn't."

Lyric accepted the rose, careful of the thorns. She quickly pressed her face to the soft, cold petals and inhaled deeply. Her heart soared at his words. The blush that turned her cheeks pink sent a hot rush through her body. A warning whispered through her mind, but she knew that it was already too late to guard her heart. With a small sigh, she followed him inside.

Jade's house was decorated like any other normal home would be. Pictures hung along the walls, some of them appeared to be incredibly old. His home had a warm and cozy feeling that drew her in, made her feel safe. The house was large, but it wasn't enormous. The warm-toned walls and soft carpet encouraged the illusion that Jade was no different from anyone else.

When Lyric sat perched on the cream-colored sofa, she gasped as Jade merely gestured to the fireplace and it burst into flame. "I guess it doesn't come without its perks, huh?" she asked, nodding towards the fire when he pressed a glass of red wine into her hand.

"You could say that. It certainly isn't without its downfalls though." Jade sat next to her, close enough that their thighs touched. "Tell me how you like the wine. It's some of my best, a gift from Griffin."

Lyric took a gracious sip of the wine, rolling it around in her mouth to explore its full flavor. "He was nothing less than a gentleman. And, the wine is good. He clearly knows how to select it. It's a shame you can't partake."

Jade's low laugh stirred her. "A gentleman? Griffin? I'm shocked to hear it."

"Really? But, he was so nice. He kept me from becoming a midnight snack for that disgusting animal." Just the thought of the vampire in the trendy Goth club caused Lyric to shudder.

"He kept that piece of shit from having me personally tear him to pieces." Jade glared at the floor, his hands clenched into fists.

Lyric was curious about Griffin and the past that Jade shared with him. She was entranced by the vast history that he had, the eras he had lived through that she could only read about. "Tell me more about him. Griffin. And you. How did you come to know this life, Jade?"

Silence descended, and after a minute, Lyric thought that perhaps she shouldn't have asked. Jade's eyes were still black as sin. The barest trace of gold lined the black, drawing Lyric's eye. It was just so easy to fall into the abyss of his gaze, to give in to that predatory pull. It was almost too easy to abandon the notion of resistance.

When Jade began to speak, Lyric realized that she had been completely captivated. A jolt of fear shot through when it became clear that she'd been looking at him as if he were the potential food source. She wanted to feel him take her in his arms, to writhe beneath him as he sank fangs deep into her throat. It came as a shock to Lyric, how natural it was for the vampire to have such power over her. Had he even tried?

"Griffin has been a part of my life for almost four centuries. We happened upon each other one evening when out for a hunt. Unlike most vampires who prefer to hunt and feed alone, Griffin is the type of guy that likes to share a good time. Within reason." Jade maintained steady eye contact, watching Lyric as he spoke. She settled deeper into the couch cushions, intrigued. "We formed a friendship, something that is not so easy for our

kind. Trust isn't something we dole out generously. Over the years we got into our share of interesting situations, many I was grateful to get out of.”

Jade chuckled and looked into the blazing fire. Lyric got the sense that he was reminiscing, and she wished she could see inside his head, see whatever he was seeing. She couldn't say that her entire life was a snooze, but she doubted it was so exciting. Everything told her not to go down that dark path, but once the question formed in her mind, she had to ask. “Would it be wrong? If I asked you how...”

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Jade had known the question was coming. If she hadn't asked tonight, she would have eventually. Wasn't it better to tell her these things about himself now? It would give her the opportunity to change her mind before she got further involved with him.

...Before he could fall in love with her.

“How I became a vampire? Are you sure you really want to know?” He tried to smile playfully, but it didn't reach his eyes. He was seriously asking her.

She was so close. The scent of her was intoxicating, sweet and seductively feminine. Inhaling it deeply caused him to grow hard. The need to taste her blood was like a drowning man's need for air. He wasn't new to the bloodlust, he could control it now. But, something about her threatened to strip that control away and release the beast caged inside him.

“Only if you want to tell me. I probably shouldn't have asked.” Lyric peeked out at him from beneath her long lashes. “Sorry.”

Disobeying the voice in his head, Jade reached for her hand. “Don't be. It's no secret.” The warmth of her skin was enough to stimulate his hunger to a whole new level. He didn't see her as a victim, though that's not to say he didn't find her to be a delectable blood source. He groaned inwardly and forced himself to keep talking.

“It was a friend, actually. Rafe. He was almost like a brother. I didn't even know about him, what he was.” Even deep in remembrance, Jade watched Lyric as he spoke. She glanced down at their joined hands and gave his a light squeeze. “I was poisoned, after sleeping with a married woman. It's not something I'm proud of. Her husband tried to have me killed. I was at death's door. And, Rafe offered me a choice.”

“So naturally, you took the opportunity to escape death.” Lyric used her free hand to stroke a soft line up the back of his hand. “Most of us would in a moment like that.”

How could she be so understanding about everything? If she knew some of the things he'd done in his time, she would run screaming out of the house. Her touch felt like heaven, and he longed to drag her to him, to press his body to hers.

Jade's undoing was his lingering fear, haunting him from days that now existed only in history books. This wasn't the same, he knew that. Yet, he couldn't shake the apprehension that crept through him like an unwelcome shadow.

“Well,” he said, shaking off the tension that had enveloped him. “That was the beginning of it all. It would take a lifetime for me to tell you everything. Literally.”

Lyric smiled up at him, her full lips enticing him. “The beginning of everything that led you to this very moment.”

The tension seeped from his body, gone as fast as it had come. She was right. Every single thing he had seen and done had somehow led him to be right here, right now, with her. And, for that, he wouldn't have changed a thing.

Jade was beyond ensnared. She had him, and she didn't even know it. He wanted her

too much. The desire struck him with an agonizing intensity. God, how he wanted to love her in every way, in ways that humans could never imagine in their wildest dreams.

As he watched her lift the delicate crystal wine glass to her scarlet painted lips, he imagined the taste as she moved it around in her mouth before swallowing the fine, aged nectar. Everything inside him said that this was his moment, take it now before it was ruined. Jade stared at her as if she was sunlight itself, awestruck and a little bit afraid.

Acting on desire and abandoning logic, he reached for her. Tipping her head up, he closed the distance fast, pressing his lips to hers. The taste of wine greeted him and along with it, the taste of Lyric. When she didn't pull away, he gently but firmly deepened the kiss.

She was sweet, and breathing her in was like the breath of fresh air that Jade didn't know he'd been missing. The bloodlust was strong when he slipped his tongue into her mouth. Without doubt, a part of him wanted to drain her dry, to draw out every moment and revel in the bloodshed. Yet, the urge to take her, to make love to her until he was beyond the ability to do so, was even stronger than the urge to spill her blood. When Lyric began to kiss him back with an unexpected fervor, Jade was awash with relief and something more, exhilaration.

Jade swept the hot confines of her mouth with his tongue. The taste of her caused his erection to ache. He was afraid to touch her too much; her temptations could overcome him, and there would be no going back. He wanted her though, in a way that was thorough and all encompassing.

Wine splashed onto the carpet from the glass that Lyric held tilted in her hand. Jade grabbed it from her and set it onto the coffee table.

As his passion grew to consume him, he shoved a hand into her soft locks, the sensation targeting every one of his weaknesses. He devoured her like a lion with his kill. She was everything that he hungered for.

Lyric made a small sound, a combination between a murmur and a sigh. Her arms went around his neck, and Jade groaned. He couldn't let this go too far. Not until he knew she was willing and not just responding to the allure of his predatory nature. Being intimate with a vampire was not without its sacrifices. Did she even know how close to death she walked?

The softness of her lips and her hands on his cool flesh was almost too much. He couldn't remember the last time the touch of a woman had felt so right. Her long hair spilled over his hand, enticing him to bury his face in its warmth. Gently nibbling her lower lip, he kissed his way down her exposed throat.

Her pulse leaped when he pressed his lips to her jugular vein. Jade sensed the blood rushing throughout her body; he could smell her desire and excitement. She was absent of fear when his tongue lovingly caressed her skin. She tasted exquisite.

The urge to pierce through that satin soft flesh was too much. The sound of her heart beating reverberated inside his head, driving Jade to take everything he lusted for. An image flashed behind his eyes, blood running from Lyric's neck to stain her pale white skin as he fed from her. His fangs grazed her throat, and she shuddered in his arms.

His hunger grew along with his physical lust. Only as he bared his fangs did he realize what he was doing. Jade all but pushed her away in his sudden attempt to put space between them. Fear coursed through him, and he stared at her, horror etched on his handsome face.



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“What's wrong?” Lyric was breathless and confused. Jade was staring at her as if she'd just ran over his dog. “Are you ok?”

Her heart thundered in her ears, and she struggled to calm it by taking deep breaths. Her lips were swollen from his kiss, creating a tingle she felt all the way to the warm place between her thighs. She was ready for him; his touch ignited a passion that she had never known was possible.

When she moved toward him on the couch, he held up a hand to ward her off. “I don't want to hurt you, Lyric. Please, try to understand. This isn't easy for me. I don't know how to be with you without bleeding you.”

“It looks like you're doing fine to me.” It struck her on a deep level, this fear he had that he would harm her. She had more faith in Jade than he had in himself. Something was so wrong about that.

Slowly, cautiously, Lyric inched closer to him on the couch. He watched her warily, the tension within him showing clearly in his eyes. “Lyric,” he warned. “I'm serious. I don't just kiss pretty girls and let them go. I kill them.”

She was sure that he was trying to frighten her, if only because he was so frightened of himself. There was no doubt in Lyric's mind that if Jade truly meant her harm, he wouldn't hesitate to feast on her blood. The fact that she wasn't dead already told her enough.

“Why not me, Jade? What makes me worth sparing? What sets me apart from the rest?”

Jade looked at her with an unspoken agony in his eyes, but his expression softened. “When I look at you, I feel something that goes beyond anything I've felt for any woman. I don't know where it comes from. But, now that I've found you, I can't imagine not having you.” He glanced away, into the fire.

A small smile played about Lyric's red lips. She continued to slowly close the distance he'd put between them. “Then you need to start trusting yourself. I don't believe you're going to hurt me.”

“You don't even know me.”

“And yet, I still trust you.”

“You shouldn't.”

When she was close enough to touch him again, she paused. “Too late for warnings.” Ever so slowly, Lyric reached up to run a hand along the side of Jade's strong jaw. She outlined his lower lip with her finger before leaning in to press her lips to his, needing to feel him.

“Lyric.” Her name came out as a whisper. Jade showed no other resistance as she kissed him with total abandon.

“No worries,” she spoke low, in between kisses. “Take it slow and just hold me. I want to feel you.” Common sense shouted at Lyric that she should be afraid. The power emanating from Jade was so far from human that it should have kept her at a distance. She couldn't heed the warnings going off in the back of her mind. They held no sway over her. Emotion and instinct guided her, and she willingly followed.

Jade's hesitance seemed to fall away at her soothing words. He pulled her into his embrace, and she snuggled in against him. In that moment, he could have killed her, and Lyric would have died happy.

## Chapter Nine

Lyric's insides were twisted with eager anxiety. All she wanted was to feel Jade's cool skin pressed against her naked flesh. Never before had any man elicited this kind of response in her. She longed for him with a desperation that commanded her. She knew what she was doing though, and the anticipation was killing her.

Jade kissed her as if she were a fine dessert to be savored as it was devoured. His taste held a sweetness that she couldn't get enough of. Kissing him with all she had, the head-spinning sensations brought her alive with a new hunger that was all for him. Jade's hand moved through her hair, down her body, anywhere that he could touch her. She sensed a solemn longing in him, a need greater than she understood.

Throwing her arms around his neck, she consciously made the decision to abandon all reason and self-control. Whatever happened now was all up to fate and circumstance. She hoped that Jade would join her and let go of all that was holding him back.

When he picked her up in his strong arms, a thrill shot through her as he carried her beyond the living room and down the stairs that led to his bedroom. The adrenaline hit her like a ton of bricks, forcing her breath to come in little bursts. Sensing the increase in her heartbeat, he smiled, a sensual pull of his lips that revealed his fangs.

"I hope it's alright," Jade said, nudging the door to his bedroom open with a foot. "I'm not really set up to entertain ladies. It's in need of a woman's touch."

Lyric took in the room with an eager eye, finding it bare but comforting. The bed and bureau matched, a fine oak set in a warm color. A few framed photos of nature scenes hung above each. Despite its lack of windows, Lyric felt at home in Jade's room.

He gingerly laid her on the bed, bending over her as he did so. Claiming her lips again, he slowly ran a hand up her bare leg to her thigh. Lyric gave a small gasp and bit gently at his lower lip. The scent and feel of him dominated her senses. All she could focus on was Jade, all around her. When his hands continued to slide up her body, she held her breath in anticipation.

Ever so slowly, Jade freed Lyric of her clothing with an expert hand. With the removal of every piece of fabric, she trembled in his arms. As he peeled away her soft, black bra, her breasts spilled free. Jade was quick to capture them in his hands as he kissed her. His touch was possessive but tender. She stretched languidly, reveling in his sensual affections.

She reached for him, pulling at his shirt so that she could run her hands over his stomach and lower back. His muscles rippled beneath her fingers. Jade gave a small groan when her hands moved up his chest, exploring every inch of skin as she went. The electricity between them sparked hot wherever their flesh touched.

Jade's lips were hot on her neck as he kissed his way down her jaw to her throat. He licked and sucked at her pale skin, leaving a moist trail as he went. Lyric's hands came up to entangle in his long hair as he made his way down to her breasts. She gasped sharply when he took one of her nipples in his mouth. Swirling his tongue around it in a manner that had her breathing hard, he quickly brought it to a firm point.

Moving to lavish the same attention on her other breast, Jade also began to tug at her leggings, slipping them down her legs and onto the floor. He didn't rush to remove her

lacy red G-string though. Instead, his hand played with the flimsy string at her hip. His sharp fangs grazed a light trail over her breast, leaving a faint red mark. Despite the passion-induced frenzy that she was caught up in, Lyric couldn't help but wonder if it was hard for Jade to control the urge to bite her.

His loving tribute to her breasts made Lyric feel worshiped. Still, she felt no fear, trusting him completely. She pulled at his clothing, finding it unfair that he could touch so much of her while she was so limited. She was desperate to feel his body beneath her fingertips and between her legs.

He rose up above her and peeled his shirt off, baring the full expanse of his upper body for her viewing pleasure. She flashed him an eager look, but she had no way of knowing what it did to him. When he came within reach again, she grabbed him with an aggressive desire that shot the level of ardor to a ravenous high. If Jade had been trying to hold back, he didn't try any longer.

He reached to draw her skimpy underwear to the side so that his hand could access her soft, feminine place. As Lyric reached to caress the sparse hairs that trailed down to disappear inside his jeans, Jade dipped a finger into her opening. She was wet and ready for him. She moaned when he slid a finger deep inside, her body clenching in response.

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The sound of Lyric's pleasure was overwhelming. It stirred responses in Jade that had long lay dormant. The sensations of her body as it gripped his finger tightly were causing his cock to ache as it throbbed. She was so wet for him already. It was killing him to prolong this moment when all he wanted to do was fill her.

The temptation to bite into her supple human veins was enormous. Jade had been playing this game long enough to maintain control, but it wasn't easy. The need to taste her blood as it spilled over his tongue was undying.

No words could describe how marvelous Lyric tasted: sweet like apples with a spice of ginger and something more that was all her own. Every time his lips touched her flesh, he went to heaven. He could have breathed her scent in and tasted of her all night. As it was, he was eager to move on to other things.

Lyric shuddered as he worked his fingers in and out of her inviting sheath. The lust rolling off her was almost enough to convince Jade to take her right then. He wanted to savor this moment, loving every second that she wanted him with a hunger this immense. She wanted him and not because he'd lured her like a predator with prey. Lyric saw him as a man, a person, not just a monster. As hard as it was to wrap his mind around that, Jade found that he longed to get used to it.

Her responses were encouraging. A purring sound came from her that brought a smile to his lips. He delved inside her, as deep as he could reach, dying to replace his finger with his shaft. She moved against him in a rhythmic manner, seeking to feel more of him. Kissing his way down her body, Jade lingered over her navel, dipping his tongue inside to make her squirm.

By the time he dared to truly taste her, a glistening sheen of sweat adorned her skin. At the slightest touch of his tongue to her pink folds, Lyric's body clenched tightly, and she gave a small cry. Tracing a moist line to the most sensitive part of her, he drew the tiny nub into his mouth. Her heart beat faster, and Jade felt as if the sound of it was inside his head. He loved her with his tongue until her muscles spasmed around his finger, and she came with his name as a whisper on her lips.

Jade quickly abandoned the remainder of his clothing. He couldn't pull his eyes away from the exquisite, naked beauty on the bed before him. His mortal woman couldn't have been more perfect. His woman ... yes, she most definitely was.

Lyric stared up at him with a dazed expression. She lifted her hips when he slid the thong underwear down her legs and tossed them aside. Nudging her legs apart, Jade crawled onto the bed between them, kissing her ruby lips as if it were the first time all over again. She sighed softly and wrapped her arms around his neck, her small hands playing in his hair.

The head of his sex pressed against her moist warmth, and he hesitated, meeting her eyes. He gave her one last chance, one moment to change her mind. When she just looked at him expectantly with her lower lip caught between her teeth, he threw caution to the wind.

Though his urgent desire insisted that he be inside her now, Jade wanted to savor this moment forever. Entering her slowly, he embraced every sensation as her body opened to receive him. She was so deliciously slick and tight, sheathing him perfectly, as if they'd been made for one another.

Her fingers tightened ever so slightly in his hair as he began to thrust in a steady rhythm. Her milky white breasts bounced gently in time with his thrusts. With her head thrown back and eyes closed, Lyric moaned. Her pleasure was his priority. Jade wanted this to be all for her. Yet, when he plunged deep, burying himself fully inside her, he thought he would die from the extreme sensations. She wrapped her legs tightly around his lower back, holding him deep within her as they writhed together as one.

He kissed her then, a hard bruising kiss. She responded with a hunger to match his own. Giving a sudden cry, Lyric convulsed, and her hot sex gripped him hard. The orgasmic energy oozed from her as she came. It tantalized Jade, causing him to ache for her blood. Despite the urgent hunger, he was already head over heels in love with the woman in his arms, and he would die before he would lay fangs on her.

When Lyric had caught her breath, he carefully rolled them over so that she sat atop him. The view was entrancing. His eyes roved over her, watching as she lifted off his cock and slid back down, taking him in until no space remained between them. Black hair fell over her shoulders and down her back; her blue eyes virtually shined.

She had control, and she used it. He watched her move with a fluid grace on top of him. She rode Jade hard until he groaned with the agony that it took to hold back. He didn't want to climax yet, didn't want it to be over. He belonged buried deep inside of her; he was sure of it. Yet, when she began to cry out, he groaned and succumbed to the pleasure.

Jade's arms went around Lyric, pulling her down so he could kiss her tenderly. The orgasm rocked him, forcing her name from between his lips as he pressed them to hers. Her body instinctually responded to his, gripping his cock tightly as he released inside her.

She collapsed on his chest, clinging to him with an urgency that knew no bounds. He held her as if he'd never let go. Stroking her hair, he murmured soft words in her ear. "I think I've fallen in love with you, Lyric Morrison. And, if fate makes a fool of me for doing so, then so be it."

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The flash of the lighter was blinding in the dark as Taylor lit a cigarette. Drawing the harsh fumes into his lungs, he savored the wickedly enjoyable sensation before exhaling. He glanced at Sadie, who lay sprawled on the seat beside him. It was hard to see anything but her outline in the pale glow of the cigarette.

He felt higher than he'd ever been as a drug-induced youth. The thrill he got from his time with Sadie was unreal, bigger than any intoxicant he'd ever ingested. However, the addiction was just as deadly.

Tonight had been different. Taylor had gone home to discover Charity locked in the bedroom, unwilling to speak to him. After a shouting match through the door, he'd grabbed his jacket and gone to Cry. And, this time when Sadie had taken his hand to lead him down to the hidden blood chamber, he had instead led her outside where they had fucked in his car as she bled him.

Taylor's head fell back against the seat when Sadie grasped his shaft tightly. She pumped him in her hand until he grew rigid again. He was glad they'd come out to his car instead of going down to the lower level of Cry. Though he'd never admit it out loud, it scared the shit out of him down there.

The first time she'd taken him there, he had watched as several vampires had their way with a woman. Whether she was willing or not had been irrelevant because they'd killed her anyway. Of all of the strange and morbid things he had witnessed in the basement of Cry, Taylor had never been able to wipe that memory from his mind. It had penetrated deep inside him, and yet he kept coming back.

A groan escaped him as Sadie moved so that she straddled him. The short, curly hairs of her sex tickled his groin. Her fingernails left pale, red scratches along his chest as she dragged them down to his abdomen. Even in the dark, Taylor could see that her expression was hungry. She hadn't had her fill of him yet.

He wondered if she ever planned to kill him and why she hadn't yet. Taylor wasn't stupid enough to believe he was her one and only. He got as much from her as she did from him, but there was nothing more to their relationship. Eventually, she would tire of him and then take his life along with his blood.

The heat of her pussy banished the thoughts from his mind as she plunged down on him, taking him deep inside her. The heady swirl of vampire power caught him up in its intensity. Even as he gladly gave in to the manipulating rush, he knew that he wanted more. Now that Taylor had seen the vampire who killed Lisa, he was determined. Somehow, he would get his moment, his payback.

Even as Sadie moved on him with the expert skills of one who had been pleasing men for many lifetimes, the thoughts continued to churn in his brain. The vampire that Taylor so badly wanted, he might not come here to Cry, but he wasn't far. And, he consorted with human women.

Another thought struck Taylor then, and his pulse pounded harder. Had Lisa somehow been involved with the vampire behind his back? Or, had she simply been the unfortunate choice of a hungry predator?

He squeezed Sadie's firm ass as he enjoyed the small noises she made. With one hand, he reached for one of her small but nicely shaped breasts. He circled the nipple softly, and she began to move faster, sliding up and down on him with slippery ease.

The atmosphere grew heavy with their sexual energy. Taylor's arousal grew to the breaking point as he looked up at her spectacular body. Being inside her was mind

blowing, and he gripped her hips to control her movements. The first orgasmic sensations had his cock twitching.

He felt the muscles spasm inside her as she climaxed. As she did so, she leaned in to him, sinking her fangs into the side of his neck. It pulled a small cry from him, one that was both pleasure and pain. His hand dropped to his side, and when the orgasm washed over him, it was even better than the first time. The sensations were mind shattering.

Taylor struggled to stay in control as Sadie's power sought to draw him in and make him into her willing slave. His seed filled her as she simultaneously sucked his lifeblood.

Slipping a hand down beside the seat, Taylor gripped the stake and withdrew it in one smooth motion. Everything within him cried out as he went against the obedient urges her power encouraged in him.

With one hand, he shoved her back and brought the stake down hard. Slamming it into her chest, he froze with fear when nothing happened. Then all of a sudden, Sadie let out a shriek like an animal caught in a trap. Her wail cut off abruptly as she exploded in a shower of dust, ash and bone.

Taylor's entire body vibrated as the remnants of Sadie fell all around him. The backseat of his car was a mess. He stared around in shock; the stake fell from his hand to clatter to the floor. A slow smile spread across his face. Goddamn vampires.

He was so incredibly pleased with himself as he drove home. So much so that he almost missed the poster plastered on the side of the bus stop. As he pulled to a stop at a red light, he just happened to glance over.

It was her! The dark-haired woman he had seen with the vampire. Taylor did a double take before pulling over to get a better look. He couldn't believe his luck tonight.

It was her alright, along with a handful of other gorgeous women. So, she was a burlesque dancer. Of course, why shouldn't she be something undeniably sexy? According to the poster, she had a show coming up with her fellow dancers.

The wheels started to turn in Taylor's brain with ideas forming that he couldn't help but entertain. No question, he would be at that show.

## Chapter Ten

The ear-piercing shriek of the alarm clock brought Lyric awake with a start. Fumbling to remove the beauty mask she slept with, she reached for the clock with a fist. Groaning, she rolled over in bed to squint at the sunlight glaring through her window. It couldn't be noon already, could it? She did not feel at all like getting up to face the world.

It had been an hour past sunrise when she'd taken a taxi to her rental car, from there heading home. Tearing herself away from Jade had been the worst agony. A lazy grin spread across her face at the thought of him. After he'd stopped psyching himself out, everything had gone smoothly. She couldn't have asked for it to be any better. Jade's touch was tender. Closing her eyes, she let the memory of their lovemaking warm her.

With a sigh, she thought back to his insistence that he was bad news for her. He'd really thought he would hurt her. Logically, Lyric was probably a fool to think otherwise. Still, she had no reason not to trust him, killer or not.

Lyric most certainly did fear vampires. She was terrified when she recalled the slime Griffin had saved her from. She didn't see Jade the same way. He had already proven himself to be different. With his scent still on her skin and a pleasurable ache between her legs, she couldn't have been happier. If only she could lie in bed all afternoon and enjoy the afterglow.

As it was, duty called, and she had little choice other than to get up and get ready to meet the other Scarlet Ladies. They were going to spend some time practicing their routine before the show that night at one of the clubs where they performed regularly. Fridays and Saturdays were always booked up for the dance troupe. In just over a year, they had become a regular name in the local nightlife.

Frisk wound his way around Lyric's ankles as she moved about the kitchen, fetching tea and making toast. Even her furry friend seemed to notice how lost in thought she was. She seemed to eat in a robotic fashion, her mind elsewhere. Naturally, a shadow of doubt rained on her parade. She couldn't help it when a thought flickered through her mind, unbidden.

What was she thinking would happen with her and Jade? Was he going to just stand by and watch her grow old and die? The alternative was beyond ridiculous, not to mention irrational.

She gave her head a shake and quickly tidied the kitchen. It wasn't worth thinking about. All she knew was that she would settle for any time with him, even if last night were the start and the end of it. That thought didn't sit so well with her so she shoved it aside. This wasn't the time to be a love-struck, swooning female. She had to focus on the here and now, not think about the way he made her feel nor the fact that the thought of never seeing him again felt like someone was carving a hole in her insides.

It hit her then, like a waking dream, shocking her to the core. The vision flashed behind her eyes for the briefest of moments, but she saw it clearly. The image was her with extremely pale skin and glittering eyes paired with razor sharp fangs. Then it was gone as fast as it had come. Uncanny. For a moment, she almost doubted that she'd really seen it.

Try as she might, Lyric just couldn't shake Jade from her thoughts. On her way to the

club to meet the girls, the visions she'd had recently haunted her. She couldn't know anything further unless she had another vision. She had a job to focus on, yet she couldn't help but worry.

Once she was fully immersed in her working environment, she began to relax. Jade was a vampire, and she was not. Whatever the future held would be revealed in good time.

By the time Lyric was all dolled up and ready to perform, the excitement she always felt was flooding her. The sun had since set, and the club was beginning to fill with people. She kept reaching into her purse to check her cell phone for missed calls. Nothing. After she'd checked for the fourth time, Storm took notice and raised her eyebrows in question.

"What's with you, Lyric?" She asked, a smile quirking her painted red lips. "Who are you waiting to hear from?"

Blushing, Lyric debated on how much to tell, but this was her best friend. How could she resist? "I saw him, last night. The vampire."

"What? I had a feeling that's why you snuck out of here so fast. Tell me everything." Storm looked intrigued. She waited for Lyric's response while trying to secure a sparkling hair accessory into her blonde mane.

"He took me out, and we talked. It was nice." Lyric couldn't help the giggle that came out. She was a terrible liar. She turned to the mirror, pretending to fix her lipstick to avoid Storm's scrutiny.

"You're hiding something. Come on, tell me." Storm gave her a nudge. "And please, help me with this damn hair piece?"

Lyric set to fixing the other dancer's hair, using it as a way to avoid making eye contact. "Maybe I'm hiding a little but only because I don't want to jinx anything."

"You're completely glowing, lady. There's only one thing that gets a woman glowing like that. I want details. Ouch."

"Sorry," Lyric grimaced as she fought with the hairpiece. "There. How's that?"

"Better, thanks." Storm gave her head a toss, ensuring everything was in place. "So, when do I get to hear all of the juicy bits? I can't believe you slept with him already."

Before Lyric was forced to answer, Brit breezed into the room, barking out orders. "We've got five minutes until show time, girls. Are you all ready? Get lined up in the order you'll be going out." She clapped her hands for effect, and Storm rolled her eyes.

The petite choreographer paid no attention to her. She was used to the girls joking about her being a drill sergeant. Pushing a hand through her short, spiky, purple hair, she continued to herd them out of the dressing room. After a few last glimpses in the mirror and a touch of perfume or lipstick, the troupe managed to get organized and on their way.

Lyric fell in line with the other girls, and a wave of pre-show jitters swept her. Leaving the brightly lit dressing room to enter the dark backstage area, she was awash with the energy of the waiting crowd. She couldn't help but be affected by the excitement. Lyric genuinely enjoyed what she did for a living. It wasn't the kind of thing she would be doing her entire life. Shoving all thoughts of Jade aside for now, she looked ahead to the stage and the audience that awaited.

\* \* \* \*

Guilt had no place within Jade when the bloodlust ruled him. He lived for the kill.



The tenderness that had awoken in him with the arrival of Lyric in his life was blessedly absent. When his eyes opened at sunset, the hunger greeted him with a vengeance.

He didn't want to think about what that might have been like if she'd been there with him. Waking up beside her living, breathing body could strip away his control. The blood hunger made him more monster than man. Would he really hurt her in such a state? It was a risk Jade wasn't sure that he was willing to take.

Even the thought of Lyric drove his hunger to a frenzied state. Again, that image entered his mind, blood splashing down her alabaster skin, spilling from two brutal punctures in her throat. The visual stirred his cock to life, and he cursed. He was no better than a rabid animal in this state. Lyric could never see him like this. There was no question.

Tonight Jade hunted the downtown district where the trendy nightclubs constantly spewed drunken twenty-somethings onto the street. There was no rhyme or reason to whom he would choose; he would do anything to ease the maniacal craving. Whether or not he would be able to leave his victim alive remained to be seen.

Jade didn't kill every night. The bodies would be piling up outrageously if he did. He did kill regularly though, and he didn't think that he could ever change. For that matter, it wasn't something he had any desire to change. It was what he was. Yet, he didn't feel like that was good enough for Lyric.

Jade laughed bitterly to himself, kicking a Styrofoam coffee cup that lay in his path. He hadn't cared before. Live or die, they were all expendable to him. Jade had detached himself from any emotion he'd once felt for the human race. He couldn't even remember what it was like to be one of them. Looking back on it, it felt like someone else's life.

His usual game of baiting a lone female and luring her out with him held no interest at all. He just wanted to kill and get it over with. Satisfying the pain of resistance was his priority. He'd found it hard enough to refuse the urge to invite Griffin out for a night of debauchery and bloodshed like the good old days. But, what would he have gained by reaching into the past?

A trio of giggling girls brushed past him, one of them eyeing him hungrily as if he were the one on the menu. They were barely legal, so Jade continued to walk without dragging her into the shadows. Frustration turned his mood sour. He ignored a prostitute that glared at him with challenge in her eyes. It was entirely possible that she had reason to.

Welcome to the night. He chuckled at the thought. The night was a very disturbing place to be, a lifestyle all its own. Those who did not truly live among it were blinded by illusions. Beyond the surface, there was more evil than any six o'clock newscast would ever capture. And, he was dragging Lyric into that.

He shoved thoughts of her from his mind. The way he reacted to the bloody visuals was disgusting him, and he wanted to avoid it at all costs. No more thinking; it was hindering the hunt, reminding him that something existed beyond the dark world to which he belonged.

Acting on instinct rather than thought, Jade prowled along the busy nightclub strip. The next opportunity that presented itself, he was taking. Crossing a side street, he eyed the bar with flashing neon lights on the corner. Too easy. No sooner had he approached than a woman walked out the door, chatting away on her cell phone.

It hit the ground hard; the screen went blank. Jade dragged her down the empty side

street before she could cry out in surprise. Pulling her small frame against his hard body, he clamped a hand over her mouth and pushed her hair aside. Biting into her neck, he had enough conscious thought left to avoid a fatal bite. Feeding without the kill wasn't in his nature. This last minute decision was made purely because of Lyric.

Whom did Jade really think he was kidding? Avoiding murder once or twice would never make him worthy of her. He was playing a role: the good, remorseful vampire. It wasn't him though. He did not detest his need for blood. He enjoyed it. And, try as he might to pretend he loathed his existence, he wasn't fooling himself.

Sucking hard at the wound, Jade took great pleasure in the pained cry it wrenched from his victim. His fingers dug into her upper arms where he held her, leaving angry red marks on her skin. Brutality wasn't his deal, and try as he might, the craving for the kill was more than he could take. Her blood was warm on his tongue, coating his throat and sparking a fire within his core.

If he didn't stop now, he was going to kill her. Jade didn't want to stop, and the harder he tried, the more impossible it became. The frenzy grew within him until it was maddening. If he'd just stop resisting...

Jade shoved the girl away from him, causing her to stumble. He didn't wait around to see if she was alright. He melted into the night as if he'd never been there. Her shrieks began in earnest, but he was already gone.

The savage hunger still drove him as he strode with stealth down an alley. When he reached a deep point in the alley where nobody else lurked, he unleashed his fury on a nearby garbage dumpster. Lashing out with a fist resulted in bloody knuckles and a blow to his pride. It didn't make a damn bit of difference, but it felt good to let it out.

A primal sound rumbled low in his throat, a growl. The loss of his victim resonated throughout his entire being. Jade rushed down the dark alley, uncaring and unseeing. He sought one thing. As he neared the end of the alley, a flurry of scents and sound struck him with a new intensity. Pausing to take it all in, he was contemplating his destination when a sound came from behind him.

Turning defensively, he was pleasantly surprised to find a man holding a bag of garbage, staring at him with caution. He would do just fine. Jade lunged at the man, a cool hand snaking out to wrap around his throat. The trash bag fell, forgotten.

This time Jade made no attempt to go easy. His hunger was ravenous, and his will belonged to it. He plunged fangs deep into the man's artery, overwhelmed by the crimson river that suddenly poured forth. A hot rush enveloped Jade as he drank down the heady nectar. Not once did he hesitate or consider stopping until the life had been drained from his victim and the painful ache inside him eased.

A high-pitched ringing sounded in his ears as the blood and power coursed through him. He could have collapsed against the dumpster and lazily enjoyed the maddening rush. A warm sense of comfort filled him, and his sanity slowly began to return. A smile played along his lips.

Taking a moment to smooth back his disheveled hair, Jade languorously licked his lips before turning to go. This kill had been intense. His prior resistance had enhanced the impact and left him reeling. Try as he might, he couldn't wipe the grin from his face. Feeling satisfied and eager, he dug his car keys from his pocket and headed for the lot where he'd left his car.

Jade felt so good that he considered calling Griffin. Surely, his old pal would be up

for a night of bloodshed and mayhem. The thought was so tempting. Even more tempting was Lyric. She was performing tonight. With the bloodlust appeased, he had no reason not to be there. Watching her dance swept him away to a different place, a world where nothing existed but the two of them. If only...

Relinquishing his hold on the desire to wreak havoc with Griffin, he focused on seeing his beautiful mortal woman. His woman. The thought came so naturally. Jade felt better about himself in Lyric's presence. The man inside him was free to think, just to be. She made him feel things that he'd never thought he would feel again.

As he envisioned Lyric, her storm colored eyes, luscious lips and body to die for, he groaned. Again, he had to ask himself why he was inviting her into his blood and death filled existence. She saw him as a man despite the fact that he survived on the lives of the living. Regardless of what he was, Lyric looked past that to whom he was inside. And, that made him unwilling to let her go.

\* \* \* \*

Music pumped through the building as the DJ spun a series of the latest club hits. The Scarlet Ladies had successfully seduced their spectators who were now enjoying drinks and cramming onto the dance floor. Lyric and the girls mingled among the crowd, answering questions and signing small promo photos. She and Storm had been fending off advances left, right and center. However, for the most part, everyone was polite and respectful.

Every bar crowd has a lecherous creep. It was only fitting that he would end up finding his way to Lyric. The girls were all dispersed around the club. Only Storm was within earshot when the drunk sidled up.

His sickening grin immediately alerted Lyric to his level of intoxication as well as the fact that he was about to make a very unwelcome advance. Flashing a quick look at Storm, she gave the stranger a polite but reserved smile. He took a large swig out of a bottle of import beer and nodded to her.

"Evening ladies. How about I buy the two of you a drink?" He got too close, blasting Lyric with his sour beer breath. She shrank back and glanced around, looking for a means of escape.

"No, thank you," Lyric answered, raising her voice above the music. Storm was far enough away that she could pretend not to be paying attention, which is exactly what she did.

"Come on now. Just one drink." He leered at her with eyes that had to be seeing double from the looks of him.

She shook her head and held up the photos in her hand. "We're just here to sign pictures and answer questions about the show. No drinks, thanks."

She made as if to turn away from him, hoping he would just take the hint and move on. His hand on her shoulder felt cold and wet from the condensation on his beer bottle. Glaring daggers, she shrugged him off, her temper blazing.

"How much do you charge for some afterhours entertainment? I've got fifty bucks with your name on it." He cackled and swigged from his beer.

Lyric stared at him as if he was the most revolting thing she'd ever seen. "You've got to be kidding me." Turning her back on him, she made a beeline for a few of her fellow dancers on the other side of the room. The cold, moist hand that landed on her scantily

clad behind had her shrieking in surprise and outrage. Of all of the nerve! The action quickly went from grabbing to squeezing.

As she whirled around with her fist clenched, the man was jerked away from her. Jade stood there in all of his dark glory, a scowl adorning his perfect features. He held the drunken man's wrist at an awkward angle, snapping it like a chicken bone. Lyric heard the crack from where she stood. Her mouth dropped open, and she stared in shock as the man let out a scream.

"Touch her again, you die." Jade growled out, tossing him aside like a bag of trash. The import beer bottle went flying, spraying foam everywhere.

Lyric had eyes only for Jade. Though she heard Storm's exuberant gasp of, "Oh, my God!" as her friend looked over Jade, Lyric couldn't look away from the man before her. His hair was loose and wild. He was casually dressed in blue jeans and a black t-shirt that hugged his body, revealing well-toned muscles.

She raised a brow in question and bit her lower lip. Swiftly he came to her, sweeping her into his arms. Her breath was stolen when he kissed her with a bold passion that shocked her delightfully. The thrill that shot through her left her quaking in his embrace.

"Let's get out of here." Jade's voice came low against her ear. His lips brushed her neck and she melted. "Are you free to take off?"

Hell yeah, she was. Lyric wouldn't have said no to him for the world. Nodding, she glanced around for Storm who was watching them like a hawk. Storm couldn't have looked more pleased.

"Yeah, just give me a minute. I have to grab my things and have a quick word with Storm." She took a step back from him and didn't miss the way his eyes assessed her from head to toe. Flushing under his appraisal, she was secretly delighted at the obvious desire in Jade's green eyes. The black-and-white bustier she wore was one of her favorites. If the look on the vampire's face was anything to go by, pairing it with booty shorts and knee-high boots had been a good idea.

She'd barely made it to Storm's side when the girl was all over her with questions. "Is that him? It is, isn't it? He is damn fine, girl. You cannot let this one get away."

Lyric laughed and dragged her friend along, away from Jade who watched them go. "Yes, that's Jade. And, I feel ridiculously, stupidly, head-over-heels in love with him."

Storm kept casting glances over her shoulder, wonder written all over her heart shaped face. "For real? Wow. He certainly is delicious. Almost as tasty as that friend of his."

Lyric wasted no time grabbing her sweater and the bag containing her things. She would change later. If anything, Jade would appreciate her staying in costume.

"Ah, so you liked Griffin, did you?" Lyric winked and smiled knowingly.

Storm crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her blue eyes. "You better call me as soon as you get home. I will be waiting impatiently for details. I have a million questions for you already."

Lyric laughed and gave Storm a quick hug. "I'll introduce you to him in a quieter setting, and yes, I promise to call you first thing."

By the time she'd returned to Jade, he was waiting anxiously. He seemed incredibly eager to leave the noisy din of the nightclub. Taking her bag, he offered her his free arm. She accepted it with a smile as her heart did flip-flops in her chest.

"I didn't expect you," she said when they were out on the street. The sudden change

in noise level was drastic but welcome. "Not that I mind, of course."

"I couldn't resist." Jade gave her hand a warm squeeze. "I'm glad I arrived when I did. That son of a bitch is lucky to be alive right now."

Being this close to Jade, touching him, Lyric was able to sense his undead energy. It felt much stronger than usual. He had an edge that struck her as feisty. Much more predatory than when she'd been with him last night. The power that coursed through him was lively, and a slight tingle began where their hands joined.

"Always riding to my rescue." She beamed up at him. "My hero."

Jade's demeanor seemed to darken, but his grip on her hand tightened possessively. "The sad part is, I'm the one you should be protected from."

"What's up with you, Jade? I don't like the weird vibe I'm getting from you." Pulling her hand gently from his, she rubbed her bare arms and slipped her sweater on. "The negativity is driving me crazy."

He walked along beside her in silence for some time before answering. Lyric was getting the feeling that something was eating at him. It wasn't hard to figure out what that might be. She waited patiently for him to talk, hoping he would confide in her.

"I want to show you something. I want to take you to Cry. It's an abandoned building on the edge of town that's been taken over by vampires. You need to see what goes on there, Lyric. Don't be too quick to get involved with me. Not until you see what it really means to be what I am."

A lump formed in her throat, and a sense of panic gripped her. His words were more than a little cryptic. She wasn't afraid to go to the creepy nightclub. She was afraid of the vibe she was getting from Jade.

"Sure," she said, careful to keep her voice even and controlled. "I'll go wherever you want. I trust you, and nothing you show me is going to change that."

Jade made a noise, a sound of disbelief. If only he would show a little faith in her. She knew he was a killer. She'd seen it herself, that first night they'd met. She didn't care. If it was part of being with him, it was something she could live with.

The ride to Cry was quiet. They talked, but it wasn't as easy-going as Jade made it out to be. Lyric went along with it, certain that whatever it was he intended to show her, it wouldn't be enough to chase her away. Was that what he wanted? To chase her away?

She couldn't shake the thought, so she bit the bullet and spit it out. "Is there a reason for this? Your tension and this trip to some vampire hangout? I mean, are you trying to scare me off?"

Jade's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He kept his eyes steady on the road. "I might be. But, it's not what you're thinking. I can't get you out of my head, Lyric. This is something I have to do." He looked at her then, a storm brewing in his eyes.

"I think I understand." Lyric could see it in him. He was asking himself the very same questions that she had been. Were they both just two fools that were bound to end up regretting this entire thing?

She gave her head a shake. No, she had already made up her mind. Jade's insecurities were his own. She couldn't allow them to sway her. "I've been anxious, too. It's only been a matter of days, and yet I feel like I can never again know my life without you in it."

Fearing that she would come apart, Lyric looked out the window at those out and about in the city. She didn't think she'd ever been in love before. Sure, she'd had relationships, even a couple of serious ones. But, she had never looked at anyone and felt

that she needed him without question. It was different with Jade; she was drawn to him on a deeper level.

Being psychic, Lyric hadn't always had the easiest time relating to other people, especially those who thought her visions were made up or just total insanity. Jade was from that world even more so than she was.

"Lyric," Jade's voice was thick with tightly bound emotion. "I have been asking myself why I am so crazy for you, what makes you so different from anyone else I have ever encountered. And, I cannot find the answer to that question. All I know is that I feel like I must never let you get away now that I have found you."

She wasn't worried anymore. He could do all of the worrying if he felt so inclined to do so. They both felt it, and that was good enough for her. When they pulled up to the menacing building that loomed like a horror movie prop, she took a deep breath and stepped out of the Mustang. Meeting him in front of the car, she reached for him and pulled him close for a tender press of her lips to his.

It was just a small, soft kiss on the lips, but it said so much. He held her there for a moment, pressed against his hard body. She was instantly aware of his physical reaction to her. Her breath caught at the unmistakable sensation of his erection pressed against her. Did they really have to waste their evening in this dive?

"Show me whatever it is that you want me to see. I just want to be alone with you."

She brushed back a lock of his hair, letting it trail a silken path between her fingers. Capturing her hand in his, he kissed the tips of her fingers, lingering to draw her pinky into his mouth. The warm heat of his tongue shocked Lyric's insides. Her breasts swelled inside the restrictive bustier, and she ached to get out of it for more than one reason.

"I hope you still feel that way when we're on our way out."

Following him inside, Lyric couldn't help but glance around warily. Many sets of eyes fell upon them, taking note of Jade and the juicy morsel at his side. Lyric couldn't help but feel more on display than the last time she'd been here. Expecting him to lead her to the bar or a table, she was surprised when instead he weaved through the crowd to a heavy security door at the back.

A scary-looking vampire stood with arms crossed in front of the door. He was big, bald and wore a glower that would have scared the pants off her, had she been wearing any.

When Jade approached, the big vamp moved aside with a slight nod. His eyes went to Lyric next, and she gasped upon noticing that they were completely black, not even the whites showed. Her heel caught as she stared, and she stumbled. Jade reached to steady her, and she grabbed his arm in a white-knuckled grip.

The heavy, metal security door opened, and they began to descend a set of concrete stairs into the basement. Lyric's stomach dropped heavily, and a wave of nausea crashed through her when the door slammed shut behind them. Apprehension filled her, and she clung to Jade, fearing a fall down the deadly stairs.

His arm went around her waist protectively. The staircase was enveloped in darkness. A pale glow at the bottom guided their way. Lyric had an uneasy feeling that she didn't want to see what lay below. The closer they drew, the harder her pulse thrummed in her veins. Jade leaned close so that his hair brushed her face.

"Try to calm down, love. You're safe with me here, but you're starting to smell a little too good. Deep breaths ... no fear."

Lyric was fully aware that, whatever she was descending into, it was crawling with vampires. Their unnatural energy picked at her senses, and she knew fear would draw their attention. That was not something she wanted. She trusted Jade, but could he really protect her from a swarm of them?

Taking a deep breath, she willed her heart to slow to a normal pace. By the time they reached the bottom, her eyes were slowly adjusting to the dim lighting. It took a few moments for her to make out the shapes ahead of them in the dark.

One candle burned in a sconce on the wall. It cast a fair amount of light considering how absolutely black it would be without it. The moving shapes sprawled all around them were unidentifiable at first. It was quiet, but Lyric could easily identify many of the sounds surrounding them. There was a hush of murmurs, many voices low in whisper. Love making noises reached them as well as the occasional pained cry. What in the hell?

All at once, Lyric's brain began to make sense of what she was seeing. A virtual orgy of vampires and humans were sprawled all over at random. From sofas to beds and even mountains of pillows, there were so many bodies that she feared stepping on someone. Jade's eyesight was much better than hers, and he easily led her through.

As they stepped around the individual groups locked in their wicked embraces, Lyric's eyes grew wider. Nobody paid them any attention, yet she got the unmistakable feeling that they were acutely aware of their presence. Her hand grew slick with perspiration in Jade's hand. She tried to pull it away, but he refused to let go.

The scent of blood hung so heavy on the air that Lyric could smell it herself. It turned her stomach. She wondered if it was enticing to Jade. He led her further in, away from the staircase that was now lost in the darkness behind them.

Her eyes landed on a young, nude woman in the clutches of a vampire that sucked and licked at a bloody wound in her wrist. The woman wore a strange expression, one of utter bliss. Opening her eyes, she looked straight at Lyric. It appeared as if her lips formed into a smile, but Lyric couldn't be sure. Lyric quickly turned away and pressed closer to Jade, though that was hardly possible.

"Why did you bring me here?" She hissed, low and breathless. He'd better have a damn good reason. It was an orgy of sex and blood. She had little desire to know anymore.

"I want you to see for yourself what it means to be a vampire." Jade stopped and turned to her, taking her face gently in his hands. "What it is that I live with every night. I need you to look at the horror and the sickness and tell me if you can accept it."

"Are you out of your mind?" She cast a frantic glance around. This was not how she envisioned Jade. These creatures were beyond vile. "Don't tell me you come here."

To her surprise, he chuckled. "No. I don't. But, this is the lowest of the low: vampires and human blood-rush junkies living in the slums and feeding off one another."

"What does this have to do with you?"

A scream echoed around them, causing Lyric to jump. Jade pulled her closer, his eyes narrowing in on something in the dark that she could not see. He moved toward the source of the sound, pulling her along but sheltering her behind his body. At first, it appeared to be nothing more than a large, black shape writhing and squirming in the corner.

An icy chill crashed over Lyric when she realized that the shape was actually several vampires encircling the body of a woman. They all feasted on her naked flesh, biting and

sucking from her neck to her ankles. Though the woman moaned and cried out, she made no attempt to get away. Her movements grew weak, and Lyric shuddered, feeling the woman's life energy slip away. They were killing her.

"Please," she whispered, tugging on Jade's arm. "I don't want to be here."

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The scent of fear emanated from Lyric. She was terrified, and so she should be. Jade made no attempt to change her mind. He'd seen more than enough, too. Guiding her back towards the staircase, he grimaced upon spying the corpse of a man shoved off to the side, as if awaiting proper disposal. The scent of death mingled with blood and sex to make an aroma that pleased his senses and caused his arousal to grow.

He wasn't entirely sure why he brought Lyric here. Having her look at him like some dark hero was something that he felt he had to bring to a stop. The vampires crawling the basement floor of Cry were among the worst kind. Yet, he'd wanted her to see how bad and pathetic it could get.

Vampires were monsters that came in many forms. These members of the undead were little more than parasites, drawing willing victims in like insects to a light bulb. Yet, Jade still believed himself to be worse. He did not hide in dark spaces, waiting for a feast. He sought it out, took it without asking and didn't look back.

When they were back outside, heading toward his car, Lyric whirled to face him angrily. The heat of her fury slapped him, the energy forceful and aggressive.

"Why? Tell me why you took me in there. What is it that you want me to know about you? And, why do I have to be subjected to that disgusting and total madness?" Her dark blue eyes blazed with anger. Lyric crossed her arms over her heaving chest, and Jade unsuccessfully fought the urge to let his gaze wander to her sensational cleavage.

She looked positively furious, and Jade wanted nothing more than to kiss that glare right off of her face. Eyeing the petite dancer before him, he was impressed by her ferocity. It brought a smile to his lips, which he quickly squelched before it could really piss her off.

"I don't know, Lyric." Her name felt so right rolling off his tongue. "I wanted you to see how bad it can get. The world that you are exposing yourself to every moment that you're with me."

The glare on her beautiful face didn't waver. In fact, it seemed to darken. "In case you didn't notice, Jade, the world that I live in is just as bad as that. It was a human that would have killed me if you hadn't been there that night. A human." She kicked a rock near her feet, wincing when it bounced off the side of his car. "Vampires may feed from the blood of the living, but we are all feeding off each other in some deranged way or another. You don't have to go out of your way to prove to me that you are a monster. Serial killers are monsters, but their mothers still love them. What you are is not always who you are, Jade."

She was right. He was going out of his way to ensure that she knew what he was. Yet, he was not doing enough to show her who he was. Did he even know himself anymore?

"What if I don't know who I am anymore, Lyric?" The words tumbled out on their own, but they came naturally. "I only know that I never started to care again until I met you. And now, I'm afraid that you will see beyond the man that saved you to the vampire that wants to bleed you, and you will run."



Jade couldn't deny that a part of him wanted her to flee him, to tell him that she never wanted to see him again. Then he wouldn't be able to hurt her. The fear that he would uncontrollably kill her plagued him like a disease, unrelenting in its intensity.

Her expression changed to one of curiosity, and Jade tensed, knowing what was coming next. He knew that he couldn't continue to hide the cause of all his fear.

"What is it that you're really worried about?" She reached to take his hand. The warmth of her touch on his cool skin made him long for more. "Tell me the truth, please."

He desired to feel all of her again, warm and soft against him. If he confessed his secret to her, that might never happen. That was a chance he'd have to take. Lying to her was just not an option.

"I murdered my wife." The words felt strange as he spoke them. Other than Griffin, nobody knew this secret. "I was newly turned, and I returned home and drained her dry. That about sums it up. And, I will face hell a hundred times over before I let myself do that to you."

He waited then, allowing her to absorb this information. A series of emotions crossed Lyric's face, and Jade watched them all in tense silence. Her eyes fell to their joined hands. He expected her to pull away, but she didn't. People went in and out of the building behind them, but neither of them seemed to notice.

When at last Lyric reacted, it was to step away from him, towards the Shelby. "You've had hundreds of years to deal with that, Jade. I care about who you are now, not who you used to be." A protest formed on his lips, and she held a hand up, as if expecting it. The next words out of her mouth shocked him to the core. "The way I see it, you have two choices. You can continue to live in fear of yourself and rob us both of a potentially beautiful thing. Or, you can take me home and make love to me the way I know you want to."

Jade stared at her, watching her saunter over to his car. What was it with this woman? She was constantly surprising him with her boldness. But, she was right. He had a choice to make: run from himself forever or learn to love again.

He didn't have to be told twice. Pulling the car keys from his pocket, he unlocked the doors with a beep. "Alright. Let's go to my place."

## Chapter Eleven

A hiss greeted Jade as he stepped into the apartment. Frisk made it clear that he had nothing nice to say. Lyric suppressed a giggle when Jade attempted to pet the fluffy cat only to promptly be smacked with a paw complete with extended claws.

"I'm sorry," she laughed, shooing the cat down the hall. "I didn't think he would be so unaccommodating. I promise to make up for it myself."

"Is that so?" Jade raised an eyebrow and grinned. The small action sent a thrill through her, and she flushed. He held a brown paper bag awkwardly in one arm. "Is there somewhere I can put this?"

"On the kitchen table is fine." Motioning to the small apartment kitchen, she asked, "What do you have in there?"

He peeked in the bag and then back at her. "Just a few things." As he pulled out a pile of steaming food containers, she watched him quizzically.

"You don't even eat, Jade. Smells good, though."

"Good. Dig in. I brought it for you. Obviously."

The tantalizing aroma of Chinese food caused Lyric's stomach to growl. He'd clearly gone out of his way. Along with the Chinese food was a salad, a few tacos and a vegetarian sandwich. "You do know I will never be able to eat all of that."

Jade gave her a boyish smile, and she had the feeling that he would have blushed had vampires been able to do so. "I didn't know what you would like so I wanted to bring some kind of selection."

"Oh, my God." Lyric dropped the container of food that she'd been holding onto the table. "You are the sweetest thing ever." Standing on her tiptoes, she pulled him close for a spine tingling kiss. How she got so lucky, she would never know. Jade was thoughtful, putting her first in everything they did. She was grateful for him.

Things had been amazing over the past several days, since they'd had their talk outside Cry. Jade seemed to be much more relaxed. Lyric was just happy to live in the moment, refusing to allow insecurities to get the better of her.

His hand came to brush the hair gently back from her face, the simplest gesture that seemed to speak to her soul. Lyric was suddenly very relieved that she'd been able to get Storm to leave before Jade arrived. She'd had a vision earlier, of Storm, one that she wasn't ready to share with her friend. She wanted to consider the meaning of it further first.

The vision had frightened her a little. It had been Griffin, holding Storm's limp form in his arms as lightning lit up the night around them. Lyric was never able to get a sense of the time in her visions. She just saw one moment, a picture in a time yet to occur. Even though her visions didn't always happen, the failure rate was low. Really low.

Pushing the thought aside, Lyric began to put some of the food away in the refrigerator. She had to laugh again at the amount he'd brought. To think, Jade believed himself to be a no good monster. She doubted he could play the villain even if he tried.

"I wish I could take you out for a romantic dinner," Jade spoke suddenly, and she let the fridge door slam shut. "I mean, really take you out."

"You can take me out, Jade. It doesn't have to be dinner to be romantic." Lyric

moved around the kitchen, fetching a fork before diving into the delicious looking salad. “The most romance I’ve ever experienced comes just from being with you. Even if we were to just sit here all night and watch cable TV.”

“You have cable?”

“Of course. I live alone with a cat.” Lyric made a face, as if that explained everything.

Jade grinned and nodded in the direction of the living room. “Mind if I catch the rest of the hockey game?”

She rolled her eyes and gave him a playful shove. “And, you try to make it seem like you’re not like other guys.” She found it endearing when Jade turned on the television and soon began to shout at the game like every human male she’d ever known. He wasn’t so different. He just needed to cut himself some slack.

Lyric dished some chicken fried rice onto her salad plate before joining him in the living room. He cast a derogatory look at her dish and asked, “That’s not all you’re going to eat, is it?”

“Hey, I have to squeeze myself into some pretty tight clothing in a few hours. I can’t enjoy the luxury of stuffing myself on all of the goodies you brought me until after the show. Which I am greatly looking forward to doing.”

Lyric would have given almost anything to remain in her comfy track pants on the couch with Jade. Duty called though, and The Scarlet Ladies had to answer. Tonight’s show was in one of the more ritzy areas of town, a change from the downtown clubs where they often performed. A small theater was hosting the event, and Lyric couldn’t wait to perform somewhere with such class. It would be a nice change from the venues where they were usually booked.

“I have something else entirely for after the show.” Jade winked and reached to tickle her side.

She squirmed and giggled, upsetting her plate in the process, dumping rice on the couch. “Jade!” Lyric protested, pretending to stab him with her fork. “I can just imagine what is running around inside your mind. Care to share?”

“Nope. You’ll have to wait and see.”

“That’s not fair.” She dodged another of his playful attacks, miraculously getting a fork full of rice into her mouth before it could fall. When he didn’t let up, she squealed and set her dish onto the coffee table to free her hands.

They wrestled playfully on the couch, spilling onto the floor when Lyric took an unexpected tumble. Laughter pealed from her as she pulled Jade down with her. Their lips met, and their playful nature took a turn.

She had never dared to dream that a man like this could exist. Yet, here he was, in her arms. As Jade pressed against her, Lyric squirmed beneath him until she felt him grow hard. A satisfied smile danced over her lips when he groaned low in her ear.

“You make a weak man of me, scarlet lady. How much time do we have before you have to leave for the theater?”

He sucked gently on her neck, causing her pulse to leap. She sighed contentedly and tightened her grip on him. “Oh, we have more than enough.”

With a playful little growl, Lyric altered their position so that she straddled Jade. He lay beneath her, looking up at her with an eager grin. His admittance struck a chord within her, and the desire to please him was overwhelming. How many things could

possibly cause a vampire weakness?

Jade's hands slid down her back to the small triangle of cotton peeking out from her track pants. Staring down into his mysterious eyes, a burst of excitement filled her with a giddy rush. She wanted nothing more than to lavish him with her love, to show him what he really meant to her. Her feelings couldn't be contained in words alone.

Starting with the softest kiss, Lyric closed her eyes and focused on only that moment. The sensation of Jade's lips as she plunged her tongue between them ignited the fires. Deepening the kiss, she tasted him slowly but thoroughly, wanting to remember every second. The clean and intoxicating taste of him was enough to coax a small moan from her.

Kissing her way to his ear, she sucked his lobe into her mouth, loving his low groan. The feeling of control was empowering, and Lyric used it to her advantage, grinding her groin firmly against Jade's rock hard manhood.

His fingers dug into her behind, and she laughed seductively. Licking and sucking at his heavenly flesh, Lyric made her way down his body, lifting his shirt so that she could lightly tongue his navel. Stripping it off him and tossing it on the couch, she quickly set about removing his pants. Her sure fingers were fast with his belt, and in no time, she held his throbbing shaft in her hands.

"Oh, Lyric." Jade murmured her name, his fingers entwining in her hair.

Nobody had ever made Lyric feel so bold and confident. Jade made her feel like a woman in a way that was carnal and savage. She wanted to taste him, to feel him in every way. Stroking him with a slow and steady rhythm, she kissed his tight abs, following the thin trail of dark hair down.

Feeling liberated, she eyed the head of his erection, licking her lips hungrily. Jade's eyes were riveted to her as she lowered her mouth, her tongue darting out to lick the length of him. A shudder rippled through Jade's body, and she smiled with satisfaction.

Drawing him into her mouth, she swirled her tongue before sucking him in as deep as she could. Jade moaned, and his fingers tightened in her hair. Lyric varied between sucking him deep and teasing him with the tip of her tongue. She kept it up until he was begging to be inside her.

Shimmying out of her clothing, Lyric knelt over him so that she teased him with her wetness. The lust in Jade's eyes caused him to appear drunk, and she loved it. He had a way of making her feel like she was the only woman in the world.

She was more than ready to slide her body down his cock, but she waited until he moaned her name again with a lusty desperation. When at last she took him into her, they both cried out in pleasure. Riding him, Lyric felt like a goddess. She moved with a perfect rhythm, tensing as the waves of ecstasy began to build deep inside her.

Jade's hands were on her breasts, kneading and pinching her nipples. "Oh God, I love you." He thrust up hard as she came down, hitting the entrance to her womb so that a tremor shook her.

Her body gripped him tighter, squeezing and holding him deep. Lyric loved the glorious feeling of having him buried inside her. She didn't think that she'd ever get enough of Jade. He was like a spring of rushing water in the middle of the desert, something unlikely to ever be found. Yet, he'd practically fallen into her lap. She kept expecting to wake up and find that it had all been a dream. It was a fairytale, really, and Jade, her prince.

The orgasm rocked her, causing her body to spasm on top of him uncontrollably. Collapsing against his chest, she pressed her lips to his in a breathless kiss. He twitched inside her, gripped by her strong inner muscles. He came hard, filling her with liquid heat.

They lay there for a long time, enjoying the aftershocks. Lyric was unwilling to move away, preferring to keep him within her. A sense of comfort settled over her, and she smiled to herself. Some dreams really did come true.

\* \* \* \*

The theater plunged into sudden darkness, and the audience seemed to hold its breath. That sense of anticipation always rose when the lights dimmed right before a big show. Jade waited anxiously along with everyone else, though he supposed that he was likely more eager than anything. He could watch Lyric dance every night for the rest of eternity, and he would never tire of it.

Jade tugged nervously on his sleeve, straightening it despite the fact that it already was straight. He'd worn a fine black suit, one that he didn't drag out of the closet often. With a black shirt and matching shoes, he felt pretty good. Hopefully, Lyric would find him as irresistible as he always found her. With his hair tied back at his nape, he couldn't hide behind it the way he liked to, but he found it more presentable.

He had to give his head a shake. Since when had he been concerned with his public presentation? What others thought had never mattered much to him until he met Lyric. She was too perfect; he couldn't stand the thought of failing her.

The music started, and one spotlight shone on the center of the stage. Jade tensed, waiting for the moment when he would see her. A blonde stepped onto the stage first, followed by a redhead. He was impatient, waiting for the explosion that would rock him when he feasted his eyes upon his woman.

When at last she made her entrance, it was better than anything his imagination could have conjured up. Lyric's long hair was wound up on her head in an elaborately concocted design, pinned with sparkling silver hairpieces that reflected the light. The dress she wore had a corset-style, leopard-print bodice that ended just above her thighs in the front. The back was a large tail of feathers that sat high atop her pretty ass, moving with her body as she sashayed around.

Jade leaned back against the wall, glad that he had chosen to stand off to the side rather than cram into a seat between humans. He had a great view of the stage. Unfortunately, he was close to the aisle and was continuously jostled by people who couldn't just sit down and enjoy the show. It was annoying but watching Lyric dance with grace and power made it all worth it.

The spark she'd ignited within him was sure to burn eternal. Not only was she ravishing, everything that he could want in a woman, but she had also given meaning to every night that he walked this earth.

He was easily caught up in the enchanting movements of the ladies that graced the stage with their enormous presence. The entire crowd seemed to be held in thrall, caught under the spell of the magical moment before them. Jade didn't even realize how much time had passed until the curtain closed and the lights slowly grew brighter, signaling the ten-minute break for intermission.

As if waking from a deep sleep, people began to move in their seats and walk about.

A swarm began to steadily make their way past him, on their way to the lobby for snacks or outside for a cigarette. As hundreds of people pushed by, the scent of their blood seemed to grow and pulse. It slapped at Jade like a swarm of buzzing insects.

Deciding that taking a walk might not be a bad idea, he grimaced and did his best to blend in with the moving crowd. When he broke through the lobby and made it out into the night, he wasted no time putting distance between himself and the humans that loitered about everywhere.

The bloodlust was always there, lingering beneath the surface. Surrounded as he was by so many heartbeats, they had begun to reverberate through his head. It would drive him crazy if he didn't get a handle on it.

A short walk down the street couldn't hurt. He'd be back before the second half of the show began. He wouldn't miss a moment of Lyric's performance for the world. Once he'd made his way down the block, the overwhelming sensations began to dissipate, and the hunger subsided. It curled up in his core like a sleeping beast, to wait for the next opportunity to feed.

The man seemed to come out of nowhere. He slammed into Jade so hard that he fell to the ground while Jade stood, staring dumbfounded down at him. The young man scrambled to his feet, his eyes so wide that the whites looked unnaturally huge. He brushed at his clothing but never took his eyes off Jade.

"Sorry," he muttered, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. Before Jade could reply, the guy had shoved by and resumed his previous pace.

Jade turned to watch him disappear into the crowd outside the theater. The man's energy had been frazzled and anxious. Something about him struck Jade as odd. Whatever it was, he couldn't put his finger on it. Dismissing it, he continued to stroll until he felt balanced and serene.

Upon returning to the theater, he discovered that most of the audience members were back in their seats, waiting for the lights to dim. He'd barely made it through the lobby when Lyric's friend Storm barreled into him at an alarming speed. He caught her by the arms so she wouldn't fall as she began to talk a mile a minute. The panic in her voice made sense to him before her words did.

"Have you seen Lyric? She went to the ladies room at intermission, and she hasn't come back. We can't find her anywhere." Storm's eyes were wild with fear, and it quickly affected Jade. He gently pushed her back a foot or two so she wouldn't tempt his blood hunger.

"What do you mean? She's just gone?" The sensation that swept Jade instantly made him ill. The world seemed to crash down around him in response to Storm's words.

She nodded, tears welling in her eyes. "It looks like there may have been a struggle in the dressing room. But, it's hard to say for sure."

For a moment, Jade couldn't focus on anything but the fact that Lyric was in trouble. It was because of him. He was sure of it. Terror filled him, and he knew he had to act now.

"Listen to me. I need you to go to the address I'm going to give you and find Griffin McKay. Tell him that I may need his help. If anyone messes with you, tell them that you're under the protection of Jade Kenyan. Got it?"

Storm nodded but didn't speak. Her hands trembled, and for a moment Jade second-guessed his decision to send her for Griffin. She felt like power, though, a witch. Then

she took a deep, shaky breath and nodded again. "I'll do anything for Lyric. She's like a sister to me. Please, find her."

"Do you have a vehicle? Don't get in a cab dressed like that." She nodded despondently in response to his question. Jade motioned to her burlesque costume and shrugged out of his jacket. "Take this. And, I promise, nobody is going to touch Lyric and live to face another day." Jade slipped her a card with his cell phone number as he told her where to find Griffin. "If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to call me."

In a flash of blonde hair, Storm was gone. Jade rushed back into the theater where the crowd waited impatiently. Making his way down the center aisle, he headed straight for the stage side door that led to the dressing room. As he went, the lights dimmed, and the rest of The Scarlet Ladies, minus Lyric and Storm, returned to the stage as if nothing were amiss.

Bursting through the dressing room door, he took in the state of the room. Makeup and clothes littered every tabletop and mirror space. The scent of perfume and hairspray was thick enough to overwhelm the scent of any individual person. He would get nothing here. Maybe if he managed to pick up their trail outside, he would have a chance in catching up to them. Whoever had Lyric had just earned a death sentence.

The nearest exit was the back door, which had to be the way that they went since Jade himself had been outside the front entry. The back of the building was empty of people. Other than an overflowing dumpster, it was just an empty lot.

Rounding a corner, Jade entered a small parking lot for the business next door to the theater. A silver BMW sat there with the engine running. The windows were tinted such a deep black that, in the dark, he couldn't see through them. As he approached, the car was thrust into gear, squealing out of the lot with enough force to make the tires smoke.

Jade bolted for his car. He knew that he was playing right into the hands of someone who knew exactly who they were dealing with. The entire situation lacked supernatural energy, which only left a human. Every second of delay might allow Lyric's captor to get away. He couldn't allow that to happen.

When he reached his car, the stark white envelope trapped beneath the windshield wiper immediately caught his eye. It said one word on the outside: Vampire. Tearing it open, Jade was surprised to find an address written inside, nothing more.

As Jade tore through the city streets, he searched for the silver car. The address lay on the passenger seat, and he continued to glance tensely at it despite having it already committed to memory. He wasn't sure what to expect so he was a little surprised when he pulled up to an apartment building in a quiet, east-side neighborhood. There was still no sign of the BMW.

Jade swore softly, wanting to leap out of the Shelby like a man on fire, knowing how stupid that would be if someone were lying in wait for him. Every moment that he wasn't rushing to her side was killing him. He couldn't take the chance of having something happen to stop him from getting to Lyric. So, he forced himself to take a moment to tune in to his senses and focus on his surroundings.

When he was sure that he was truly alone, he slowly got out of the car and took stock of the entire building. Someone might be setting him up for something big, but without question, he was going in there. Lyric's safety was worth more than his own. He would willingly walk into hell itself to save her.

## Chapter Twelve

The sound was almost as painful as the sensation when the tape was ripped from Lyric's mouth. She gasped, sucking air deep into her lungs. Her arms ached from being bound tightly behind her back. Her mind was reeling as she continued to try to make sense of everything that had just happened.

"If you scream, I promise, I'll slit your throat," came the whispered words of her abductor. "Got it?"

She nodded her head quickly up and down, trying to resist the urge to scream bloody murder. Taking in her surroundings, she noted that he'd brought her to an apartment, a lavish, expensive penthouse apartment at that. Finally getting a good, hard look at him, she concluded that she didn't know him from a hole in the ground.

With his dark hair and eyes, he was clean cut and looked much like any other average Joe on the street. At first glance, there wasn't a single threatening thing about him. Then she saw it, hidden in the depths of his gaze, something that wasn't right, wasn't complete somehow. Her heart sunk when the dim lighting surrounding them glinted off the knife that he held.

"It shouldn't be long now, and your boyfriend will be here. I have some fun planned for the three of us. Well ... fun for me anyway." He laughed humorlessly, his eyes fixed on Lyric. "My, you sure are a pretty thing. No wonder he hasn't devoured you yet. I'd be dragging that out, too."

Lyric grimaced inwardly but said nothing. What could she say? Apparently, this guy knew Jade. She didn't want him walking in here though, vampire or not. This guy could be really dangerous.

He stared at her for a nerve-wracking length of time. She wanted to ask him what the hell he was looking at, but the blade he continuously turned over in his hand prevented her from doing so. As desperately as she wanted Jade to come to her rescue, her fear for his safety meant more to her. The vision she'd had of Jade danced through her thoughts, and a chill trickled down her spine.

"Cat got your tongue?" He asked, tapping the knife absently against the edge of the coffee table. He'd tossed Lyric down on one of two cream colored sofas and taken a seat on an easy chair across from her.

So, he wanted her to talk. What for? If he was going to kill her, why waste her time making small talk? It was meaningless.

"Who are you?" Against her better judgment, Lyric glared as she made the request. "As long as you are calling the shots, I'm sure it's not too much to enlighten me a little."

The stranger gave her a lazy once over, lingering on her bountiful cleavage that was thrust especially high in the bustier. Disgusted, she looked away, her eyes falling to the yellow post-it note stuck to the table between them. She couldn't make it all out from where she sat, but the first line was clear: 'Taylor, this time it's really goodbye.'

Upon noticing her gaze, he snatched the note from the table and tossed it to the floor. His expression grew dark and shadowed. She was nervous but determined to keep a cool head. He looked away, and for a moment, she thought she saw pain etched into his youthful face.



“Taylor?” She began, fear causing her voice to shake. “Is that your name? I just want to know what's going on here, Taylor. Can you not give me that much?”

He made an exasperated noise before pinning her with bloodshot eyes. He was riddled with anxious energy, and Lyric knew that made him unpredictable. In a sudden motion that made her jump, he slammed the knife into the coffee table so that it stood upright by the point.

“I'll tell you what's going on, pretty thing. If it wasn't for your boyfriend, I wouldn't have even met that chick.” He pointed at the crumpled yellow note on the floor. “I would likely be happily married, like I was supposed to be. If your precious blood sucker hadn't killed the love of my life.”

He wore a mask of hatred, and Lyric could only stare curiously. Oh great, so this was about Jade after all. Her heart sped up in tempo, and she mentally groaned. Of all of the possibilities behind her vision, she never would have guessed the source would be a lovelorn human male. She considered the many things she could say in response, but nothing sounded right. She didn't doubt for a moment that Jade did as Taylor claimed. He'd tried to tell her that he was a ruthless murderer, and she'd refused to heed his warning. And, still she loved him.

“I've spent almost a decade hoping that I would come across that vampire again,” Taylor continued. His fists clenched, and he swore heartily before getting to his feet to pace the room. “And now, things are finally going my way. Thanks to you, I have some leverage. There'll be no running this time.”

His voice cracked on the last word, and Lyric studied him hard. He looked tense, like he could snap at any moment. The guilt that washed over him was heavy, evidently something that haunted him. A man driven by the guilty need for revenge was not someone that would be willing to make any compromises.

Lyric swallowed hard. If this was some eye for an eye thing, she was as good as dead.

She watched Taylor as he paced, trying to make it look like she wasn't. She didn't trust him. Casting a glance around the apartment, she saw nothing that would help her and no way out other than the door. Even though her feet were not bound, she'd never make it out with her hands tied as they were.

“You know you'd never make it out of here.” Taylor's eyes followed the direction that she looked. He nodded knowingly. “Though I can't say I blame you for considering your options.”

She sat silently, refusing to meet his eyes again, fearing that she would see something there that would confirm her suspicions that she was awaiting her death at the hands of this man. Why couldn't her visions have shown her this? The desperation that gripped Lyric then had hot tears pricking the back of her eyes. Furiously, she blinked them away before he could see them.

Taylor came back to stand beside the coffee table, plucking the knife from it. He watched her with quiet contemplation, and Lyric prayed that, if he were intent on killing her, he wouldn't go so far as to rape her first. Who knew what he was capable of?

“I'm sorry that you were unlucky enough to get caught up in this,” he said, his voice low. Was that a trace of regret she detected? “But, I am going to take all of the lucky breaks I can get. I mean, we are talking vampires. How lucky can I get?”

“Indeed.” Lyric mustered the one word answer, believing it best not to engage in

conversation with him. She quaked with fear, waiting to see what he would do with the blade he now studied intently.

He fixed her with eyes that saw something other than her, something that fed his fury. A grin tugged at his lips, and he resumed pacing, his hand wrapped tightly around the handle of the knife. "Where is that mother fucker? He is your lover, isn't he? I'd hate to have gone to all of this trouble just to have him not even show up."

Lyric pitied this pathetic man. She certainly understood the desire for vengeance that he had, but the vampire bite peeking out from beneath his shirt collar destroyed any sympathy she might have had for him. For someone who had such hate for vampires, he sure seemed to be acquainted with them. Unless it was only Jade that he hated so deeply.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his sport jacket, Taylor withdrew a large, blood stained wooden stake. He turned it over a few times, admiring it lovingly. Bile choked Lyric as she watched him; the psychotic smile on his face morphed his features into a hideous mask. *Oh God*, she prayed. *Don't let Jade show up. If this guy got the upper hand, somehow, anyhow...* No, she couldn't allow herself to entertain that thought.

"I said, 'He's your lover, isn't he?'"

"Yes," she gasped out, fearing what he might do if she refused to answer. "He is my lover. But, please, you don't have to do this. Jade never would have intentionally done anything to take her from you. If he'd known..." Her words trailed off as she realized that anything she said was only going to encourage him rather than have the opposite effect.

The laugh that poured out of him didn't even sound human. His strangely macabre cackle caused goose bumps to break out on Lyric's flesh. She groaned and wracked her brain for something to say that might help, anything at all.

"Don't waste your breath, sweetheart. I've lost everything. My true love, the woman I tried in vain to replace her with and my own mind." Brushing the knuckles of the hand that held the stake against the puncture wounds he bore, Taylor stared off absently. "There is nothing that can take this night away from me now. Your monster owes me."

Lyric opened her mouth to reply when a muffled sound came from the hall. Before either she or Taylor could react, the door burst open with a loud slam. Jade stormed into the room like a hungry animal. His expression was murderous as he spied first Lyric bound on the couch and then her captor just feet away.

"Jade! He's got a stake!" Lyric cried out, fear for the man she loved over ruling any concern she should have had for herself.

Instead of attacking Jade, Taylor flung himself at Lyric and pressed the blade of the knife to her throat. It burned as it made the tiniest surface cut, not even enough to draw blood but more than enough to cause her heartbeat to pound in her ears. She struggled to hear over the noise as the two men faced off.

"Take another step, and she's dead." Taylor warned; the pressure on her throat increased as he enforced his words. "I promise."

Uncertainty flashed over Jade's face, but it didn't linger. The venomous look he pinned Taylor with was as hungry as it was ferocious. "Get your filthy hands off of her. Whatever your problem is, it has nothing to do with the girl."

A chuckle came close to Lyric's ear, sending uncomfortable shivers down her spine. At such close proximity, she could smell the booze on Taylor's breath. Who knew what else he was hopped up on?

"Don't be so sure, vampire." Taylor sneered. "Me and you have to have a little talk."

And then, I'm going to take great joy in what comes next.”

“And what could we possibly have to talk about?” Jade's attention was on the dark-haired man holding Lyric in a painfully dangerous position.

She watched him with wide eyes, unable to keep herself from drinking him in despite the situation. He was gorgeous in his dressy attire. His gaze flicked to her briefly and then back to Taylor, but she didn't miss the agony in those green and gold eyes.

“You probably don't even remember. She was nothing to you ... just another blood source. But, she was everything to me.” Taylor's hand shook against Lyric's throat, and she winced. “I watched you kill her. I watched you force yourself on her like the sick animal that you are. You tore into her and left her to rot on the kitchen floor.” He virtually snarled the last, and Lyric struggled not to twitch in any way.

“And you ran.” The awareness spread across Jade's face as he remembered something. He raised a finely sculpted eyebrow and dared to take the smallest step towards Lyric and Taylor. “Oh I do remember you, pal. Your scent, it's coming back to me now. You bumped into me on the street earlier, and I knew there was something about you that I couldn't place. But, I remember, because you ran.”

The tension in the room seemed to double in its intensity. A change in the atmosphere had Lyric almost choking on the raw hate emanating from the outraged man threatening her life. If what Jade said was true, then it certainly explained the immense guilt that she was sensing from Taylor. That kind of emotion could make a desperate man quickly come apart. Though she refused to give up hope, she didn't see a pleasant end to this situation in sight.

“What else could I do?” Taylor's voice rose to a shout. “I couldn't save her from you. I had no other choice.”

Jade nodded but remained silent. Lyric watched her vampire lover closely, fearing he would do something rash. If only she could get her damn hands free.

“Why wait until now then? Why not confront me that night?” Jade asked, eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the man that held his woman. “You've been bitten. Willingly, I'd bet. How can it be that you try to play the hero now?”

Pissing the guy off further wasn't going to help anything. Lyric did her best to give Jade a look, which he ignored. She felt that she was at the mercy of these men and their emotions. It was not at all reassuring.

“How dare you? I have spent a decade looking for you, doing anything I could to be part of your world. And now, I am going to make you pay for the ten years you stole from me, along with the woman that should have been my wife.”

The strained silence that descended was almost deafening. Lyric's wrists burned, and she squirmed as much as she could without forcing the sharp blade deeper into her skin. She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. Between the mental anguish and the physical discomfort, she was quickly coming undone.

After several moments—which felt like hours—went by, Jade conceded with a slight nod. “Alright. You can take your best shot at me. That's only fair. But, let the girl go.” He gestured to Lyric, and she immediately began to shake her head.

“No! Jade, don't. You don't have to do this.”

He gave her a quizzical look that said she was the crazy one for thinking he would leave her there to die at the hands of a maniac. A sharp tug on her hair caused her to yelp.

“Shut up, bitch. You are as disposable to me as Lisa was to him.” Taylor jerked on

her hair again, forcing her head back so that her eye contact with Jade was broken and her pale throat was exposed. "I don't want to just wipe you out, vampire. I want to make you suffer. Like I've been suffering."

Lyric could clearly detect the trace of a smile in his voice. Taylor appeared to be gaining confidence now. She knew she would die. Perhaps Jade had only prolonged her life by saving it. What if she'd been meant to die that night?

Her lips trembled as she bit back a sob. She was not going to give this sick son of a bitch the power of her tears. Regardless of when death claimed her, every moment with Jade had been worth it.

The enraged sound that came from Jade was purely animal in nature. "Don't fucking hurt her, you little piece of shit. I don't have much willpower left to prevent myself from tearing your limbs off. If you so much as scratch her with that thing, I promise you will die slower than anyone should ever have to."

There was no hesitation on Taylor's part as he laughed outright in response. The sound of wood under pressure told Lyric that he was squeezing the stake in his other hand, readying himself perhaps. She held her breath, afraid to so much as breathe. She didn't want to be the one to set him off.

"I fully expect you to take your best shot at me. But, you should expect that I will do the same. I have nothing left to lose." There was a defeated note in his voice that tugged on the empathic side of Lyric. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Look," Jade's tone was icy cold. "You want me? Come and get me. But, get your hands off my lady. Now."

"I'm afraid that blatantly rude and disrespectful orders are going to get you nowhere, you goddamn leech." With an aching slow motion, Taylor slid the blade lightly across the surface of her flesh, just enough to burn as it cut.

Lyric couldn't prevent the small shriek that burst from her. All it would take was some actual effort on his part, and her throat would be slit from ear to ear. Any moment now, it was coming.

"Just, stop! Please," Jade pleaded, and Lyric's heart broke. "I will do anything you want. Just, don't kill her."

There was quiet as Taylor considered this. Then, he shrugged and smiled as if truly pleased with himself. "Oh, I won't be killing her, my friend. You will be."

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Shock rendered Jade temporarily speechless. The scenario playing out right before his eyes was like something out of a nightmare. The six-inch blade that bit into the soft flesh of his ladylove had him beside himself with panic. He had known that danger would come to her because of him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" With fists clenched tightly at his sides, Jade maintained steady eye contact with the asshole that held Lyric's life in his hands. He couldn't wait to sink fangs into this pathetic coward.

The eerie vacancy in the man's eyes chilled Jade. This guy had lost it long ago. And, it was all because of him. Something that he had done for the thrill of the kill and the rush of appeasing the bloodlust had led to this moment. If anything happened to Lyric, Jade would have nobody but himself to blame.

"You heard me." The words were stated slowly, a hint of menace behind each one. The hate emanating from the wacked-out man tantalized Jade's hunger.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion then as Jade watched the blade jerk in the hand of his foe. Lyric screamed, and blood welled from a perfectly precise cut just below her ear. Blood ran in a fine line down the side of her neck from the small gash. It wasn't life threatening, but Jade was livid. The fury stormed through him, and the need to kill was overpowering.

The scent of Lyric's heavenly blood reached him, and Jade was beside himself with hunger. Fear and pain mingled in the energy of the room, driving Jade to taste that sweet nectar that spilled down her chest to seep into the fabric of her bustier. A strangled cry emerged from him as he fought down the urge to lick that crimson trail.

Jade's eyes widened with horror when Lyric's attacker boldly touched his finger to her wound, rubbing her blood between his fingertips. With a smirk, he held his hand out towards Jade.

"What's wrong blood sucker? Don't tell me that you don't want some of this. It will be such a waste otherwise." With a flick of his wrist, a second cut opened near the first. Lyric whimpered and shook her head at Jade.

He knew she wanted him to leave her, but that would never happen. Crossing the remainder of the room slowly, Jade didn't once take his eyes from the man that was about to become another victim. So maybe he'd killed the guy's lover, but this brought him past the point of caring. There would be no remorse once he got through with this guy.

Jade was filled with the bloodlust, and he fought to maintain control. Though his eyes flicked to the scarlet stains on his beautiful lady, he was more hungry for revenge. The stake clutched tightly in the hand of his prey did nothing to deter him. This wasn't the first time he'd been threatened with one; it likely wouldn't be the last.

"Kill her!" The sudden shout echoed through the room. "Or, the next cut will be the one that finishes her off. You fucking owe me."

There was only one way to handle this. Jade was terrified of losing all control. It already hung in such a precarious balance. Never taking his eyes from the crazed man, he reached out a tentative hand. Tilting Lyric's head to the side, he heard her sigh at his touch. His stomach clenched and ached as he brought his face to her bleeding throat.

Ever so delicately, he touched his tongue to a bead of blood and followed it up to the wound it had descended from. A small groan escaped him as he quickly grew erect. Even her blood stirred the desire to life within him. Though she held very still, he heard Lyric draw in a breath and hold it. She was afraid.

Jade might have been a blood hungry monster, but he was not stupid. As the stake whistled through the air towards him, his hand shot up to stop the downward swing midway. The crunch of bone brought a satisfied smile to Jade's lips as he crushed the wrist held tightly in his grasp.

No sooner had the jackass started shrieking in pain than Jade tore himself from Lyric's bloody neck. He was dying to sink his fangs deep, and it wouldn't be her. The stake fell forgotten to the carpet, and Jade jerked the man off his feet. Drawing him close, he stared directly into the face of the miserable wretch.

"You're as dead now as your precious woman," Jade growled into his face. "You fucked with the wrong vampire, you sorry piece of shit."

Everything happened at once then. Time seemed to slow right down when in fact, it was faster than ever. Pain, sharp and explosive, struck Jade low in his abdomen. The knife handle protruding from his body had him momentarily confused until Lyric

screamed his name. The panic in her voice spurred him into action.

He wasted no time biting into the pitiful victim he held immobile. Going straight for the artery, Jade wanted his death. He needed it. A strangled gurgle came from his prey, and he ignored it, pulling hard on the wounds that flowed like a scarlet waterfall over his tongue and down his throat. He paused only to yank the knife from his body, letting it fall to the floor.

Lyric's hysterics were hurting his sensitive ears, but they didn't distract his focus from the feast in his grasp. His victim didn't even have time to cry or scream once Jade started draining the life from him.

The heady glow that enveloped Jade was welcome, a relief from the pain scorching through his insides. The stab wound would never be enough to harm a vampire seriously, but damn, it hurt like a bitch. As he drank deeply of the satisfying human blood, he was caught up in the head spinning allure, the undeniable magic of the feed.

When at last he dropped the lifeless corpse to the floor, the need for more drove him. Turning on Lyric, he saw her frightened, pressed to the back of the couch as if trying to hide. His intentions warred within him as instinct commanded him to kill her and love encouraged him to hold her.

Every drop that fell from her wounds beckoned to him. He shook his head, refusing the desire to feast on her. She was sweet, delicious. How badly he wanted her.

Jade was fighting a losing battle. He was in kill mode, and the fact that there was a bleeding human within such close proximity was enough to force him past the point of no return. He actually caught himself taking a menacing step towards her. But, Jade would rather truly die once and for all than harm a hair on Lyric's head. Betraying the undead lust dominating his focus, he threw himself toward the door.

"Jade?" Lyric's word was a sob, and she struggled to get to her feet.

No, if she came after him there would be no stopping himself. He had to get out of there. He stumbled in his haste to flee the dreadful temptation. The sound of the door hitting the wall and bouncing back echoed on his way out.

He didn't look back, but if he had, he would have seen Lyric throw herself off the couch, hands still bound behind her.

"Jade!" She cried, but he was long gone.

Collapsing to her knees on the bloodstained carpet, she cried as if her heart were breaking. The cooling body just a few feet away was her only companion until Storm and Griffin found her nearly an hour later.

## Chapter Thirteen

Numb didn't begin to describe Lyric's mental state. Though she shivered slightly, she had no conscious awareness of the chill that stole through her. It meant nothing.

Water dripped from the tips of her long black hair. The gentle hand that pulled a hairbrush through her tresses trembled slightly. Ever since Storm and Griffin had gotten her back home, she'd barely spoken a word. Storm had insisted that she shower and change. Unable to muster the strength to resist, Lyric had allowed her friend to guide her through the motions.

When she'd repeated the events of the evening to them, it had been robotic and detached. The only time she had exhibited obvious emotion was when Griffin had cut his finger and used the blood to heal the cuts inflicted by Taylor's blade. A whimper had escaped her as she recalled the predatory bloodlust in Jade's eyes when he tasted her blood. The way he'd looked at her as if he couldn't decide if she was his mate or his next kill.

Clutching tightly at her fuzzy robe, Lyric closed her eyes and relived the night over and over in her mind. A barrage of questions assailed her, one after the other like a flurry of punches. What could she have done differently? How could she have stopped Jade from running out on her? Why did she feel like she would never see him again?

Storm laid the brush aside and got to her feet. "I'll bring you some tea. Do you want anything else?"

Lyric managed to shake her head from side to side. It took all of her willpower to perform the action. Though she genuinely appreciated Storm's need to take care of her, part of her just wanted to be alone.

The murmur of voices carried to her from the kitchen. Griffin and Storm spoke in hushed tones, but it wasn't hard to decipher their words in the small confines of the apartment.

"It's alright. You can leave. Thank you for helping me get her home safe." Storm spoke softly, almost timidly.

"Think nothing of it," came Griffin's low, melodic response. "Is she going to be ok?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I've never seen her like this before." A sigh.

"And how about you? Are you alright? That wasn't exactly a pretty sight Jade left behind. That kind of thing can be pretty traumatic."

There was a pause, and then Storm said, "I wish I could say that was the first dead body I've seen. I'll get over it. But, thanks for asking."

The sound of the door opening and closing was accompanied by the sensation of Griffin's vampiric energy slipping away with his exit. Lyric glanced up when Storm re-entered the room.

Her blonde locks were a mess, and she still wore her burlesque attire. The expression of sisterly affection that she wore was comforting, but it also sent a streak of guilt through Lyric.

"You should go, too. You've got to be exhausted." Try as she might, Lyric was unable to muster a smile. "I'll be fine. I think I just need to rest."

Storm eyed her with disbelief. "Are you sure? I can stay if you want me to."

“I'd love it if you came by in the morning. We could go for brunch.”

Despite the mind-numbing pain that filled Lyric, she knew how much worse it would be without a friend like Storm to count on. Without her, Lyric would be completely alone. Judging by the way that Jade had deserted her, she didn't doubt the truth in that assumption.

When Storm finally gathered her things to go, she hesitated by the door, clearly torn as to whether or not to leave. “Promise you'll call me if you need me. Even if you just want to talk about it.”

“Of course.” The door closed, and Lyric sighed.

Dragging her heels, she made her way to the door, locking it securely. Surveying the empty apartment, she waited to feel something. Where were the tears that she kept waiting for? Shouldn't they have started by now?

The ache inside her was hollow, as if her insides had been scraped clean. She kept waiting for more, wanting to unleash what seemed to lie coiled tightly inside her. Head down, her wet hair clung to the sides of her face as she made her way down the hall to her bedroom. She considered curling up on the couch in the living room, but memories of making love to Jade in that room haunted her.

Unable to get settled in comfort, she tossed and turned until finally she just gave up and stared up at the ceiling. Every time she closed her eyes, Lyric saw Jade. Pupils dilated and fangs bared, he'd been ready to kill her. He'd tried to warn her from the start, and she hadn't listened.

Maybe his love for her wasn't enough. Maybe Jade had been right all along. He was more monster than man, and that would never change.

That thought did it. The floodgates opened with the first sob. Hot tears streaked a moist path down her cheeks regardless of her attempts to wipe them away. Before long, her body shook with the intensity of her pain. Nausea combined with heartbreak to twist her insides in a wretched mess of physical and emotional agony.

The sound of her pain brought Frisk to her side, nudging her with feline head bumps until she raised a hand to pet him. The suffocating darkness made it hard for her to breathe. Lyric focused on taking deep breaths, drawing the air into her lungs. Everything felt so wrong without Jade at her side. Would she ever get used to it?

She wondered if perhaps she was too quick to jump to conclusions. But, then she saw Jade again in her mind's eye, remembering the moment that she saw it in his eyes. He could kill her as easily as he'd killed Taylor.

Yet, he hadn't. He'd run from her and left her with a corpse. If Storm hadn't come ... Lyric shuddered, unable to finish the thought.

The glowing red numbers on the digital bedside clock ticked by; each minute felt longer than the last. Lyric watched them, knowing that sleep wasn't coming any time soon. Her sobs subsided, and the tears, too, began to dry up. Yet, there was no end to the black hole of despair that consumed her.

She stared at the clock until the numbers were just a red blur. Clutching a handful of Frisk's soft fur, she ached for Jade.

\* \* \* \*

It had been more than four centuries since Jade had craved liquor as bad as he did right now. Drowning his sorrows in booze would be a most welcome relief from the self-



loathing and guilt that terrorized him. Now, his only escape came in the form of blood, rushing hot and fast from an open wound, the very same thing that had led him to this moment of disgust and regret.

Regret. It was so very new to him. In all of these years since he'd shed his humanity, he had never felt much regret for it. Until now.

If he were dead as he should have been ages ago, he wouldn't be here now to turn a mortal woman's life upside down. Even as he had the thought, he knew he didn't mean it. Then he never would have been there that night to save her. And, he most certainly never would have experienced the joy and splendor of holding her in his arms as he claimed her as his own.

Who was he kidding? He was a fucking idiot, running from her as she'd cried out his name. That sound continued to resonate throughout his entire being. He'd left her, like the vile creature that he was. He left her bloody and wounded beside a dead man.

A sharp wrap at the door pulled him from his pity party. With a scowl, he rolled off the couch and went to answer it, promising bad things for whoever stood on the other side. His senses tuned into that familiar energy as he jerked the door open unnecessarily hard.

Griffin stood there, his expression masked but unpleasant. Rather than waiting for an invitation, he pushed past Jade into the house. The action irritated Jade, but he remained calm. Closing the door, he turned to his friend, awaiting the lecture he assumed was coming.

"Please tell me that you've got a really good explanation for what happened tonight." Griffin spoke calmly, watching Jade in a way that made him feel like he was on display.

Jade weighed his options before responding. What could he say? The truth was all he had to offer. "There's nothing I can say to explain away my actions this time. I fucked up. Big time." He pushed his disheveled dark mane away from his face, forcing himself to meet his friend's hard gaze. "So, you found her?"

"Oh yeah, I found her. On her knees beside a corpse, sobbing your name into the bloodstained carpet. That's how I found her, Jade." Griffin's tone held a note of contempt. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

The impact of Griffin's words was worse than a punch in the gut. Jade felt sick. He had nobody but himself to blame for what had happened to Lyric. And, he'd gone and left her like the coward that he was. He hated himself for asking, but he had to.

"Is she ok?"

Griffin leaned against the wall at his back and crossed his arms over his solid chest. "She's alive and physically well, if that's what you mean. But, from what I saw, she's an emotional wreck."

Jade's heart sank. How could he have expected any different? He couldn't help but feel judged by Griffin, which was something extraordinary in its own right. Since when had Griffin started caring about his exploits with human women?

Rather than risk an ugly encounter by asking, he said only, "Thank you. For finding her and taking her home. I owe you."

Griffin shook his head, his eyes never leaving Jade. "You don't owe me anything. But, I'm not sure I can say the same about that young lady. She counted on you, Jade, and you let her down."

"Dare I ask when you became such a bleeding heart for the mortals?" Jade attempted

a smile, but it twisted into a sour smirk.

"You know I don't give a damn about them beyond my next meal," Griffin scoffed. "But, that girl loves you, and the fact that she's still alive confirms that you are head over heels in love with her. Otherwise, she'd have been worm food the night you met her. So, maybe you need to stop being such a jackass and go to her. Before it's too late."

Jade weighed the wise words of his friend. So simple and so true. And, something that he could not do. He could have killed her. It was a chance he couldn't risk again.

"I can't do it, Griff. She means too much to me. I never should have gotten involved with her in the first place. None of this would have happened."

"It's too late to walk away and pretend you didn't twist her entire life into something else completely. That's cruel Jade, even for you."

Frustration coursed through him, and Jade was stricken with confusion. If he gave in to what his heart instructed him to do, he would be with her right this minute. But, he'd done enough harm to her, and he couldn't bear the thought of exposing her to further danger.

"That's why I'm never going to see her again. It's past time I got out of this city. Staying here this long was a mistake." Even as he said the words, he didn't believe them. They felt like a betrayal to Lyric, and he fought to hide the lie in his eyes.

Griffin gave him a look that clearly stated how ridiculous he thought Jade was being. "It was just a goddamn human. Far worse things could have gotten a hold of her. Why is this such a deal breaker?"

"It wasn't just a human. It was a human that watched me kill his fiancée and felt like he owed me one." Jade laughed, but it was bitter and lacked humor. "Can you believe that? Here I've been worried about myself and other vampires, and it was a human behind all of this. He nearly drove me to kill her."

"No," Griffin shook his head, fixing the other vampire with serious brown eyes. "Otherwise, you would have done just that. If you had the strength to resist once, why not again? Why are you so afraid of yourself? It's so ... unbecoming of you."

Jade managed a genuine smile at that. Leave it to ruthless, cutthroat Griffin to make him feel like a fool in a tactful and classy manner. If there was one person on this earth that he could be honest with, it was this man.

"I can't let myself do to her what I did to Emma." He almost choked on the name of his long dead wife; it had been so long since it had passed between his lips. "I keep picturing Lyric like that, dead. The thought scares me more than anything I have felt since I killed my wife. I can't relive that with her."

Silence fell, heavy but comfortable. The two men stared into one another. The calculating look Griffin wore instilled a sense of curiosity in Jade. He wondered what was going through his friend's mind, but then decided that he didn't want to know.

Pushing himself away from the wall, Griffin paced the length of the kitchen once before spinning on his heel and raising one finely sculpted eyebrow. "Why don't you just eliminate the possibility of killing her?"

Immediately Jade was shaking his head vigorously. "No, don't say it. It's not even an option."

"It's always an option. Turn her, Jade, and your worries are over. Besides, what were you planning on doing as she aged anyway?"

Jade turned away to stare out the window at the darkened street. Panic gripped him,

and he struggled against the urge to go to her and do just as Griffin suggested. It couldn't be so easily cut and dried.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," he replied honestly, watching the traffic pass his house but seeing only a blur of lights. "I was just living in the moment, enjoying the scent of her skin and the beat of her heart. The sound of her breathing deeply as she slept next to me." He hung his head, ashamed and mournful. What had he done?

A low chuckle came from Griffin. Before long it was a full out laugh. "Oh my dear friend, never have I heard you sound like such a ... human. Go to her already, or you're going to spend the next several centuries mourning the loss of her. And, God forbid, I should have to listen to that drivel."

Jade knew that Griffin's words were in jest, but they made him realize that he'd been enjoying those human facets of Lyric because he lacked his very own human qualities. Though he didn't mourn his lost humanity in any way, he did thoroughly enjoy basking in the warm glow of hers. She was everything he could ever want in a woman, human or not. And, because he loved her the way that he did, he knew he had to let her go.

"I'm not going to her. But, I need to ask you a huge favor." He turned to face Griffin, gripping the edge of the counter to still his trembling fingers. "Will you watch out for her? Please? At least, just for a little while. After I'm gone."

"Gone?" Griffin's jaw dropped in surprise. "You've got to be kidding me. You haven't left this city in decades."

"Which is all the more reason why it's time for me to leave."

"Come on man, you're making a big mistake if you take off now. Is this really what you want to do, or what you think you have to do?"

"What difference does it make? I'm doing this for her. So she can have the normal life she deserves. Maybe I can give her that much."

Griffin stayed silent this time, merely watching as Jade left the room and returned with a ring of keys. "Here," he thrust them at Griffin, fearing he would change his mind if he waited too long. "Stay here while I'm gone if you like. The house has been paid off for years."

Taking a notepad from one of the kitchen drawers, he scrawled a note in haste, which he sealed in an envelope before writing Lyric's name on the front.

"Just in case she comes by." He gave the envelope to Griffin before he gave in to the urge to tear the letter to pieces. "I'm leaving tonight."

After Griffin made a final attempt at appealing to whatever sanity remained within Jade, he bid his friend goodnight, leaving him to battle his demons alone. Jade refused to listen to the voice in his head that told him how stupid it would be to leave town. This wasn't about what he wanted; it was about what was best for Lyric.

As Jade packed, he refused to think about anything but getting as far from the city as he possibly could. He couldn't stop thinking about her and what Griffin had said. "Turn her..." If only it was that easy. But, wouldn't that be like killing her, too?

He tore through his closet, shoving clothing at random into bags. Only when he reached for the blankets on his bed did he stop. Her scent was all over them. He'd been unable to wash it away. With a groan, he stalked out of the bedroom. He could buy new blankets.

By the time he was ready to leave, he had almost lost the will to do so. Tossing his things into the trunk of the Mustang, he paused to look back at the house. It hadn't meant

much to him before meeting Lyric. Now, he looked at the simple structure and saw the place where they'd first made love.

No, he shook his head sadly. She deserved so much better than him. And, despite the way he longed for her, he knew he had to do this.

With one final look at the place he'd only just begun to think of as home, he slid into the driver's seat of the Shelby. Putting the car in gear, he focused on the road ahead and never looked back.

## Chapter Fourteen

After the fifth call in a row from Brit, Lyric gave up and simply turned her cell phone off. She'd left a message for the dance troupe's choreographer the previous evening stating that she wasn't feeling well and she wouldn't be available for a few days. Only Storm knew the real reason behind her absence. She just had no drive to take the stage and play the role of the glamour girl.

In the three days since she'd seen Jade, she hadn't mustered the courage to call or see him. Every time she picked up the phone and punched in his number, she could never bring herself to press send. Tossing the phone aside, she didn't even toy with the idea.

Though she wasn't up to dancing, she couldn't fathom the thought of staying in the small apartment another night. If she didn't get out and get some fresh air, she could kiss her sanity goodbye.

The television was the only sound as she pulled on a clean pair of jeans and a red tank top. It was the first time she had worn something other than a robe or pajamas in days. She'd secluded herself inside the apartment, even neglecting to answer the door when her neighbor stopped by with some of Lyric's mail that had been put in the wrong mailbox. She had little desire to interact with the outside world.

Lyric felt detached from the world beyond her door, which was exactly why she needed to get out and reacquaint herself with it. The pain of Jade's desertion and his ongoing silence was something she would have to learn to live with. Somehow. If she gave in to the overpowering urge to lie in bed another day, she might never get her life back.

Everything had changed for Lyric over the past few days. It was a harsh realization that love was exactly what everyone said it was: a game, a sure way to bring about your own emotional destruction when it all fell down around you.

Looking into the mirror at her pale reflection, Lyric shook her head solemnly. She barely recognized the haunted person behind her eyes. It was shocking to see the raw pain reflected back at her. Seeing it made it even more real, and her heart sank. It had only been a few days, but the ache inside her continued to grow rather than fade. Would she ever escape the hold Jade Kenyan had over her?

Abandoning the notion of putting makeup on, she dragged a brush through the tangles in her hair and shrugged. She might have looked like the walking dead, but she had nobody to impress.

When she started up the little rental car, Lyric realized that she didn't really know where she was going. She followed the streets aimlessly, taking turns at random. Every station on the radio seemed to be playing a song either celebrating or mourning love so she drove along in silence.

She didn't really plan to end up at the river that ran beneath the bridges joining one side of the city to the other. But, before long she was sitting there, at the water's edge, the rental car parked a few blocks away.

Staring out at the rushing water, she was captivated by the absolute black of it. The current was strong, demonstrated by the fallen logs and other natural debris that floated by at an impressive speed. With her chin in her hands, Lyric watched the river for a long

time, wishing it could wash the hurt away.

As hard as she fought to keep Jade from her thoughts, it was a losing battle, a waste of energy. She wondered where he was right now. Was there any chance at all that he was thinking of her, too?

The vision flashed through her mind so fast that she stumbled getting to her feet. It was Jade, flying down the highway in his Mustang. A flash of green reflected in the headlights, a road sign.

Her heart faltered and nearly skipped a beat. The road sign was for a town almost halfway across the country. For the first time in a long time, Lyric cursed her visions. Not only did they tend to be far too vague, they rarely turned out the way she interpreted them to be. It was frustrating. But, if Jade was planning on leaving town, she needed to know.

Her feet moved fast as she ran full out to the car. Maybe if she got to him in time, she could change his mind. Even if he never wanted to see her again, she couldn't stand the thought of him leaving. A vice-like squeeze of her heart caused her to gasp. She would rather die than live out the rest of her life without Jade, all the while knowing he was out there, forever immortal.

She drove through the city streets as fast as she dared. Her pulse pounded and fear gripped her, driving her to keep moving despite the part of her that insisted she was being foolish. If Jade wanted to leave, who was she to try to stop him?

The battle continued inside her until she turned into his neighborhood. Her common sense screamed at her to turn around and go home, where she belonged. Her heart kept her going forward. She had to do this, if only so that she could finally let him go.

The first thing she noticed upon pulling up in front of his house was the absence of his car. That could mean anything though, right? It didn't mean that he was gone. Then she caught sight of the envelope closed in the screen door. Her stomach twisted painfully, and a lump formed in her throat.

The house was clearly empty. After getting out of the car, she'd stood in front of it for what felt like hours before making her way up the walk. She was not at all surprised to discover her name on the front of the envelope.

Fingers shaking, Lyric slid a finger beneath the seal and withdrew the small piece of folded notepaper inside. She held her breath when she opened the note and read Jade's parting words to her. In small, neat handwriting it simply said, "You walk with death every time I am near. I cannot be the one that destroys you. I love you too much. Be happy."

Lyric had thought her tears had long run dry. She was wrong. The familiar sting of pins pricking the back of her eyes brought a fresh wave. She hadn't cried in days, at least three. So much for letting him go. The soul-crushing ache for him was stronger than ever.

Her vision hadn't been wrong, but it had come too late. Jade was long gone. Even though she knew that with every piece of her being, she rang the doorbell anyway. Just in case.

Of course, there was no answer. The place was dark, and Jade had skipped town, leaving her behind. Lyric felt abandoned and guilty at the same time, as if she had no right to feel that way. He'd said that he loved her, and then he left. Yet, she had no true claim over him. Nothing bound them together other than words spoken in moments of passion and times of affection. Still, she felt like he was hers and that the universe owed her a damn good explanation.

The way Lyric saw it, she had two choices. She could go home and attempt to go on with her life as if Jade Kenyan had never come into it. Or, she could lay claim over her man whether he liked it or not.

Jade didn't leave because he didn't want her. He left because he didn't know how to live with himself. Though it wasn't her job to save him, she refused to allow him to rob them both of something so beautiful because he was unable to find peace within himself.

It was time for Jade to face up to his fears. He would continue to run from them for another three or four centuries while she faded away with time, unless she acted now.

\* \* \* \*

She swallowed hard when the large looming shape of Cry came into view. Fear struck a chord deep within her, but Lyric forced the unwelcome sensation down. She didn't know where else to find a guy like Griffin. She couldn't imagine that the odds of finding him in a city this size were good at all. After looking in the trendy Goth club she'd first met him in and coming up empty handed, she had gathered her courage and come here.

Now, she wasn't sure that had been the brightest idea, but it was all she had. Knowing that she'd regret it forever if she chickened out, she took a deep breath, said a small prayer and got out of the car.

The sound of the car door slamming shut echoed in the eerie quiet. A glance at the old building revealed it to be just as it was the last and only time she'd been there. From the outside, it appeared to be empty, abandoned and void of activity. If only it were so. The darkness of the energy inhabiting the building reached out to her as if it would draw her close.

Lyric approached the entrance, forcing each foot to keep moving, one after the other. Her every instinct demanded that she leave now before it was too late. It was not an option for her. She had everything to gain by facing the horror that lay before her now. Jade was gone. With nothing left to lose, she steeled herself for what she might face once on the other side of those large double doors.

At first, she was caught off guard by the sense of normalcy inside Cry. The main floor was like any other bar, something she hadn't really had time to look at when here with Jade. Certain that there was some rule about avoiding eye contact with predators, she did her best to observe those around her without meeting their eyes.

Lyric considered and then scrapped the idea of getting a drink at the bar. It would make her a sitting duck, easy pickings for any one of these bloodsuckers. No, she would make a quick jaunt around the main floor and then leave if there was no sign of Griffin. Asking for him probably wasn't the best plan. It would mean having to speak to one of these creatures.

It occurred to her that she didn't see Jade as one of them. She never had. He was her hero. Nothing like the vile things that she knew writhed and squirmed in the basement as they fed, one blood orgy after another. She certainly hoped that Griffin would never be among those vampires. If he were anything like Jade, he wouldn't come to a place like this at all.

After circling the perimeter of the main floor, Lyric decided that Cry was a waste of time. Nobody in his right mind would be caught there. And, judging by those who frequented the place, she was the only one there with enough sense left to believe as

much.

With a sigh that was quickly swallowed up by the loud industrial music, she turned and headed for the door. Only one person attempted to speak to her, a human. Politely declining, she pushed by and was soon outside beneath the one dim streetlight.

Tension eased out of her like a weight being lifted. She was safe now. She'd been certain that something blood hungry would have been all over her due to the waves of fear she had to have been giving off. A hand went to her forehead as she crossed the small lot back to her car. Her temples pounded with the beginning of a headache.

She would find Jade. Somehow, she would find him. She refused to let this one setback discourage her. He was out there, and as long as he was, she was determined to find a way to bring him home to her where he belonged, whether he knew it yet or not.

As she pulled the keys to the rental from her purse, a sound from the shadows sent a shiver down her spine. Every tiny hair on the back of her neck stood on end as she got the frightful sensation that she was being stalked.

The car was still yards away. The atmosphere grew thick with menace, and Lyric's fear quickly gave way to all out terror when the vampire emerged before her. It was as if he'd materialized out of thin air, effectively barring her way to the car. She recognized him immediately. Dexter. The very same vampire that Griffin had chased away from her weeks ago. And, he looked much too happy to see her.

The broad grin that suddenly broke across his stiff features made her sick to her stomach. She couldn't have imagined this turning out any worse. She was dead, without a doubt. Taylor had been child's play compared to this guy. She would have given anything right then to be able to turn back time.

"Well, holy shit. Look what we have here." Dexter spoke with obvious glee, looking much like a man that just realized he held the winning ticket. "And, all alone at that. You're either suicidal or incredibly stupid."

He was right. She was beyond stupid for coming here by herself. Clutching her purse tightly, she couldn't stop her eyes from darting to the car and back to him. She'd never make it, but she had to try. His eyes followed her gaze before coming back to her, looking her over like she was a fine gourmet meal. He was daring her to go for it.

Lyric struggled to fill her lungs with air as fear crushed the breath from her. Staring into the black eyes of the vampire facing her, she missed Jade more than ever. Would he even know she'd been killed? She hoped not. He would only blame himself for leaving.

"If you touch me, Jade Kenyan will-,"

"Save it, cupcake. You can't pull that one on me twice. It may have been true the first time, but I know that Jade left town. And apparently, he also left you." Dexter clapped his hands, rubbing them together eagerly. "So as far as I can see, it's just you and me. And, I'm feeling kinda like you owe me."

Lyric knew that she was in for it, but she wasn't going down without a fight.

"Yeah," her voice was breathy and faint. "I guess you would feel that way."

He raised an eyebrow in confusion. "That's it? No screaming or begging?"

She knew that he was hoping to break her. Begging would be accepting her role as the victim. Though Lyric accepted that he intended to kill her, she didn't have to play dead before she really was.

Choosing not to respond, she made the decision to turn away from him and keep walking to the car. It took courage that Lyric didn't know she had to turn her back on



him. He made a scoffing noise of disbelief, and a moment later, his hand was on her shoulder. Dexter spun her around roughly, giving her a shake. She tried not to cringe.

"You really think I'd just let you walk away? You're mine, and I'm not playing anymore." He grabbed her by both shoulders, jerking her towards him. Her purse hit the ground, and she flung her arms out to fight him off.

A small scream broke the silence around them as Lyric stumbled, falling to her knees. The pavement bit into her flesh despite the jeans she wore. Grabbing one of her arms, he twisted it behind her back so that he easily controlled her entire body. The pain shot down her arm, sharp enough to make her yell a second time.

Dexter was done talking. Baring his fangs at her, he jerked her to her feet and pulled her against him. The pain in her twisted arm was enough to bring tears to Lyric's eyes. She thought for sure he was going to break it. Her instinct was to beg him to stop, but she refused to give in to the weakness.

The vampire's strength was enormous, impossible to break free from. She could do nothing but tremble in his grip when he pushed her hair back in order to bare her neck. Adrenaline flooded her, and Lyric struggled not to plead and promise, anything if he would just let her go. She stood no chance of getting away now, and the excruciating pain coursing through her arm was sapping the energy from her.

His drugstore scent filled her nostrils when he leaned in close. Tasting her first, he slid his tongue along the vein in her neck, the one she just knew he was going to tear into. Her breath came hard and fast in anticipation of the moment when his fangs would pierce her flesh. When she felt him grow hard against her, she wanted to vomit.

The moment his sharp canines plunged through her skin, Lyric cried out and sagged against him. The pain seemed to shoot straight to her core, hot like fire, searing a path throughout her insides. He pulled on the wound, sucking hard, and it brought another pained sound from her.

Only when he'd drawn enough of her blood to weaken her seriously did he release her arm. Unable to stand on her own, his arms went around her, and she wished that she would at least fade into unconsciousness. Feeling him literally suck the very life from her was pure hell. Her mind raced as if seeking a way out still, though there was no escape for her now. Death was coming to claim Lyric, and it was coming fast.

The parking lot began to blur before her eyes. She knew it must almost be over now. Soon the pain would fade, wouldn't it?

Oh Jade, she thought. I hope you never learn of this night. Go on as if I never existed.

Lyric's thoughts began to scramble, becoming incoherent. The physical pain was easing as her body grew numb. Yet, the heartache was stronger than ever. Dying wasn't so bad. It was far better than living without Jade.

A strangled sound came from Dexter, and he was suddenly yanked away from her as if he'd been plucked from the face of the earth. Weak and dizzy, Lyric hit the ground with a crash of sprawling limbs. She struggled to focus on the blurred shape that moved too fast for her eyes to follow.

It was too late. The darkness crept over Lyric, taking hold to draw her under. Her eyelids fluttered and then closed. She never saw Griffin kneeling over Dexter, smashing his skull against the concrete until it was covered in blood and brain matter. Nor did she feel him lift her battered body into his strong arms.

Kneeling on the hard pavement, Griffin held the woman that his dearest and only true friend in the world loved more than anything else. He muttered a curse aloud at Jade before feeling Lyric's slowing pulse.

Lightly slapping the side of her face, he repeated her name until her eyes opened. They rolled back in her head almost immediately. She was as good as dead.

"Lyric, dammit! I can't help you if you don't talk to me." Griffin all but shouted as he shook her. "Goddammit Jade, you owe me big time. Lyric! Honey, you have to answer me. Do you want me to keep you here or let you go?"

The voice that broke through the still fog clouding Lyric's brain wasn't the one she longed to hear, but something about it made her want to listen. Something familiar. Drowning in a sea of black, a sense of calm set in, encouraging her to just let go, to take that very last breath.

As she drew in that last shaky breath, a series of images flashed through her mind. Jade, that very first night when he saved her from the junkie on the street, the night she spotted him in the audience as she performed and that first night they made love. Jade. She couldn't leave him, could she?

It was so easy to slip away, but Lyric heard her name spoken with an urgency that forced her to listen, and she knew she had to, for Jade. It was like breaking through the surface of a wave that had swallowed her whole. Her eyes opened, and she saw a vision of Griffin that seemed to blur and spin before her. Was it real?

"Lyric, you will die if I don't do something." Griffin was leaning in close, speaking clearly and slapping her face. "You have to make the choice. I cannot do it for you. Jade would kill me."

"Jade," she croaked, sapping her waning strength. It was hard to make sense of what Griffin was saying to her. She heard Jade's name and she clung to it. "Jade."

"Tell me you want me to do this, Lyric. Or else I can't." Griffin's voice was pained.

Vaguely Lyric knew what he was saying, what he was offering. The darkness drew close again, blanketing her in warmth and comfort. It was so easy to turn away from him and cloak herself within it. And still, something was missing.

The echo of her heartbeat reverberated inside her head as it slowed. Every small, shallow breath was a fight that her body couldn't afford to put up. An awareness settled into Lyric; she was being offered a way out, a way to join Jade forever without the human vulnerabilities that he feared so greatly in her. She nodded but the action didn't translate physically. Lacking the strength to communicate with Griffin, she began to fight the black webs that smothered her.

Choking, she had to be choking. Lyric couldn't breathe. The sound of her dying heart grew louder until it drowned out the sound of Griffin's voice, her last link to this world. With one last desperate inner cry, Lyric reached for him. His cold hand touched the side of her face and though she heard him say her name, he sounded a world away.

"Please," she murmured, unable to focus on Griffin's face as it swam above her. "Don't let me go."

Her words lacked strength but Griffin heard her clearly. He acted quickly, cursing once more before pulling his best friend's woman close and biting into her wounded throat.

Lyric's heart didn't have much to give, and he took only as much as was necessary. Using fangs to open a vein in his wrist, Griffin pressed the pumping crimson flow to her

lips. "If you want to bat those pretty eyes at Jade again, drink."

Griffin's blood was hot and salty on her tongue. She would have recoiled from it if she'd had the strength to. As it filled her mouth steadily, she had no choice but to swallow. That very simple action took enormous effort, and she had to fight hard to make the muscles in her throat work.

The powerful vampire blood flowed into her, breathing new life throughout her dying body. A seed was planted, growing swiftly into a root that took hold to claim her for the undead. Lyric felt it then, the start of a spark that quickly grew into a flame. Yet even as the new life inside her struggled to take over, her heart slowed until each beat grew further apart. Her lungs grew heavy, and it became impossible to breathe.

Lyric cried out inside her mind, desperate to fight the abyss that threatened to suck her in. The sound of Griffin's voice as he spoke soothingly to her disappeared entirely as she spiraled headlong into the black cloud that enveloped her. With one last labored beat, her heart seized and stopped.

## Chapter Fifteen

As the Shelby Cobra raced down the highway in the dead of the night, Jade reached for the radio knob with a heartfelt curse. The Jimi Hendrix song that had just started was like salt in his wounds. He hadn't been able to get Lyric off his mind since leaving town. The farther away he got, the stronger his need for her grew.

Slamming his fist against the steering wheel, he pressed the gas pedal to the floor, making the engine roar. It did little to appease him.

He'd been traveling in the same direction since leaving, stopping wherever it was safe during the day. He didn't know where he was going or what he planned to do when he got there. It had occurred to him very early on how incredibly rash and stupid this had been. Still, he'd kept going.

If he went back to her, he would destroy her. And, he loved her too much to be the one to take everything away. She deserved to live the full human life that he had never had. He couldn't give her children, walk beneath the sunshine or grow old with her. So despite the fact that every fiber of his being screamed for him to turn around, he stared straight ahead as the lines on the road flew by.

Another road sign lit up brilliantly as Jade blasted by. He didn't bother to read it. He'd lost track of his location long ago.

Visions of Lyric filled his head. He could still see her that very first night, standing next to the bus stop in those sensational heels. From that first moment, she had stirred a piece of Jade that he had long forgotten existed.

Jade had done many things that he'd come to regret. Not only had he betrayed his wife with another woman, he had murdered her. And still, fate brought a gift as amazing as Lyric into his world. It just seemed too good to be true. Walking away before it all blew up in his face had to be for the best. It just had to be.

Bloodlust gnawed at him. He hadn't been feeding, which did nothing but make him irritable and irrational. He couldn't go much longer. Again, he was reminded of why he chose to leave the only woman he had loved so deeply.

A series of commercials followed the modern rock song on the station he'd switched to. Jade shoved a lock of hair out of his face. "Fuck sakes! Why her? Why now?" A twinge in his gut had him squirming in discomfort. Something didn't feel right.

A sharp and sudden pang in his still heart filled him with dread. The strong sense of foreboding that gripped him was enough to make him question everything. He had to go back.

The radio commercials came to an end, leading straight into the classic strains of guitar that had haunted most of Jade's journey. Lyric! Something was wrong. He knew it without a doubt. Maybe another Hendrix song wasn't enough to confirm that, but at this point, Jade didn't believe in coincidence.

Now he was regretting his rash decision to throw his cell phone out the window in a fit of rage a few hundred miles back. Removing the temptation to call Lyric had been his solution to the undying urge. What in the hell was wrong with him? When had he become such a blathering fool? Right about the time he'd first laid eyes on Lyric, that's when.

He didn't have to think twice about turning around. With a glance in the mirror to

make sure everything was clear behind him, he hit the brakes and spun the car around. The tires squealed as they slid on the asphalt before regaining traction. Jade began a steady stream of cursing, this time directed at himself.

What had he been thinking when he thought leaving her alone and helpless was best for her? If something had happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

The thought instilled a fear within him that had him pushing the car to the limit. He had to get to her. Anguish rocked Jade as he prayed for the first time since he'd been human. *Just let her be ok*, he thought. *Please God, I need her.*

\* \* \* \*

Dusk had settled like a thinly veiled backdrop to the city. The quiet neighborhood was disrupted by the angry growl of a Mustang engine pushed to the breaking point. Long, silken black tresses perfectly fanned out on the white pillow moved slightly as Lyric thrashed about, caught up in the throes of a dream she could not escape.

For a time, she had felt nothing, dreamed nothing. Then, everything came to life behind her closed eyes. Trapped in a slumber that would not free her, Lyric had been waiting for whatever was next, whatever really came after death. However, death had come and gone, leaving her changed but not alive. No longer human.

Her dreams were dominated by bloodlust and crimson rivers that flowed like waterfalls in paradise. She longed for death, longed to be the bringer of it as she drank down the life source of something whose heart continued to beat. The foreign thoughts and needs were frightening to Lyric, and she struggled to separate herself from them.

Try as she might to cling to pieces of her former human life, the only thing that kept coming back to her was Jade. And, with his memory came a swarm of tangled emotions. The ache that lingered had survived even death. He'd abandoned her. Left her alone to die.

A yearning for his loving touch was matched by the desire to hurt him, to make him die inside like he'd done to her. Such vehemence filled her that she lashed out in her sleep, connecting with the lamp at her bedside. It crashed to the floor with the sound of shattering glass, but she continued to dream deeply.

Images of the tall, dark and fantastically gorgeous man that she desperately loved never ceased their assault on her emotions. Why wouldn't he leave her to mourn the loss of him in peace? As long as he continued to haunt her, even through death, she would never be free. If Jade didn't want her, why could she not finally bring herself to believe that?

Her stomach began to hurt as it twisted and cramped with a painful wave of nausea. The craving was strong, taking over her focus. A hunger like none she'd ever experienced commanded her attention. It resonated throughout her until nothing else mattered but satisfying the torturous need.

An alarm seemed to go off inside her head at the sound of a door opening and then that voice that she would know anywhere. A snarl curled her lips up to reveal bared fangs, and her eyes snapped open.

\* \* \* \*

Seeing Griffin's car in the driveway had caused Jade to all but run to the door. Lyric's

rental car hadn't been at her apartment, and he was frantic with worry. He flung the front door open, Griffin's name ready on his lips, when he sensed the energy of a newborn vampire.

His instinct was to tear through the house in search of the foreign creature. Before he'd even made it to the staircase, Griffin stepped out of the living room to intercept his path.

"Jade, wait!" He grabbed his friend's shoulder in a friendly but firm manner. "We have to talk. About Lyric."

"Lyric? You've seen her? Where is she?" Jade's voice rose with panic. He reached out as if he would shake Griffin to get the answers out of him but stopped short of doing so.

"She's here." Griffin paused, allowing his words to sink in. "But, you have to calm down." Looking Jade over carefully he added, "It's about time you showed up."

A hand to his forehead, Jade went cold inside as his intuition told him what he'd known all along. Whatever had happened in his absence, he was too late to save her. "Tell me, Griff. Whatever it is, just spit it out."

Jade wanted to resist when Griffin guided him into the living room. He stood stiffly, only sitting when his friend insisted. The suspense was killing him. When he caught the concern etched in Griffin's deep stare, he knew it was bad. The urge to shout at Griffin to start talking was quickly overcoming his resistance.

"Jade," Griffin began slowly, as if selecting his choice of words. "Lyric was attacked at Cry. I'm not sure why she went there, but Dexter got his hands on her. I found them in the parking lot."

Jade felt like he'd been kicked in the crotch. If his heart had still beat, it would have stopped right then. "Please, keep going."

"It was too late. She was dying. So, I asked her what she wanted. She was almost too far gone to respond." As Griffin spoke, Jade's insides went cold. "When she finally mumbled something that made sense, she asked me not to let her go."

The eyes of the two vampires met, and Jade slowly shook his head from side to side. It was as bad as he'd feared, and it was all his fault.

"And?" He asked, fearing Griffin's answer, already knowing what it was. Waiting for him to say the words was eating a hole in Jade's insides.

Griffin's dark gold eyes peered into Jade. His voice was low and steady. "I turned her, Jade."

The silence that fell between them was strained as Jade absorbed what he was hearing. He was conflicted; his emotions, a mess. He owed everything to this man before him, and yet a jealous streak tore through him with a bitter sting.

Lyric ... a vampire. He couldn't imagine it. Suddenly afraid to see her, Jade glanced around nervously. "Where is she?"

"She hasn't risen yet." Griffin looked pained for a moment before saying, "If this isn't what you want, if you'd rather I didn't-,"

"No," Jade interjected quickly. "She made the choice." He knew Griffin had been about to offer to destroy her. It wasn't that Griffin was so cold but that he was practical and realistic about the world he was a part of. Jade couldn't fault him for that. He had sacrificed of himself by doing what he had.

Jade's body almost vibrated with tension. He got to his feet and paced the length of

the room once, then twice, before grabbing his friend in a typical guy hug. "Thank you, for being there when I wasn't."

Griffin gave him an affectionate clap on the back. "Are you ok, man?"

"I need to see her." Jade's eyes went to the hall by the stairs and back to Griffin. "Fuck, I'm terrified. What if she regrets everything? What if she wishes that you let her die instead? She may not even forgive me for leaving her the way I did. I feel like such a stupid shit."

"You love her. You did what you felt was best because of that. She'll understand."

Jade wasn't so sure. Waking as a newborn vampire would be confusing, a hurricane of feelings and emotions. The dominating factor was always the bloodlust. The thought of his beautiful Lyric lusting for blood and tearing into human flesh scared him. It just wasn't her. Would she still feel for him the way she had before?

"You know what the change is like, Griff. It steals every thought but the blood hunger in the beginning. She could take one look at me and see only the asshole who got her into this situation in the first place. What if she never wants to see me again?"

The conflict of emotion and worry began to brew into a full-fledged storm. Jade hated himself right then, and he expected the same from Lyric. He could leave, now before she awoke. No! No leaving. He had already proven himself a coward. Now, he would prove how much this woman meant to him by staying, whether she rejected him or not.

The air in the room seemed to shift around them as the atmosphere grew hot with the energy of a brand new vampire. Both men spun around to find Lyric framed in the doorway between the hallway and the living room.

Taking in the sight of her, Jade was enchanted all over again. His knees went weak, and he was at a loss for words. The transformation had subtly altered her appearance, making her even more beautiful, if that was possible.

Her eyes flashed with a brilliance that jolted his heart. Those stormy blue orbs glowed with an eerie translucence that was no longer human. Her ink black hair shone with an unnatural blue hue. Lyric's alabaster skin was pale, like porcelain, and Jade knew it would feel just as smooth. She was clad in one of his silk bathrobes. Their eyes locked, and everything else faded away.

"I have spent every moment that we have been apart waiting to lay eyes on you again." Her bell-like voice was soft, but it pierced his soul. "I thought I never would."

Jade was enamored, frozen in place. His eyes were riveted to her cherry red lips and the two tiny points that protruded from beneath them. Looking at Lyric, seeing her as a vampiress, it was surreal. Jade couldn't believe she stood there before him, her humanity gone. Dead.

He wanted to go to her but was unable to move. His feet felt heavy, and he feared that she would reject him. He didn't dare take that chance.

The energy in the room lightened as Griffin quietly retreated from the room, leaving Jade and Lyric to stare at one another with shared uncertainty. Her lower lip trembled, and she took one shaky step towards him before stopping and holding her arms out to him.

Guilt and dismay brought hot, anguished tears to his eyes, and he struggled to keep them from falling. He could still hear the way she'd cried out his name that night as he fled the apartment, leaving her inside with a corpse.

“Jade?”

The way that one word wavered almost brought Jade to his knees. Looking at her as she stood there reaching for him, it struck home on a deep level that he was truly loved. For the first time in his entire existence, he felt genuinely cared for. It was starting to make sense now. It wasn't about whether or not he deserved her; it was about loving her and being loved.

He crossed the space between them, sweeping her into his arms in an embrace that lifted her off her feet. Their lips met, and Jade kissed her as if it were their first time all over again. Her skin was like marble, cold but smooth and soft. The strength that emanated from her was strange and new. Jade was surprised at the way she gripped him tightly, holding him to her as if she'd never let go.

He kissed her with a renewed passion, vowing never to let her out of his sight again. He had almost allowed a human to drive them apart. Never again. He would have loved her had she still been mortal, but now, part of him reveled in the strong and predatory feel of her in his arms. Nothing would take her from him now.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispered against her lips. “I never should have left you.”

Blood red tears overflowed from Jade's shining green eyes to streak twin paths down his cheeks. Staring into her vampire eyes, he found himself entranced. He wanted to ask her how she was feeling, if she was ok, but he didn't want to rush her. This had to be so new and strange for her.

A small smile graced her lips, and she reached to catch a crimson tear on the end of her finger. Bringing it close to her face, her tongue darted out to capture it. “But, you came back.” She peered into him as if seeing right to his soul, and Jade felt exposed. He would give anything for this woman.

His skin began to tingle where she touched him, and when he focused, he could easily feel her fledgling hunger. It was nothing short of miraculous that she still had control of herself. If there had been a human in the vicinity, it would have been a different story.

“You need to feed. Let me take you out.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, pausing to close his eyes and absorb the new feel of her. She still smelled like apples and spice. The scent brought a smile to Jade's face. How had it possibly come to be that a cold-blooded killer such as himself had been gifted with someone so extraordinary?

With a timid batting of her long, luscious eyelashes, Lyric gazed up at him with fear in her hypnotizing eyes. “I'm scared. It hurts, and everything is so confusing.”

His own bloodlust flared up like a flame licking at his insides. Together they would hunt. It was only right that he ease her into her new life. A pang of shame struck Jade like a blow to the guts. If it weren't for him, she would never have been at Cry alone.

Taking her small hands within his own larger ones, he stroked a thumb along the back of her fingers. “I'll help you through this. I promise you. Lyric? Do you trust me?”

Jade was terror stricken, waiting for her response. He didn't blame her if she had no faith left in him. He had little himself.

She reached to stroke the side of his face and instinctively he leaned into her touch. “With my whole heart and soul.” Staring up at him with an expression of awe, she looked at him as if just taking him in for the first time.

He knew what it was like to look at the world with the eyes of the undead. Though Jade had long since gotten used to the difference, it was astounding in the beginning.



He'd felt as if he'd never truly experienced his senses before. Everything was brand new.

Entwining their fingers together, he clasped her hand tightly in his and brought it to his lips. Jade placed a gentle kiss on the back of her knuckles, allowing his lips to linger as he breathed deeply of her scent. Just the very essence of her was causing a tightening in his chest and a throb in his groin.

He wanted so badly to take her right there but restrained the urge, knowing how desperate her hunger must be. With great difficulty, Jade released her. "Let's go hunt."

After she'd changed into blue jeans and one of his t-shirts, she returned to him with a shadowed look and an eerie sparkle in her eyes. An excited thrill shot through Jade, and he was suddenly eager to get moving. The hunger scratched at him like a caged animal waiting to be unleashed.

They found Griffin outside, leaning against his car, as Jade had him blocked in. Pulling away from him, Lyric went to Griffin with slow but sure steps. A small smile turned her lips up at the corners, and she reached to take his hand.

With a quick glance at Jade, Griffin surrendered his hand to the petite vampiress. Jade hung back, watching with curiosity. Lyric squeezed Griffin's hand and stared up into his gold eyes.

"Thank you," she said, her voice scarcely above a whisper. "I am forever in debt to you for what you did. I know your love for Jade drove your decision, but please know that I'm eternally grateful. You reunited us. If there is ever anything I can do for you, anything at all, don't hesitate to mention it."

Griffin brushed a strand of hair away from her face, a gesture that was natural despite how little they really knew of one another. Jade understood their shared intimacy. They were bound by blood, like family. It was nothing for him to be threatened by, and he wasn't. He trusted Griffin. His friend had gone to great lengths for him and Lyric. They were both indebted to him.

"Take care of Jade. That's all I can ask of you right now," Griffin replied with an uncharacteristic gentleness to his tone. "He needs you."

Lyric nodded her dark head once. "I will. But, I mean what I said. Anything you need from me."

Pressing a quick but chaste kiss to her temple, Griffin released her and met Jade's eyes over her head. The two men shared a look, and the unspoken bond they'd formed centuries ago was strengthened. Jade couldn't help but wonder if Griffin would ever allow himself to find the joy and love that Jade had found with Lyric. The ruthless vampire had abandoned notions of love long ago. Jade hoped it wouldn't always be so. One should never live out their existence loveless and alone. He knew that now more so than ever.

Jade glided to Lyric's side, unable to keep his hands off her. It continued to amaze him just how mind-blowing she was; her beauty overwhelmed his senses. With a few brief parting words to Griffin, Jade led his undead ladylove into the night.

## Chapter Sixteen

Tangy blood, hot and intoxicating splashed over her tongue. The moment that Lyric had sunk her fangs into her victim, the rest of the world had faded away. Nothing else remained but her and the two pimps they'd found making money by selling underage girls.

If Jade hadn't been with her, she would have killed the first thing she'd come across with a beating heart. The hunger had been the most horrid pain. Now that the blood washed down her throat to quench the undying ache, a heavenly satisfaction filled the hollow void within her.

It was all instinct. The bloodlust guided Lyric even as it drove her. There had been no fear or hesitation on her part when it came time to bite into the pulsing artery in her victim's throat. Something dark and hungry inside her took over, and she'd been shocked to discover how good it felt.

The heady rush was euphoric, almost orgasmic in nature. The pleasure that filled her from head to toe was beyond anything she'd ever known in life. She was ravenous, sucking hard at the pumping wound. She couldn't get enough. As Lyric drank down the life of the struggling man in her insanely powerful arms, the immense strength inside her flourished and grew.

As her victim's heart slowed to a stop, she released him and turned to Jade with wild eyes. Her heightened senses required serious concentration on her part. Not only could she clearly hear voices several blocks away, she could easily make out every word spoken if she listened carefully.

The city smells would take some getting used to. The pungent odor of garbage and human bodies had her wrinkling her nose in distaste. The fact that she didn't actually have to breathe now was something she couldn't entirely wrap her mind around. The downtown core was far worse than the lush green neighborhood that Jade lived in. She couldn't wait to breathe in the delicious scent of roses and rain on his back porch.

Taking in the sight of Jade standing a short distance away, she was taken aback by the emotion in the depths of his bright eyes. She'd found him to be handsome before but now, seeing him through new eyes, she just stared. He was angelic in his beauty. Never had Lyric felt as blessed as she did then, knowing he was hers.

He watched her with a strange look on his face, as if he couldn't believe that he was seeing her as he was. Lyric kept waiting for the dream to end. She was afraid to accept this new reality, fearing that the moment she did, it would all come crashing down.

Once he touched her, slipping his arms around her and holding her close, she collapsed against him with the action of one who longed for comfort and rest.

"Tell me that I'm not dreaming, that you're really here with me." Lyric threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in Jade's thick hair. It had seemed like a lifetime they'd been apart.

Death hadn't come easy. Giving in to it had been easier after Griffin's blood passed her lips, but it was Jade that had kept her going. Her will to cross through death and come out the other side had been fueled by her burning need for him. She never would have been at peace without him.

Lyric knew that if death hadn't been there to take her from him forever, she likely would never have made the choice to become one of the undead. Then again, perhaps it was inevitable. Her death would have separated them eventually.

"If this is a dream, then I refuse to wake up." Jade's voice rumbled low in his chest, and she snuggled in closer against him. "It was a nightmare without you. I don't know what I was thinking, but it wasn't intelligent in any way. I didn't even know where I was going."

"You were trying to save me ... from you. And, I love you even more for your selflessness." Lyric allowed him to lead her away from the dead pimp's body. "But, don't ever try to be the nice guy by leaving me again. I will find you."

His chuckle warmed her. The tension he'd been carrying since they'd come across the pimp eased. Though she doubted he would admit it, Jade had been anxious about her hunting. Now that she was free of the bloodlust, she was feeling a little anxious about it herself and grateful it was over. Had she really killed a man?

She shuddered, prompting Jade to ask if she was alright. With a nod, Lyric focused on putting one foot in front of the other. It was too late to come apart. This wasn't going to be easy, but if Jade could face this existence and still go on to laugh and love, then so could she.

With the lively human blood running through her, Lyric felt rejuvenated and as strong as at least ten men. Holding a man so that he could barely move had taken no exertion. She couldn't wait to see what she could really do. The realization of how she had changed was still sinking in, and she knew the shock would wear off with time. She grinned, enjoying the strange sensation of her fangs beneath her lips and the power humming throughout her.

When they returned to his house just an hour before dawn, Lyric was struck with fear. The rising sun had never been an enemy before. She could feel it's slow but sure approach as if there were an internal clock inside her mind, warning her to make haste before it broke over the horizon.

That final moment of absolute dark before the dawn seemed to be stripped away in layers before her eyes. Colors were brighter amid the fading rays of the moon. She couldn't resist pausing to admire the roses near the front door, seeing them as she never had. Their scent was almost too sweet, and they seemed to smile with scarlet petals that reached for her. The life flowing through the rosebush was vibrant and vital. Moreover, humans would never see it the way she saw it now, feeling the energy and allure of nature.

Jade moved to pick one, and she caught his arm mid-motion. It had been reaction without thought, and again she was amazed at the change in her.

"Don't." Their eyes met, and a flurry of questions assailed Lyric. "How is it that it takes passing through death to be able to feel the life all around us? Even in the earth at my feet. How? Why is this something humans can never be so aware of?"

She searched Jade's golden-rimmed eyes, needing an answer. It didn't seem fair. Would the world continue to suffer at the hands of its inhabitants if they knew, if they could feel what she was feeling?

Pride shone in Jade's eyes when he tipped her head up with a hand beneath her chin. He kissed the tip of her nose before saying, "Oh, some of them are. Those that seek nature rather than industry, technology or Wall Street. That's the sad reality with humans,

Lyric. Most of them are nothing like you. They don't have your heart or your warmth. They are monsters in their own right.”

Lyric flashed back to the night in Taylor's apartment as she followed Jade inside the house. She didn't know anything about the man other than his first name and what he had shouted about Jade. In those moments, Taylor had been nothing less than a monster, one that had been self-made by his own choices. And, now he was dead.

That sad and angry mortal man had been every bit the monster that Dexter was. The lines blurred between human and vampire, each being just as capable of evil as the other. Her thoughts went back to the two dead pimps Jade and she had left in the alley. She didn't question the right or wrong of the action anymore.

The moment the door closed behind them, she was all over Jade. She pulled at his clothing with an aggressiveness that was both new and welcome. Lyric's mind was on overload as she tried to process every change she'd undergone. She didn't want to think or question anymore. She just wanted to feel Jade's hard, naked body pressed to hers. The need could not go ignored.

“Jade.” She kissed him with a hungry passion, delving into his mouth with her tongue. He tasted like blood, and she wanted more. “Make love to me, right now. I can't wait another minute.”

Unable to keep her hands off him, Lyric licked and bit at his lips while shedding her own clothing. When it lay pooled on the floor at her feet, she brought his hand to the warm place between her legs. He didn't need any further encouragement. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her to the safe sanctity of the bedroom.

Lyric was frozen in place when Jade merely gazed longingly into her eyes for a long, drawn out moment. Love had always seemed so elusive, and here it was, eternal and staring her right in the face. Jade was a dream come true, a gift from the heavens themselves. She couldn't believe otherwise.

“I love you.” Jade's words were breathy, barely a whisper. He hovered over her, looking down at her with such emotion in the depths of his stare. “You have saved me from myself, whether you know it or not. I didn't believe myself to be worthy of love, and you make me feel like that isn't so. If everything I have faced in my existence so far has been so that I could be here with you now, it was all worth it.”

The rush of emotion brought tears to Lyric's eyes. She blinked back the blurry red tears and wondered again what she had done to deserve such a gift as Jade. “I would die again if that's what it took to be with you.”

Jade groaned, low and needy. Crushing his lips to hers in a bruising kiss, he awakened a dark desperation within her. She had to have him inside her now, completing the union of their souls. Running her hands down his perfectly muscled back, she gripped his ass tightly, urging him to claim her.

Finding her wet and ready, Jade didn't need further encouragement. His eyes never left hers as he pressed his throbbing erection against her opening, sliding deep inside with one solid thrust. Every sensation seemed to be brand new, as if she'd never held him inside her before.

An explosion of pleasure had her seeing stars. Lyric was over stimulated as her mind tried to make sense of the rampant feelings and sensations that rocked her body. As Jade moved inside her, pulling out just to thrust deep again, they ceased to feel like two separate bodies. They fell into a natural rhythmic pattern, moving as if instinct guided

them.

Lyric began to feel as if she and Jade shared the same body, the same soul. Her heart ached with the immense love she felt for him. Though she battled the crimson blood tears, they won as they spilled down her cheeks. With extreme tenderness, Jade kissed each one away. Every blood red drop was a symbol of joy and surrender. She dove head first into his world, without time for thought or hesitation. And, as long as Jade continued to love her like only he could, she would never regret that hasty decision made when standing on the brink of death.

Jade. It had all been about Jade since that first moment. Death had held no claim over her since the second he chose to step into her life in order to save it.

Holding him tightly, she pressed her face to soft hollow in his collarbone. Nothing else mattered but the two of them. Lyric cried out when he brought her to climax and again when the intensity of his every thrust grew until he was moaning her name against her ear. Another orgasmic wave began to build until it crashed over them as one.

As the sun climbed above the horizon to announce its arrival, the vampire lovers lay entwined in the safety of the darkened room.

\* \* \* \*

Before she'd even slid the key into the lock, Lyric could scent Storm inside. Relief flooded her as she turned the key and opened the door to her apartment. She'd been worried about Frisk, fearing he'd been left alone and uncared for in her absence.

The sound of the television greeted her, quickly followed by Storm who appeared in the doorway to the living room. Her face lit up at the sight of Lyric though her expression was guarded.

Lyric was suddenly thankful that Jade had insisted she hunt before returning to her apartment for Frisk and her things. It wasn't realistic for her to continue to stay there due to the lack of daytime safety. Storm's scent was delicious, stirring the bloodlust to life despite her recent feed. Lyric did her best to ignore the nagging ache. This was her best friend, the sister she'd never had.

"I knew it," were the first words out of Storm's mouth. "I knew that you were either dead or ... one of them. You look so different, like a statue."

Lyric smiled tightly, not at all surprised by Storm's reaction. "Nice to see you too, lady. Aren't you at least happy to see me?"

"Hell yes, I am. Sorry if I don't rush over to hug you. I've seen enough scary movies to know better." Storm eyed her cautiously, but the bitter scent of fear never wafted from her.

"Oh come on, Storm, I'm still me." Closing the apartment door, Lyric waited patiently for Storm to analyze her. "Don't you want to know where I've been?"

"Dead, I'm guessing. Griffin answered your cell phone after I'd called about thirty times. He wouldn't tell me anything other than that you were safe but MIA for a while. So I came here to stay with Frisk." Storm waved her into the living room, careful not to take her eyes off Lyric. "Good thing you gave me your spare key."

Following slowly, Lyric glanced around her apartment. Everything inside felt so human, so foreign, like she had been gone so much longer than she actually had.

Frisk was sleeping on the couch when she sat down on the opposite end. He shot to his feet immediately, staring at her suspiciously. A low growl rumbled in his throat, and

she gently offered a hand to him. After taking a long sniff, he ceased the noise and allowed her to pet him.

"Thank you, Storm. I owe you big time for staying here with him. I was so worried about him when I realized how long I'd been away." Lyric smiled as her feline friend leaned into her affectionate pats. She'd been afraid he would reject her entirely.

Storm perched on the arm of an easy chair on the other side of the small living room. She raised an eyebrow in question. "Yeah, no problem. Now start talking. Tell me everything. God, I can't believe you're sitting there all ... undead. It's fucked up, Lyric."

Lyric took her time, repeating to her friend the events of the night she had run into Dexter at Cry. When she revealed that it had been Griffin that turned her rather than Jade, Storm's mouth had fallen open with a, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

By the time Lyric reached the end of her tale, Storm had thrown a handful of questions at her, some of which she couldn't answer.

"What was death like? Did you see the white light and all that stuff you always hear people talk about after a near death experience?"

"No," Lyric began uncertainly. She still wasn't sure she was ready to talk about it. "But, I could feel it there, waiting for me. There was definitely something pure and beautiful there on the other side. Once I tasted Griffin's blood, it was gone." She met Storm's eyes, fighting back the inexplicable urge to cry.

"So, there is more." A smile lit up Storm's face. "I knew it."

"Well, I'm no expert, but yeah, I think it's safe to say that if there wasn't, I wouldn't even be here right now in the form that I'm in. I can't explain it, but I feel like this was all meant to be. Everything with Jade and me. I just know it deep down." Lyric fell silent as she debated on how much more to share with Storm. It was all so strange and new still, so much she herself didn't understand. "I keep having these visions, the same ones. I don't know what they mean but I keep seeing you, Storm. And Griffin."

She described the vision then, the one of Griffin holding Storm's limp frame in his arms as lightning rained down around them. Since becoming a vampire, Lyric had had this vision a second time. It had been bittersweet. She'd feared losing her psychic abilities, but in fact, they were sharper and more frequent. Like always, she didn't seem to be able to put the pieces together. It was still too vague. Perhaps that would change with time.

"Me and Griffin, huh?" With pursed lips, Storm seemed to consider what she'd just heard. "I can't say that sounds all bad. But, really, what are the odds of that happening? Your visions never reveal the details."

"No, but what I do see comes to pass more often than not. Don't forget that."

With a bob of her blonde head, Storm nodded and dismissed Lyric's concern with a shrug. "So I assume you came for your things. I don't suppose you can ditch the daylight in a third floor apartment. What about dancing? Are you going to quit? Shit, Lyric. Is this really worth it for a vampire? He's still just a man."

It was spoken with love, not criticism. Lyric knew that. She also knew that Storm was right in a way. She couldn't just give up dancing and all that she was.

"I'm still going to dance. I just need some time first. I'll call Brit and deal with it, tell her there was a family emergency or something."

"That's what I told her." Storm laughed. "It was the only way I could keep her from calling the cops to have them look for you." Both women laughed together, which felt so

good to Lyric after the past several days. Stormed stopped suddenly, her eyes wide. “Shit, what will you tell your parents?”

“Nothing.” Lyric got up and made her way to the bedroom; Storm followed at what she must have felt was a safe distance. It was almost enough to make Lyric roll her eyes. “They live across the country, and I don't see them as much anymore since they're getting up there in years. I'm kind of hoping they will never have to find out. My mom would take one look at me and know what I am.”

Heading straight for the closet, Lyric grabbed a suitcase and began stuffing it with clothing and personal items. Glancing over at Storm, she found her leaning in the doorway, watching her pack. Judging from the look on her face, she was thinking hard about something.

“Are you going to spit it out?” Lyric asked with an impish grin.

“What?”

“Whatever it is that you're thinking. It's all over your face.”

Storm ran a hand through her hair and dared to venture into the room where she sat on the end of the bed. “Do you like it? Being one of them.”

An honest answer didn't come to Lyric right away. She was tempted to dance around a direct response. Instead, she paused while folding a pair of dress pants. “I wish I could tell you how much I hate it because I feel like that's what I should say. It's been scary, but being with Jade makes it all worth it.”

“Even the blood drinking?” Storm didn't try to hide the disgust in her tone. “So you really love him, huh?”

“I really do.”

There was a pause then. Lyric kept shoving things into her suitcase, swearing when she couldn't get it closed properly.

“Well,” Storm said after watching Lyric break the zipper in her attempts to close the stuffed bag. “I just hope you don't come to regret any of this. But, as long as you're happy, I'm happy.”

The overwhelming urge to hug Storm overtook Lyric, and before she knew it, she had caught Storm up in a tight embrace. Storm let out a little squeal but otherwise put up no resistance.

“Sorry.” The sweet human scent tickled Lyric's senses, and she quickly pulled back. “I didn't mean to freak you out.”

With a sound of irritation and a swear word for good measure, Lyric grabbed the exploding suitcase with its broken zipper. Jade was waiting downstairs for her. He hadn't let her out of his sight since he'd come back to town.

After saying goodbye to Storm, she had gathered Frisk and her bag before heading down to Jade's car. They would have to come back for the rest of her stuff. As Lyric made her way through the building where she had formed her independence, she knew that she would miss it. Passing through the front lobby doors on her way out felt both surreal and melancholy. Lyric couldn't shake the feeling that she was officially closing the door on her humanity.

\* \* \* \*

## Epilogue

Ever since Lyric had told him about her vision of Griffin and Storm, Jade had been unable to shake the image completely from his mind. He had no way of really knowing what it meant and so he'd made the decision to keep it from Griffin for now. Since Storm had been somehow afflicted in the vision, they intended to keep a close watch over her. Just in case.

In the weeks since Lyric had first risen as a vampire, she had quickly immersed herself fully in her new world. It had been both a relief and a joy to Jade. Of course, it hadn't all been fun and games. More than once, he'd had to restrain her physically when the bloodlust took over.

Jade knew what it was like to live with regret after a kill. In the beginning, the bloodlust was so powerful and all consuming. It was almost like donning an entirely different personality, a rabid, irrational one. He couldn't allow Lyric to exist with the same kind of guilt that had wracked him for so many years.

Tonight was the first night that she had returned to the stage. Dancing was part of who she was, he knew that. Still, it did concern him a little. If she lost control in a crowded building filled with hundreds of living, breathing human bodies, it would be a total disaster. Surprisingly, Lyric had far better control than most newborn vampires. Jade attributed this to her psychic abilities and her exceptional will.

As much as he hated to admit it to himself, Jade kept waiting for her breakdown. But, it never came. At least, it hadn't so far. Lyric had walked away from her human life without a look back.

Jade likely mourned the death of her human mortality far more than she did. A part of him questioned the right and wrong of it. He felt responsible for the choice that Lyric was faced with as she lay dying in Griffin's arms.

He should have been there instead. If anyone had to bring her over, it should have been him. But, would he have been able to go through with it in time? He'd told Griffin himself that he couldn't turn her. Perhaps it had been better this way.

The lights dimmed, and the audience reacted with sudden expectation. Tension filled him as he waited to see her step into the spotlight. It was something he could watch forever and never tire of. The hum of the crowd's energy fueled his excitement, stimulating his senses. He was keenly aware of everything going on around him, but his main focus was all on her.

When she appeared seemingly out of nowhere before them, a collective hush fell over the audience. From the moment they laid eyes on Lyric, she held them enthralled. Mildly surprised, Jade watched as she began to move to the music. Every pair of eyes in the building was trained on her, and the entire mass of people seemed to breathe as one.

There was no doubt that Lyric had always been beautiful, but now she was ethereal and majestic, a goddess in her own right. When the rest of her dance troupe joined her, very few were able to take their eyes off the raven-haired lady with the sparkling eyes and pale as whipped cream skin. Jade didn't blame a single one of them. He hadn't been human for many lifetimes, and he too was held captive by the allure of his true love.

He could watch Lyric perform her seductive striptease until the end of time, and it would never lose the effect it had over him. It wasn't long before he began to grow



impatient. He wanted to take her home where he could hungrily devour her. The desire quickly became an undying need.

It came as no surprise to Jade when, after the show, Lyric announced her desire to hunt. The energy of the crowd and their steadily beating hearts had sapped the remainder of her control while feeding her hunger.

“Do you have any idea how spellbinding you are?” he asked, reaching for her hand as they strolled down a dark and seedy downtown side street.

They'd been frequenting areas of the city much like this. Jade had been careful to ensure that nobody they killed could be considered an innocent. He couldn't allow Lyric to start off as he had. She was better than that.

Killing recklessly without question or consideration was the way Jade had always survived. He had little reason to care about his victims and thought nothing of them once finished with them. Lyric's entry into his life had started to change that. He'd never had a reason to care before.

Truth be told, part of him still didn't care. He'd spent centuries living that way, and he was more than happy to continue. Lyric made him stop and think about it. It was her that he cared for. Blood and death dominated the life of a vampire, but that didn't mean that she had to be as cold and hard as he had become. She was simply too warm for that. Too genuine.

“Do you know how insanely handsome, sweet and charming you are?” She countered, giving his hand a squeeze.

Jade beamed a smile at her, enjoying the way she caused his heart to flutter. He hoped that he never got used to it. As they drew closer to a man in the shadows up ahead, her attention became riveted. The man spoke on a cell phone, low but clearly audible. Drug deal.

“Meth dealer, my love.” Jade whispered low in Lyric's ear. “He's all yours.” Her scent was intoxicating, and he breathed it deep into his lungs, knowing in time her human smell would fade.

In a flash, she was gone from his side. He hung back, watching with morbid fascination as Lyric approached the unsuspecting man. Her victim glanced up at her; his phone call, forgotten when he laid eyes on her. Jade loved the way everyone reacted to her. She completely embodied the hypnotic allure of the vampire.

Jade was almost disappointed when the drug dealer didn't even try to resist Lyric's advances. Instead, he was transfixed, staring into her with a strange combination of wonder and fear. He didn't try to run until she reached for him, baring her fangs. And, by then it was much too late.

There wasn't even time for Lyric's drug peddling victim to cry out. Blood spilled, and Jade grew hard as he lost himself in the sensuality of his lover's kill. It moved him, watching her feed. It touched the core of what made him a vampire, and as sinful as it might be, he loved it.

For the first time since Jade had left his own mortal life behind, he found new meaning, not to what he was but who he was. And, it was all because of her. After walking alone through death and darkness for centuries, only now was he truly living.

Time might bring many things their way in the future, as time always does. But, with her at his side, there was nothing that Jade couldn't handle. Lyric's gift to him ran deeper than the earth beneath their feet, far beyond the stars in the sky. She had freed him from

himself, whether she knew it or not. Spending the rest of his existence with this woman was nothing less than a dream come true.

Jade wasn't delusional. He wasn't fool enough to believe that they would never face challenge or adversity in the future. Yet, he knew that whatever came their way would be nothing they couldn't overcome.

With a low, satisfied chuckle, Jade admired his vampire beauty as she drank down the life of her victim. When she turned to him, licking the blood from her fangs, he held his arms out to her. As he beckoned her, she glided toward him as if her feet never touched the ground. Like a dark angel, she came to him, and he awaited her, yearning for her touch.

As Jade pulled Lyric into his embrace, she gazed up at him with a fire burning in her dark blue eyes. Overwhelmed by the power of their connection, he held her to him tightly, burying his face in her thick tresses.

Death would never part them. Illness would never touch them. If he could go back to the beginning and do it all again, he wouldn't have changed a thing.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Trina M. Lee has played in the world of vampires and werewolves since adolescence. Though she reads and dabbles in many genres, the paranormal remains her favorite. Trina lives in Alberta, Canada with her fiancé, daughter and three cats. She is always interested in meeting both readers and writers. For more info, stop by [www.TrinaMLee.com](http://www.TrinaMLee.com)

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