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THE
REVOLUTION

SAMANTHA SOMMERBY

SANDHAIN Publishing Ltd

Forbidden, Book 3

Twenty-five years ago Dell Renfield's father started a revolution, and Dell plans to finish it. Sorcerer, vampire, secret weapon, he's spent a lifetime training for his fate. The one distraction he isn't equipped for? Special Agent Alexandria Sanchez. A woman he desires above all others—and a woman he dare not get close to.

Alex's love life is already cursed. She doesn't need the added complication of a sexy new partner. Especially one who's touch is literally magic. Posing as his lover for the sake of their investigation is pure hell—and pure heaven. Now if she can just get him to quit casting spells long enough to prove she's capable. And keep her hands to herself in the process.

As they infiltrate a dangerous culture, temptation becomes too much to resist. And their torrid affair triggers an epic battle for power that could forever alter the future for them...and their kind.

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: This book contains spectacular magical ass-kickings, copious amounts of blistering sex, one super-sexy, gun-toting heroine, and a very delicious, very powerful sorcerer...who sometimes sports fangs.

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Forbidden: The Revolution

Samantha Sommersby

Dedication

To my son, Max, who suddenly has become taller, and is sometimes wiser, than I am. Chase your dreams. Follow your heart. Remember to floss.

Chapter One

If I were to be totally honest I'd tell you that the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew I was in trouble. What's worse, I knew there was absolutely nothing I could do to save myself.

There she was, standing on top of what was to become my desk, hanging a sign on the wall above it that said "Welcome Dell". She was wearing brown patent-leather high-heeled shoes and was reaching up on tiptoe. The calves of her shapely legs were flexed, well toned, and they acted like a homing beacon—sending a signal that went straight to my cock.

I'd never before confused work with anything personal. So why was I here now? Two words. My father.

Like most men in their mid-twenties, I'm determined to make it on my own. I want to lead my life the way I want, choose my own career path, make my own decisions. But I'm not like most men. I'm a vampire. Does my boss know? Hell, no. But I can guarantee you someone at the branch knows, someone high up, or else dear old Dad wouldn't have been able to pull these strings. And now I'm stuck. There's no way I can turn down this assignment without causing undue attention to myself.

She stepped back to admire her handiwork, the heels of her shoes resting precariously at the edge of the desk. She stood there for a minute, her hands on her hips and her full lips pursed into a delicious pout that told me she wasn't quite satisfied.

A long strand of her brown hair had escaped what had once been a neat chignon. As she lifted her arm to tuck it back into place my phone rang.

She turned quickly in my direction, too quickly, throwing her arms out in an attempt to regain her own balance. But she was too late and falling too fast. Like the chivalrous guy I am, I was there to catch her. For one long, endless moment we silently stared into one another's eyes. Hers were a brilliant green, amazingly inviting and surrounded by thick, dark lashes. It was like falling into springtime.

She blinked, slowly.

I glanced up at the sign.

"You the welcome wagon?" I asked her.

She reached down and fingered the badge clipped to my collar, lifting up the edge and turning it toward her so she could read it.

"Agent Renfield," she said. "You've got some fast reflexes there. I'm Alex, your new partner. I think it's safe to put me down now."

“Right.”

The instant Alexandria Sanchez’s feet touched the floor, my cell phone went off again. I didn’t have to check to see who it was, the ring tone told me. Dad was nothing if not persistent.

“Excuse me,” I told Alex before slipping out of the office.

“How the hell did you pull this off?” I growled into the phone.

“Pull what off?” my father replied innocently. He knew damned well what I was referring to.

“Come on, Dad. Don’t bullshit me. I told you I didn’t want to get involved,” I reminded him.

“Out of our entire network of operatives, you make the most sense. All it took was getting you a transfer from Chicago to L.A. It would have been far more complicated if we had to get someone into the Agency to begin with and start from scratch. You’re a natural for this assignment, Dell. We’re pretty sure it’s her. We’ll do a DNA check, get the confirmation, then—”

“I’m not one of your operatives,” I hissed.

As if being a vampire wasn’t enough to have to overcome, I also had the legacy of being the son of Byron Renfield. Not that anyone outside of his inner circle would know. According to clan folklore Byron was the youngest of the Dominie, an elite group of vampires empowered by Cain, our prophet. The Dominie were supposedly destined to lead us all into redemption. They were holy men, they didn’t mate, and they certainly didn’t have kids. None of the good “practicing” vampires did, though those were becoming fewer and fewer with each passing year. It was a trend my father, as the leader of a quietly subversive revolution, had been working toward my entire life.

Dad was succeeding, too. Gradually, little by little, he was changing the social and economic structure within the vampire world. My father was a brilliant strategist and the smartest man I knew. I had no doubt that within my lifetime his goal to mainstream our race, to integrate us into the human world, would be realized. It wasn’t his goal I disagreed with, it was his methods. They were simply taking too long. I wanted to be a part of the real world now. That’s why I left home. Not because I didn’t believe in what he was doing. I did believe in it. It made sense, his carefully crafted plan. But it required patience and that wasn’t one of my virtues. I wanted to taste it now...real freedom.

I imagined him pacing back and forth, wearing down the carpet in his neat and tidy office.

“No, you’re not,” he acknowledged. “You’re not one of my operatives. But you understand how important this is, Dell. This is personal.”

I rubbed my eyes, still gritty from lack of sleep and jetlag. I sighed heavily into my phone, hoping to somehow convey, across the miles, the depth of my frustration. It’s a fine art, supporting my father’s ideals and yet staying out of the fray. He has a way about him, a way that inspires people, a way that makes them want to do the right thing, the noble thing, the selfless thing, even me.

“She’s prettier in person.”

“Keep it professional,” he warned me.

"Says the man who just reminded me this was personal for him."

"Point taken."

Score one for me.

"Have you made contact with her?" he asked.

"Yeah. And we already have our first assignment. I just picked up the file. It's an undercover operation, her first. We could be gone a while."

"Can you delay?" my father asked. "You know if it's her we'll want you to bring her in. If you can overnight the sample to the lab in Manchester, we could have the results in a couple days."

I smiled. "Dad, first I have to get a sample. Look, I know you're going to find this hard to believe, but we have a job to do. And it's a job I take seriously. I'll get you your sample, but it's not my number one priority right now. Sophie's been missing for over twenty-five years. How many times does this make that you thought you'd found her?"

"Seven," he replied without hesitation. "But—"

"I know; Jennifer has a *feeling* about her."

"Don't be dismissive of Jennifer's feelings. She's the most reliable intuitive I've ever come across. When you met this Alexandria, did you sense anything?"

"Like what?" I asked, glancing furtively down at my crotch.

"Sometimes the Chosen possess a stronger pull. They can be more...deeply arousing."

"Dad, I'm twenty-five. I find anything with tits deeply arousing."

"Good to know," I heard Alex say.

I closed my eyes and silently prayed I'd started hallucinating.

Alex coughed.

Damn!

I swallowed down the lump in my throat and braced myself for humiliation before turning around. She was leaning casually against the doorjamb, her long legs crossed at the ankles, her arms folded over her stomach, stretching the silk fabric of her cream-colored blouse and further accentuating the fullness of her breasts.

I didn't bother to say goodbye to Dad. I just hung up.

"How much of that did you hear?" I asked, embarrassed.

Alex shrugged, then smoothed down her dark brown skirt. "Enough to guess some well-meaning friend is trying to set you up with a blind date. Am I right?"

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss my personal life. I like to keep things professional," I told her, walking back into the office and tossing the dossier onto the desk.

She blushed. "Of course." She tilted her head toward the folder. "Our first assignment?"

"Yeah, they're sending us to Vegas."

“Drugs?”

“Isn’t it always? They think they’re using a nightclub and casino as a front to launder the money, very highbrow. They want us to do a little poking around. I hope you’ve got a good set of pipes, seems they have an opening for a singer.”

She frowned before confessing, “Yeah, but I hate singing in front of people. I told the Deputy Director—”

“There’s also an opening for a pole-dancer,” I interjected helpfully. Now that created a nice visual.

“I’ll sing. What’s your cover, some pervy patron who gets to stuff wads of cash into ladies panties?”

I shook my head, then sat on the edge of my desk. “No. That’s too close to what I do in real life. I like to stretch myself on assignment.”

Alex rolled her eyes and reached for the file. “I hear they have an opening for a pole dancer,” she suggested wryly.

“Very funny. This morning a position opened up for a bouncer. It seems the guy who watched their door was wanted for something. He was conveniently picked up last night.” I loosened my tie and unbuttoned the top button of my starched white shirt. “I already called. I have an interview tomorrow. The manager is checking my references now.”

Alex opened the file and began to flip through it. “We’re supposed to be in Vegas tomorrow? Shit!”

Her audition wasn’t until Monday. There was no reason she couldn’t wait until then to fly out.

“Hot date this weekend?” I asked nonchalantly.

Her eyes narrowed. “I thought we weren’t going to discuss our personal lives?”

“That was my personal life.” I flashed her a smile. “I’m perfectly willing to discuss your personal life.”

She didn’t seem amused.

“Anyway,” I continued, “your audition isn’t until Monday. You can fly out Monday morning. I’ll pick you up at the airport and take you over to the club.”

“Why risk being seen together? I’ll take a cab.”

“Page three.”

“Page three?”

I nodded, my stomach tightening as I watched her flip to the third page of the dossier and scan the report.

She sighed. “Why do we have to be engaged?”

I was trying not to take her disappointment personally. “I guess they figure we’d have a better chance of both getting in if we were a package deal. If they don’t take us both on, whichever one doesn’t get hired will still have a good excuse to hang around.”

Alex didn't say a word. She just continued to read. When she reached the end of the file she closed it and began to drum her fingers on the desk.

"What is it? Out with it," I demanded.

"Nothing."

"It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she capitulated. "It makes sense."

I stood and closed the door before turning to face her. She was nervously nibbling on her lower lip.

"Something's bothering you. You gonna tell me what it is or are we going to have to play twenty questions?"

She avoided my gaze. Instead of looking at me, she looked out the window. "I have a boyfriend. Things have been a bit rocky lately. Somehow I don't think the idea of my shacking up with another guy for a couple weeks is going to go over well."

"Screw him."

Alex blushed. Then she covered her mouth with her hand and began to laugh. "Yeah! Screw him. This is my job. He's just going to have to deal with it. Unless... Why can't we be engaged and not live together? There are plenty of people who still actually wait until they're married to do the deed."

"Do the deed?" I repeated. "Look, Alex, first of all, no one in their right mind would believe I'd be engaged to you and not fucking you. I mean, look at you!"

Her hands flew to her hips and she glared at me, daring me to stick my foot even further into my mouth.

"And?"

I took the bait. I'm not as smart as I look. "And second of all, I meant it literally. Screw him."

"Screw him?"

"Have sex with him," I said. "He'll forget all about why you've been fighting. Then while he's still on an endorphin high just sneak in that you have to go off on assignment for a couple weeks."

"Did you *not* attend the mandatory class on sexual harassment?" she asked.

I could hear her heart racing and interestingly enough I smelled a tinge of arousal. I had a tight rein on my essence; living among humans for the past few years had made that necessary. Whatever it was that was affecting her, it wasn't that.

I held up my hands in surrender. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"Well, you did," she snapped. "I know you're supposed to be some hotshot boy wonder who thinks he can bend the rules but I like to go by the book."

"Look, Alex—"

"I may be new at working undercover," she continued, not even pausing to take a breath, "but I've had plenty of experience taking shit from guys like you!"

Guys like me?

I nodded. "I apologize. I'll..."

"Keep it professional, Agent Renfield," she demanded, echoing my father's earlier words.

"Absolutely, Agent Sanchez." I picked up the dossier and tucked it securely under my arm. "I'll see you at the airport on Monday."

Chapter Two

I could barely hold on to my glass, my palms were so sweaty. There she was, looking every bit as beautiful as she had the day I met her, completely different, but every bit as beautiful. The woman on the stage was a siren. Confident. Sexy. Glamorous. As the spotlight lit her face she slowly lifted her eyes, eyes made even more alluring by dark charcoal liner. She licked her ruby red lips seductively and stepped closer to the microphone. The spotlight pulled back and she slipped off the ostrich-feather-trimmed cape she was wearing, and let it fall so that it pooled around her feet on the stage. The black beaded gown she wore underneath was long sleeved with a daring neckline that showed off her generous cleavage. She swiveled her hips slightly, tilting the microphone stand toward her. I sat, entranced, while she took in a final breath then started to sing.

Her voice was rich and sultry, its timber resonating, stirring something deep inside of me. I shifted in my seat, discreetly adjusting myself. When I looked up I saw Raif had noticed. He was looking at me with a tad too much interest.

My interview on Saturday had been postponed until today. Raif and I'd finished chatting earlier, while Alex was changing into costume for her audition. He'd yet to give me an answer.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

Raif leaned forward. His finely chiseled face was still partially cast in shadow as he studied the bulge in my jeans.

"Need some help with that?" he asked, his lips forming a pout that somehow served to further accentuate his fashion-model cheekbones.

Raif was a vampire. *That* little fact, of course, hadn't been in the case file. He was definitely older than me, but how much older, I wasn't sure. Although strength increases with age, there are always exceptions. Immortals can train and increase their abilities. But it takes a tremendous amount of dedication and discipline. You don't see it often. I guess when you think you have all the time in the world it's easy to procrastinate and let nature take its course. When it comes down to it? It's not really the age that's important. It's the power. Raif's wasn't impressive. Not to me. But I'd been trained well, very well.

I leaned back in my chair, stretched my legs out in front of me and parted my knees. I did it slowly, provocatively. I drained the remainder of the scotch he'd given me, placed the glass back on the table, and began to trace the rim of the glass leisurely with my index finger.

Raif's eyes traveled up the length of my body; he made no attempt to hide his interest. He was hungry, but not for food and certainly not for blood, at least not at the moment.

"I'm saving it for the lady," I replied with a wink.

He turned to look at her for a moment, but before long his attention was back on me. "I'm having a private party later at my place. The lady's welcome too. We'll have dinner and get to know one another... *Come.*"

A familiar push of black tendrils probed at the edge of my mind. He wanted inside, desperately, but I deftly shut him out.

"The job?" I asked, nodding toward Alex.

Raif grinned. "Interesting. You're more powerful than you look. You have a deceptive air of youth still about you. How old are you?"

I leaned forward and looked him directly in the eye. "How old do you think I am?"

"Old enough that I wonder what you're really doing here. Why would an immortal with your power want a job as a bouncer?"

I let my eyes drift back to the stage.

He laughed. "Oh, that's priceless! You're doing this for her?"

I nodded. I find it's best to keep things simple. For as far back as anyone can remember men have done stupid things, things that make no sense, in the name of love. We all know it, none of us understand it, and we're all a tad embarrassed by it. Rarely will someone ask more questions after a confession such as this.

"She must be some fabulous fuck, huh?" He turned his attention back to the stage. The longer he watched her, the more I could smell his arousal. Apparently Raif wasn't particular about gender. I figured I had better draw the line in the sand for the horny bastard fast.

"I don't share well," I told him.

"Pity. What if she's interested?"

"She's not."

The song came to an end. Alex stood on stage waiting expectantly, the spotlight still on her.

"We'll see." Raif climbed to his feet. "Excellent! You were superb." He approached the stage.

"You really think so?"

Raif held out his hand and guided Alex down the stairs to the floor of the lounge.

"The look, the sound, it's exactly what I want." He paused for a fraction of a second. "Except..."

"What?"

He circled around her, taking in each and every spectacular angle. If I didn't do something fast, the asshole was going to start drooling on her. "I bet you look good in red."

I walked up behind Alex, slipped my arm around her waist, and pulled her back against me. “Are you kidding? Good? She looks fantastic in red.” Alex began to stiffen. Her pulse quickened.

“I’d like to see,” he said stepping closer.

“See?” she asked.

I let my free hand trail possessively down the length of her arm. Yet another hint of arousal hit the air. I realized then that I was still hard and not only could Alex undoubtedly feel it, she liked it.

“Your other costumes.” Raif reached out, and casually fingered the fabric on the same arm.

Her breath hitched.

“The beadwork is quite extraordinary,” he continued, lowering his voice. “I assume you have other gowns?”

She hesitated, but only for a moment. “Yes, but not with me.”

“I’m free at eight.”

I leaned down, my eyes locked with his. “Unfortunately, the lady isn’t.” He needed to know she was mine and on no uncertain terms. I let my lips wander behind Alex’s ear to the spot on her neck that was the most delectable, the most coveted. Just as I was about to claim the prize of an open-mouthed kiss, Alex pulled away.

“I’m not?” The nice slow burn we’d been building went up in a puff of smoke. Obviously on edge and suddenly uncomfortable she took a step back, distancing herself from both of us.

Unfortunately, Raif saw it as an opportunity and dove in. “Come on. What’s one evening? I’ll throw in dinner, my treat.”

I reached up and caressed the side of Alex’s face. “We have special plans tonight, remember?” I stared into those deep green eyes, and gave her a soft, encouraging smile.

“I could make it doubly special,” Raif suggested.

Alex opened her mouth to reply, but I didn’t give her a chance. “You have my number.” I reached for her hand and started to lead her toward the door. “You want to offer us jobs? Call.”

The elevator door opened and I swiftly exited, doing my best to keep up with Alex as she stormed down the hallway of the hotel, the train of her beaded gown clutched in one hand as she dragged her suitcase behind her determinedly with the other. How the hell a woman could walk so fast in shoes that high and a dress that tight, I’ll never know.

“Respectable distance?” I hissed, catching up to her. “We’re supposed to be lovers.”

“What did you expect me to do? Stand there with my hand on your ass and my tongue in your ear?” she asked, impatiently shoving the keycard into the door over and over without effect.

Honestly? That sounded pretty darn good to me.

“You have it upside down, sweetheart.” I grabbed her wrist, stilling her hand.

She wrenched free of my grasp. “*Don’t* call me sweetheart.” Alex turned the card over, slid it in into the lock one more time, then pushed the door open.

Alex tossed her bag onto the bed. Within seconds she had it unzipped and open. Wordlessly she rummaged through until she found a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt. I would have rather seen her in the black lace bra and panties that she’d carelessly let spill out.

“I’m gonna wash this gunk off my face and go for a run before I kill you. When I get back I’ll shower and we can go out for dinner. Okay?” She punctuated the last word with a smile that looked almost painful.

Sometimes I don’t know when to keep my mouth shut. After all, I could have just agreed with her. That would have been the simple thing. But something came over me and instead I verbalized the truth. “You can’t kill me.”

Alex stormed up to me. I swear the energy around her was crackling she was so pissed. A half a foot shorter and sixty pounds lighter and she was ready to go toe to toe with me. What a woman.

Before she could fire off the next round I opened my cell phone and began to dial. “We should pull out,” I told her. “This isn’t going to work. *We’re* not working.”

“Why don’t you say what you really mean!” she practically shouted as she reached for the phone.

“Color me confused,” I replied, doing my level best to remain calm, “I thought I did.” I stepped back, held the cell up to my ear, and listened to it ring. “I’m the senior Agent. We’re in the field. I’m in charge. That’s the rule, Miss I-like-to-go-by-the-book. If we can’t pull this off then we call it quits now.”

“Quit? No way, I’m not a quitter.”

Simon picked up. He was my liaison with the PSF, the Preternatural Special Forces, the guy assigned to support me when I was on assignment. The PSF was made up of a small contingent of agents like me, agents with *special abilities*. Not all of us were vamps, there were some shapeshifters, several fairies, a few ghosts, a couple succubi, and rumor had it they were close to recruiting their first angel.

“This is zulu, tango, November, Romeo, Charlie, six, nine. Secure.”

There was a moment of silence before Simon repeated, “Secure.”

“We’ve encountered complications. Let the powers that be know we’re out.”

Alex grabbed the phone. “We’re not out. We’ll call you back.” She hung up and tossed the phone onto the bed.

I watched silently as Alex removed the ostrich-feather-trimmed overcoat she was wearing and hung it up in the closet.

I got the impression she was stalling for time. I didn’t care. Being immortal, I had all the time in the world.

“Do I even want to know who that was?”

“My liaison.”

“You have a liaison?”

“Don’t all the hotshot boy wonders have liaisons?”

She blushed. “I’m sorry.” Alex placed her hands on her hips and took a deep breath. Then she looked at me and asked, “Can we talk about this?”

Talk? Now that surprised me. I was gearing up for a shouting match. I scratched the back of my head. “I’m not so good at that,” I told her honestly. “I’m more of an action kind of guy.”

I was rewarded with a small smile.

“Can you try? I’ll start. How about that?”

“Okay.” Mr. Agreeable, that’s me.

“I’m sorry I pulled away when you tried to kiss my neck in front of Raif. I’ll try not to do it again. I *won’t* do it again.”

She sat on the end of the king-sized bed, leaned back, crossed her legs and nervously looked up at me. She had gorgeous legs and the generous slit in her gown showed them off nicely. How could I stay mad at legs like that?

“Alex—”

“I know I messed up, Dell, and I *hate* the fact that I did. I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at myself,” she finished, the last part confessed so quietly it was almost a whisper.

“It’s a role, Alex.” I sat beside her. “Like when you were up on stage. The performance doesn’t end when the lights dim. Here you’re on twenty-four seven. This is it. This is the job. Undercover isn’t for everyone. There’s no shame in walking away.”

“I’m not walking away,” she declared emphatically.

“Then the question is... Can you do it?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounding steady and certain. “You surprised me, that’s all. It’s just that you’re more...” Alex licked her lips and glanced up at the ceiling as if she were searching for the right word.

“What?”

“I don’t know. It was...intense.”

“Intense?”

“Next time I’ll expect it. Come on, Dell. We can do this. Don’t pull the plug.”

“Okay. How about this? Forget the run. Take a long luxurious bath. Relax. We’ll stay in tonight, order room service and watch a movie, your pick. We’ll see if we can make a go of this pretending to be a couple thing.”

I witnessed the shift. A playful smile and tilt of the head as she reached out and placed her hand on my chest.

“You’ll really let me pick the movie?” she asked, batting her eyes like the consummate coquette.

“Oh! Now, there you go,” I said, slipping my arm around her waist. “That’s getting into the spirit of things.”

She gasped when I tugged her toward me, stiffening for an instant. Her body tensed as if she were going to pull away. But she didn't. Instead she forced herself to relax.

I nodded, pleased. "Good."

"It wasn't good." Her disappointment was evident in her voice. "But it was better. You're right. Staying in is a good idea. We have work to do. If we're going to be able to pull this off effectively, I've got to practice."

"We don't have much time. They probably know our room number already. They could be setting up surveillance. We need to be careful. From this moment on—"

"I get it." Alex stood. "I won't let you down. I won't break cover," she said solemnly before heading toward the bathroom.

"Alex?"

She paused at the threshold. "Yes?"

"You can trust me. I won't cross the line. I know this isn't real. This is strictly business. It's about the mission. The mission comes first."

"Right," she agreed before stepping into the bathroom and closing the door.

"Christ," I groaned.

I removed my boots and socks then flopped back onto the mattress and tried to review the events of today in my mind. *What a friggin' disaster.* Was the mission even salvageable? I wasn't sure.

Alex had been penciled in for this operation even before Dad's manipulation resulted in our temporary partnership assignment. She was green and this would have been a stretch for her to begin with. But now?

If Raif was a vampire, there were bound to be others around. How the hell was I going to explain that Alex and I were lovers, yet somehow I'd managed to hide my nature from her? Was that even possible?

I'd never tried to hold back before, not during sex. So the truth was, I didn't know. I checked my watch and thought about calling my father. The conversation was going to be awkward, but I wasn't sure whom else to ask.

"Dell?" Alex called out.

I turned my head toward the bathroom door. There on the bed, right in front of my nose were her panties. As I was about to reach for them, the bathroom door opened.

"I can't get the zipper."

I walked over to the bathroom. When I reached the door, she'd stepped back inside. Her back was to me and she was fishing hairpins out of her hair. I watched the waves tumble out of what had been a carefully coiffed updo.

"Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

I stepped into the bathroom so that I stood behind her. I moved on instinct, adopting an air of intimacy, the kind you find between new lovers, familiar yet fresh. Without thought I swept her hair over one of her shoulders, exposing the zipper. I took the tab between my fingers, and pulled it down gently, slowly, watching as the luxurious fabric of the beaded gown parted to reveal a perfect span of sun-kissed skin. She wasn't wearing a bra.

My eyes lifted to connect with hers in the mirror. They must have revealed too much because she blushed. "I can get the rest," she whispered, then looked away.

"Of course." I stepped back.

"Wait." She turned to face me, her expression softer. "I'm sorry, Dell. I didn't mean to make things awkward between us by pulling away earlier. I'm probably not as...experienced as you are. I haven't had many relationships. Touch me again, like you did before, in front of Raif."

"The past is just that, the past," I told her, cupping her cheek in the palm of my hand and looking into her eyes. "I'm utterly devoted to you, Alex. You have to believe that. You have to believe I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about you. I never will feel about anyone the way I feel about you."

Alex swallowed. She looked panicked, like an actress on stage whose forgotten her lines and just realized there was no one standing in the wings to feed them to her.

I leaned in and whispered into the shell of her ear. "You're doing great. Don't quit on me."

Alex nodded and released the breath she'd been holding. "I do," she said. "I do believe that."

I reached down to shut off the taps to the bath.

"Tell me you love me?" she asked.

I placed my hands on her shoulders, leaned down and told her what she wanted to hear. "I love you, you know I do."

"Tell me a secret, something that's real and true. Tell me something you've never told any other woman."

She was beginning to feel aroused by the charade. I could sense the increase in her heart rate and body temperature, smell the tinge of her desire. She was affected by my touch, by my closeness. Did that knowledge place me at an unfair advantage? Yes. Should I have turned around and walked out of the bathroom? Probably. But I didn't want to. Earlier she'd invited me to touch her again. We'd said it was about going through the motions, about the job, strictly professional. Maybe it was. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was more than that. One thing was certain, if I ever wanted to know, I couldn't let the moment pass. There was only one way to find out.

"I have so many secrets," I said truthfully. "I don't know where to start."

Alex sighed and let her head fall back against my chest. I looked down at the long column of exposed neck. I'd never tasted blood before. I'd never even been tempted to. But I was then, and it frightened me.

I'd fucked plenty of women, both vampire and human. But I'd never felt this...this sense of urgency and need. Perhaps my father was right. Perhaps she was Chosen.

"I'm going to kiss you," I warned her, half-hoping she'd stop me. That she'd stop this. I playfully dragged my index finger down the path I wanted to trace with my mouth.

She licked her lips. They were lush and full.

"Okay." Her voice was but a whisper.

"Not on the mouth, here."

"Why?"

"Because I need to." I leaned down slowly, inhaling, letting her scent surround me. It fueled my excitement. My cock was rock hard and I desperately wanted to grind it against her. Instead, I exhaled. A ragged sigh of hot breath fluttered against her neck, warming her, teasing her. I opened my mouth and lowered my head.

My hands moved from her shoulders, slid down the length of her arms to rest at her waist, and then I kissed her. I closed my eyes and savored the moment. Her skin tasted exotic, like some sinfully rich dessert you couldn't get enough of. Before I knew what I was doing, my tongue was on her.

I tugged her closer, so I could feel the pressure of her ass rubbing against me. I heard the beads of her gown clack together from the sudden motion. I needed the friction. I wanted release. The bathroom had suddenly grown hot. It was more than the steam from the bath. It was the fire between us. As I reached and latched onto that spot behind Alex's ear, a moan escaped her lips. What I wouldn't have done to hear more of those. But I couldn't.

Keep it professional, I reminded myself. Remember your duty.

"Steady, baby," I murmured into the shell of her ear, as I threaded my fingers through the long silken tresses of her hair, wrapping a single strand around one digit. "I'm going to let go now." I gave her a moment to recover, then yanked.

"Ouch!" She spun around and slapped me on the chest.

"Sorry," I told her, removing my ring and tossing it onto the bathroom counter. "Looks like a strand of your hair got caught."

"Next time we try it without the ring." She rubbed her head with one hand while holding the bodice of her gown up with the other. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

I looked down at my bare hand and wondered if it was too soon to suggest we try for a next time.

"Enjoy your bath," I told her, turning to leave, amazed at my own restraint.

"Dell?"

I paused.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing."

I swallowed. “We’ll decide on dinner when you’re done bathing. All right?”

“Yeah. I won’t be long.”

I flashed her my most charming and reassuring smile.

“Take as long as you want. I’m not going anywhere. And you, sweetheart, are worth the wait.”

Chapter Three

I looked down into the courtyard of the hotel. It might have been located on prime Las Vegas strip real estate but everything about it embraced the look and feel of New Orleans. Sultry jazz drifted up from somewhere below. The soft glow of gas lamps dotted the landscape of an enormous garden filled with azaleas, camellias and, of course, the requisite towering magnolias draped with moss.

Alex had been in the bath for over an hour. It had been enough time for me to seal her hair sample in an evidence bag, drop it into the pre-paid shipping envelope and send it off to Manchester.

The evening was warm. I leaned back in the wrought-iron chair, closed my eyes and reached out with my senses. There were some vampires in nearby rooms. None of them seemed to have enough psychic powers to be immediate trouble. But that didn't mean much these days.

In today's world a person's privacy was easily invaded, too easily. Listening devices could be purchased over the Internet. Don't want there to be a record? Pay cash at the local flea market or buy it out of the trunk of your friend's car. I happened to like my privacy and I guarded it carefully, combating technological intrusion with a good old-fashioned shielding spell.

That's why I'd conjured up my favorite before venturing onto the balcony, one that had been taught to me ages ago by my former teacher, a master sorcerer by the name of Basta. I'd encased our room in a force-bubble. It worked better than any jamming device on the market and all it took to make was my own two little hands and a shitload of energy.

Before I started I'd told myself I'd done it as a precaution in case Alex slipped. It was her first assignment after all. Now, here in the dark, I could admit I was also afraid I'd slip. Maybe I was even ensuring privacy so I'd feel free to. The realization was depressing.

Before stepping into the bathroom, before kissing her, I'd given her my word. I'd told her she could trust me. When I said it, I had meant it. That should count for something, right?

Wrong, said the nagging voice inside of my head that sounded suspiciously like my father.

I hadn't called Dad yet, although I'd meant to. I was procrastinating, pure and simple. I hated having to ask my father for advice. Trouble was, since Basta and I were no longer speaking, I didn't know whom else I could ask.

The mission was quickly becoming more complicated than it was supposed to be, quite possibly more complicated than we could handle, definitely more complicated than Alex could have handled without me.

This wasn't a PSF assignment; I knew that from the get go. Dad had arranged for me to be on loan for a couple weeks for the sole purpose of my getting close to Alex.

Alex... Christ, was it possible she was really Sophie, Chris's Chosen child, the one who had been kidnapped so many years ago? It had been a quarter of a century since Chris joined my father and a group of human sympathizers who'd banded together to rescue my mother, imprisoning the immortal who'd been holding our entire race hostage for centuries. A quarter of a century he'd now spent at BaMidbar, secretly minding the store and guarding the vampire who was the first, the most dangerous, the father of us all...Cain.

I leaned down and picked up the scotch I'd been nursing for over an hour. As I set the glass back down my cell rang.

"I see the package has been shipped."

"I'm fine, Dad. How are you?"

"Sorry, Son. How are things going?"

I sighed. "Not as smoothly as I'd expected. There are vamps involved."

"Powerful?"

"Maybe. Some. I'm not sure yet. Raif, the guy I met today, he wasn't a problem for me to shut down. He'd definitely have posed a problem for Alex if I hadn't been there, though. He would have had her in the blink of an eye. I almost had to resort to shielding her."

"You could take her yourself," he suggested. "Eliminate the risk."

"That's what Basta would say. Taking control of a girl's mind is the kind of thing the bad guy does, Dad. I'm the good guy."

"In some ways, perhaps Basta and I are like minded."

"You both like the same brand of scotch, that's it."

"We both love you."

"Basta loves himself. Anyway, I didn't call to talk about him. Let's get back to Raif."

"Fine. This Raif, he was tempted by Alex," Dad said. It was a statement. Not a question.

"Yeah. That doesn't necessarily mean anything. He was tempted by me, too. The guy is a walking hard-on. Besides, Alex is stunning. He'd have to be blind *not* to be tempted by her. It doesn't mean she's Chosen. It doesn't mean she's Sophie."

"Are you tempted?" he asked me point blank.

"He wasn't my type, too fickle. One minute he had eyes only for me, the next—"

"How bad is it, Dell?"

I wasn't sure what to say. So, for a few seconds I said nothing.

"Dell?"

"I can handle it," I declared, irritation creeping into my voice.

“Talk to me.”

I took another sip of scotch before I dove in. “I kissed her over an hour ago. I’m on my second scotch. I can’t get the taste of her out of my mouth. It was...”

“What?”

“Exquisite. Torture. I don’t know. I’m not making any sense.”

Dad cleared his throat. I braced myself for a lecture.

“You’re making perfect sense. You’re falling for her.”

“I barely know her, Dad.”

“But that doesn’t matter, does it? You feel it.”

“There was this moment...”

“You want her. You want her blood.”

“Yes,” I admitted, my voice barely a whisper.

“Does she know what you are?”

“No, and how the hell am I going to explain that? We were sent here to infiltrate the club and gather data. It’s supposed to be straightforward reconnaissance. Get familiar with the operation, cozy up to the manager, gain his trust, gather intelligence and report back. We’re posing as lovers. Could she not know? I’ve never tried before, is it even possible for a vampire to—”

“Hide his true nature during sex?” he finished for me.

“Yeah.”

“Not if he’s doing it right,” he teased. “Seriously, though, why not just tell her?”

“I’m not going to tell her if I don’t have to. I’m not going to shake her world up for no reason.”

“Maybe it’s for a reason. The test is going to come back positive. I know it, Dell.”

“If you’re wrong?”

“Getting Sophie back is important, Chris has been waiting—”

“Dad, this isn’t just about Chris. There’s Alex to consider. Let’s not forget that. We need to take this one step at a time. We’ll talk more tomorrow. What time will you have the results?”

“I’m pushing for three. Dell?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Be careful.”

“I will. I am. I’ll be waiting for your call tomorrow,” I told him before disconnecting. Seconds later I heard the soft click of the latch from the bathroom door. I closed my eyes, the smell of fresh soap wafted toward me. I swallowed and released a slow, deep breath, preparing myself for what was to come.

“Is it safe to come out?” I looked up. Alex was standing inside the French doors to the balcony. The makeup she’d been wearing earlier was gone and her slightly dampened hair hung loose about her shoulders. She was wearing a white silk robe. The edges around the hem were fluttering in the warm

evening breeze. The fabric had been absorbing the residual moisture from her skin and was now partially translucent in spots.

“Come here,” I said, sliding smoothly into the role I’d committed to playing, extending my hand. “I’ve missed you. Been thinking about you non-stop.”

Alex looked down at my hand. A second passed, then another. Slowly she lifted her eyes to meet mine. They were questioning, uncertain.

“You’re not going to leave me alone, are you? I thought we’d kissed and made up. I thought you’d forgiven me.”

She licked her lips nervously and stepped onto the balcony. The lingering lavender scent of her bath soap mixed with the night-blooming jasmine that clung to the wrought iron of the balcony proved to be a heady mixture.

As her hand slipped into mine I closed my eyes.

“Dell?” she whispered.

I tugged her closer, until she was standing between my legs and in front of me. I wrapped my arms around her waist and leaned my forehead against the soft pillow of her stomach. “Shh, we’re not alone out here.”

Alex shivered. Was it the night air, or excitement over the idea that we were being watched? I wanted to think it was the proximity of me. I slowly let one hand drift lower, over the curve of her voluptuous ass. She gasped as it came to rest on her thigh, the curved fingers of my hand clenched in desperation. Holding on, I strived to control the urge to slip my hands beneath the robe.

Alex threaded her hand through my hair, slowly bent down, and brushed her lips across the top of my head. “Where?” she asked, her voice sounding rough with want, her aroma laced again with desire.

I was painfully hard now.

“Across the courtyard,” I murmured. “I’m gonna heat this up for a minute. Then we’ll take the show inside, douse the lights and close the curtains. Ready?”

“Yes,” she sighed, and she was. She was so ready I could almost taste it, thick and heady in the back of my throat.

Within the space of a second I had her pinned against the balcony wall, one hand holding her arms above her head, the other cupping her breast. It was full and heavy and I wanted to feel my mouth on it, my tongue on it. I glanced down. The front of her robe had loosened. Her breasts were bared to the night air, her nipples hard, visible, and beckoning.

“Oh, God!” she moaned, her head lolling back, her neck exposed.

Alex was vulnerable. So was I. I could feel my beast rising, feel the stirrings deep within my chest. Her body began to writhe against me, craving pleasure and wantonly seeking release. Before I knew it my

mouth was on her neck, latched in place, I could hear her blood roaring in my ears. It was calling to me, promising me things it would have been so easy to take.

“Oh, yes!” she gasped, giving unwitting consent.

The sheaths covering my fangs pulled back and they began to descend. My control was slipping and in that moment I didn’t even want to try to get it back.

“Dell,” she gasped again, reaching up to nip at my earlobe, taking the firm flesh between her teeth and biting down on it.

Next thing I knew we were inside. I’d pulled the curtains and turned off the lights. I was only a silhouette. The shadows protected me, protected her from seeing who, what, I really was. I hastily walked to the far side of the room, needing to create distance between us, but not wanting to break character. Things were confusing enough, I didn’t need Alex asking questions I wasn’t prepared to answer.

“Fuck!”

“Are you all right?” she asked, taking a step toward me.

I couldn’t have her touch me, not then. So I took another step back. “Baby, I’ve never been better.”

“Oh, God,” she moaned as she gathered her robe tightly around herself and turned away from me. Was she embarrassed by what we’d done or how she’d responded? Maybe both. I should have stopped it right there, figured out a way to calm things down. But I didn’t want to, what I wanted was more.

“I want to feel your mouth on me,” I told her from across the room, my voice rough with desire.

“I...” Alex began. She was trembling. Even in the darkness I could see it.

This was a dangerous game, but one I was beginning to believe we were destined to play.

“Tell me what you want,” I demanded.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Talk to me. Tell me. I want to hear you say it.”

“I want you,” she whispered, almost imperceptibly.

Having heard her admission, I dismissed the notion I needed to maintain distance. Now suddenly what I needed more than anything was contact.

In the blink of an eye I’d erased the space between us and broken all of the rules. “I want you too,” I whispered, my arms wrapping tightly around her, my upper body covering her back, molding to her every curve in a way that let her feel how aroused I had become. “Can you feel what you do to me?”

I half expected her to pull away, but she didn’t. Instead she pushed back against me, causing me to release a moan that was far too real.

My face was buried in her hair, and my hands were buried in her robe, one cupping her breast, the other moving lower, seeking out the tactile evidence to validate the fact that I was affecting her as much as she was affecting me.

“Yes!” She spun around in the tight circle of my arms and faced me, our lips a hairsbreadth away. “I’m involved with someone,” she murmured softly, a confession only I could hear.

Was she reminding herself or was she reminding me?

“I know,” I whispered against her mouth. I didn’t need the reminder. “I haven’t forgotten.”

She tried to pull away but I wouldn’t let her, not yet. A moan escaped her lips and an obvious tremble passed through her body. I wanted to kiss her, to drink from her mouth and swallow those painfully sweet sounds of uninhibited pleasure I knew I could coax from her.

My lips found their way to the shell of her ear. “Whatever happens between us, it doesn’t have to mean anything.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I wished I could take them back. And I would have found a way, too, somehow, if we hadn’t been interrupted by an insistent knock at the door.

“Off with the robe,” I told her softly. “Get under the covers.”

I quickly kicked off my shoes and socks, pulled my T-shirt off over my head, and unbuttoned the top button of my jeans.

“Raif says you’re late for the party,” the voice on the other side of the door called out.

I reached out with my senses. He was human. Not a trace of magic. I turned on the light and opened the door.

“I told Raif we wouldn’t be coming. We’re staying in tonight.”

“Raif doesn’t like taking no for an answer,” replied the goon. “He said if you want the job, you’ll come.”

“Listen...”

“Bruno.”

“Really? Your name’s Bruno? Was it Bruno before you became a thug or did you change it?”

“Smartass, huh? We’ll see how cocky you are when Raif gets done with you.”

I frowned. “Tell Raif—”

“Honey? Is that room service?” asked Alex.

Bruno reached inside his jacket and moved to step into the room. I’d bet my life he was packing. Normally it wouldn’t concern me. Being immortal I’m impervious to bullets. But I’d have to explain that to Alex and I didn’t want to, not if I didn’t have to. Quick as lightning I placed my hand over his wrist.

“Let me get dressed. I’ll be right out,” I told him.

Bruno grinned. “The girl, too.”

I couldn’t let that happen.

“I’ll think about it.” I closed the door in his face.

“What the hell is going on?” hissed Alex.

She was kneeling in the center of the bed, clutching the sheet to her breasts. Her hair was seductively tousled and her eyes wide with fear.

“Raif’s insisting we join him for dinner. Apparently he’s not a good listener. You stay here. I’ll go and have a chat with him.”

“What are you going to say?”

“That he can shove the job up his ass, we don’t need it badly enough to participate in his extracurricular activities.”

“But we do need this job, Dell. I don’t understand. What extracurricular activities?”

I pulled my T-shirt on over my head and sat on the edge of the bed, my back to Alex. As I pulled on my socks the bed shifted. She’d climbed from it and made her way over to the dresser where I’d set her suitcase, the bed sheet wrapped loosely around her. I turned to look at her; my breath hitched in my throat.

“It wasn’t just dinner, Alex.” She was rifling through the inside of the case with one hand, holding the sheet closed around her with the other. “He wants to fuck us.”

Alex stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face me, clutching the sheet to her breasts. It had now slipped dangerously low in the back and the mirror behind her was flashing me a spectacular and practically unobstructed view of her backside.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Both of us? At the same time?”

I leaned back on my elbows and bit my lower lip, trying my damndest not to ogle. “Can you blame him?” I asked, attempting to look casual. “We are a pretty cute pair. Look at you. Is that a butterfly tattoo on your left...”

Alex looked over her left shoulder at herself. “Christ!” she gasped, rearranging the sheet in a vain attempt to cover her nudity. “Do I look like the kind of girl who would...with two men?”

“I don’t know,” I teased. “Maybe if you lower the sheet and give me a better look I’ll be able to make up my mind.”

Instead she reached down to retrieve one of my shoes and threw it at me. She motioned with her hand, demanding that I turn around so she could get dressed.

I did, dutifully. Apparently I’m a better listener than Raif and the good Lord rewarded my obedience by strategically hanging a print of the French Quarter over the bed. I could clearly see Alex in its reflective glass.

“Look,” I began. “Raif likes to play mind games. I think he’s testing us.”

She quickly stepped into the pair of black lace panties along with the matching bra. “God, you’re hot!” I whispered.

My second shoe hit me on the back of the head. I should have seen it coming, but when she bent over to pick it up, I kind of got distracted. “Then we need to set him straight, that’s all,” said Alex, slipping into her dress.

I turned around and watched for a second while she fussed with the ties that held the dress in place. “I’m going to go set him straight,” I told her. “*That’s* the plan.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No,” I said emphatically.

“What are you doing? We don’t have time for this! Unless you plan on tying me up and leaving me here, I’m going.”

Talk about a distraction.

“Could I?” I asked hopefully.

Alex frowned. “Could you what?”

“Tie you up and leave you here?”

“No!”

“Christ, you’re stubborn!” I growled.

“It’s one of the things you love most about me, remember?” she said as she slid into her shoes.

“I thought what I loved most about you was that little thing you do with your tongue,” I teased.

“Charming. You probably said something like that to Raif earlier. Didn’t you?” she asked.

“Of course not,” I assured her wrapping my hand around her wrist and my arm around her waist. I tugged on her arm and pulled her against me. “And I’ll have you know, if Raif so much as touches you tonight, I’m going to gnaw his hand off, sweetheart.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“So you agree? We’re in this together. You’re not going to leave me here all tied up?”

I glanced over my shoulder at the bed. “Tempting, but no.”

Alex gazed searchingly into my eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. After you?”

“You’re the jealous type?”

I nodded and waved toward the door. “I’m afraid so. I’m also the overprotective type, just ask my little sister.”

“Don’t worry about me, Dell. I’ll be fine. I’ve been politely side-stepping the advances of attentive men for years. I can handle Raif, especially with you in the room to back me up. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

I reached up to cup her cheek in the palm of my hand. I stared deeply into her eyes and did what less than an hour ago I swore I wouldn't.

"You only have eyes for me. Right darling?"

"Only you."

"You can trust me," I promised.

"Yes."

"Trust me," I repeated, then I slipped inside, penetrating her mind, sliding past her defenses, folding in upon her, joining with her until I *was* her, until I'd taken her.

Alex sighed, melting into my arms. "I do trust you, Dell."

"Because you're mine," I whispered, testing the waters. "Say it."

"I'm yours," she murmured, her breath beating softly against my cheek. Her body was warm and pliable as she wrapped her arms around my waist and began to nuzzle at the crook of my neck. "Only yours."

"Nothing you see will shock or surprise you tonight, Alex. If anything out of the ordinary occurs, anything that would normally be disturbing, you'll take your cue as to how to respond from me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she replied, tilting her head back and looking deeply into my eyes as if she was searching for something already, and she was. She was already searching for what I would request next, and she wanted only to give it to me, her deepest satisfaction now coming from fulfilling even the slightest of my desires.

Thrall is a dangerous thing.

Chapter Four

Bruno escorted us into the dining room where Raif was waiting. The room was unlike any I'd ever seen before, and that was saying something. The floor was made of stone, huge pieces of dark slate. The ceiling was black; at least I think it was black—the truth was it seemed to go on forever. The only lighting in the room came from what appeared to be a collection of oil pots. There must have been sixty or seventy of them. Each one independently sitting on its own dedicated narrow self. At first glance it appeared they were randomly floating at differing heights along the long walls.

The walls. They were painted a vibrant blood red. Several coats of paint had been applied. Layer upon layer of thick pigment, it was as if the walls themselves were bleeding.

There was a gleaming mahogany table that ran almost the entire length of the room. It would have easily seated eighteen or twenty. Tonight it was set for four. Already the table was adorned with delectable morsels, artfully arranged, meant to whet the appetite and tantalize the palate. Sitting in the center of the assortment of hors d'oeuvres was a woman.

"Ah! There you are! Come in!" called out Raif. He'd been standing at the far end of the room next to the table and was dressed in a pair of black silk pajamas. I suppressed the urge to make a Hugh Hefner joke. Did I mention the woman was naked? She was. Completely. Well, except for the chain choke collar around her neck.

"I can't wait for you to meet Rita. She's really outdone herself for us. Have you ever seen such a delicious appetizer? Bruno, get our guests a drink."

"Scotch, rocks," I said.

"And for the lady?" asked Bruno.

I looked at Alex. Her demeanor was perfectly calm, relaxed even. She left my side and strolled over to the sideboard that functioned as a bar. She studied the array of bottles briefly, before glancing back at me.

"Have whatever strikes your fancy, sweetheart," I told her while trying not to look at Rita. Easier said than done.

"I'll have a scotch, too," I heard Alex say.

In the flickering candlelight Rita's pale, translucent skin gave off an almost ethereal glow. She sat as still as a statue, her knees drawn up to her chest, her head tilted back and her hands positioned flat on the table behind her on either side of her hips. The position accentuated the length of her long delicate neck and forced her breasts to jut out, their rosy tips hardened and peaked. Her hair was like a curtain of rich brown

velvet, its ends grazing the top of the table. I couldn't see the color of her eyes because they were closed. But her mouth was wide open. And resting alluringly in it was a rather large ripe red plum. The seductively macabre tableau was enticingly arousing, but then, I'm sure it was meant to be. It was a display of Raif's wealth, status and power.

Rita was obviously his consort, a female vampire bred for sexual companionship and pleasure. From the feel of her, she was more than a couple centuries old. I had to admit, she looked damn good for her age.

I watched transfixed, as a small rivulet of juice spilled from her mouth and snaked its way down the length of her chin and neck, along her delicate collarbone, over the full mound of her breast, to cling tantalizingly to the hardened tip of one puckered nipple.

Raif nudged my arm. I looked over at him. He was smiling broadly and holding out a heavy crystal tumbler filled with amber liquid. "Single malt."

Bruno seemed to have disappeared. Guess he was going to miss the rest of the show.

"Thanks. Rita, I assume?" I asked, accepting the drink and waving it in the general direction of the centerpiece.

"Isn't she exquisite? She was a gift. Help yourself to a taste." Raif leaned down and latched onto Rita's nipple, the one covered in plum juice. He suckled at her breast noisily and roughly, lacing his fingers possessively through her hair.

It was as if I were driving down Interstate 5 past a huge pileup. I couldn't help but look. I glanced over to Alex. The thrall seemed to be working nicely and as I intended. She was watching casually, with only a hint of arousal—a response she'd probably picked up from me.

After a few moments Raif released Rita's tit with a pop. His mouth and tongue were far from finished, however, and his quest continued as he lapped a slow trail up the path the plum juice had previously taken. It appeared to be a pleasant journey and for the briefest of moments I envied him. In dogged pursuit Raif followed the course all the way back to Rita's mouth where finally he bit into the succulent-looking fruit, releasing both a flood of juices and a wantonly lustful moan.

I walked over to the sideboard, set down my scotch and subtly tugged at the crotch of my jeans.

"Where are my manners?" asked Raif as he offered Rita his hand and helped her to first stand, then climb down from the table. "Randell, this is Rita."

"The pleasure is mine," I said, bowing my head slightly. "And this is Alex."

Rita approached me, staring appraisingly into my eyes before allowing her gaze to wander unabashedly down the length of my body. She made no attempt to hide the interest as her deep brown eyes slowly drank me in.

"Your body begs for release," she observed, her eyes fixed on the now all too prominent bulge in my jeans. "I could bring you much pleasure."

There was no sense in denying or trying to hide my erection.

"It brings me pleasure to be faithful to my lady," I told her, slipping my arm possessively around Alex's waist.

Raif laughed. "How mundane."

"It's nice to know that among some, gallantry is still in fashion," said Rita. "You're a gentleman. Your father has taught you well."

"Unfortunately, gentlemen don't normally make for good muscle," interjected Raif.

"He's strong," declared Rita. "Young in some ways, but very old in others. Interesting." A slow satisfied smile formed on her lips as she scented the air. "She reeks of him, but they haven't had sex. Not tonight. Not yet, anyways. The need is there though, it's heavy and laced with desperation. Can you smell it? They're both positively dripping with desire. Young love... It's so delicious."

Raif stepped closer. I stood my ground as he sidled up to me and leaned in to inhale deeply at the hollow of my throat as he ran his hand down the length of my chest. "You want her so badly that the slightest touch could set you off. Am I right?"

I looked down pointedly at his hand.

"I guess not, Raif." I shrugged. "Or maybe you just don't do it for me."

He raised his head so that his mouth was now a fraction away from mine, his hand skimming over the front of my jeans. "I've yet to barely even try to *do it* for you," he whispered, licking his lips.

This was a practiced act, perfected from probably over a century of seductions. But I didn't want any part of it. I reached down and grabbed his wrist.

"Stop," I said, giving him a small taste of my power. "Stop, or we leave now. We don't need the job. We want it, but we don't need it. I can be of great value to you, but certain compromises will not be made, I told you that. Take it or leave it."

Raif stepped back. I thought that meant he was going to accept my terms. I thought the slight taste of power would be enough to deter him. I thought wrong. Raif had retreated all right, but only so he could get closer to Alex. I'd underestimated him and the error cost me. In the space of a moment he had wrenched her from me and had her in his embrace.

"I think I'll take it," he growled, his eyes flashing crimson as he pulled her back roughly against his chest, his arms wrapped around her, tightly encircling her waist and upper torso and effectively pinning both her arms. It was a feeding posture and if I didn't do something fast, Alex was going to become the soup course.

It's amazing how a bit of anger helps to enhance one's strength. It was the most effortless assault I'd ever executed. I'd meant to erect a simple mirror shield and boost the impact with telekinetic force. I expected the power of the magic to push Raif away. I hadn't counted on the gust of wind, the almost blinding light and the great big boom that literally catapulted Raif across the room, smashed him into the wall, and left him in a crumpled heap of smarmy silk on the floor.

“Dell?” asked Alex, her voice filled at once with terror and confusion. The thrall had been shattered, interrupted somehow. The air around her was electric, even someone with an untrained eye could clearly see the sparks snapping and popping like a flurry of fire flies on a hot August night. She appeared almost dazed, trying to search through the array of lights for me, the pupils of her eyes now a pinpoint from the earlier flash.

Raif started to climb to his feet, a low rumbling chuckle emanating from deep within his chest as he held on to the wall for support. His eyes were once again a cold steel blue.

Rita clapped slowly.

“Nice. Very impressive, Randell,” she said. “See, Raif? I told you the boy was strong.”

“This was a test?” I shouted, advancing toward Raif, my hands balled into fists and my eyes flashing red. I could feel the sheaths of my fangs start to recede and I had to make a conscious effort to not ride the anger, to harness it instead.

“Dell?” Alex called out.

First, I attempted to quickly reinitiate the thrall without taking my eyes off of Raif. I couldn’t. What remained was like a thin slice of baby swiss riddled with tiny holes. I would have had to clear the connection and start over. I didn’t have time for that, I had to deal with Raif.

“*Utulu*,” I whispered, extending my hand out behind me, expelling a rain of power intended to slither through the residual defenses and envelop Alex in a blanket of safe warmth until I called her back.

Raif was watching over my shoulder.

I heard a rustle of sound, which I imagined was Alex sliding to the floor. It was immediately followed by a sick-sounding thunk.

Raif winced. “She’s going to have a whopper of a headache when she comes to.”

“We’ve seen only a hint of what you’re capable of, haven’t we?” Rita asked.

They wanted a show? I’d give them one. I let my anger at Raif wash over me, gathering it up and spitting it out like a raging wall of oppressive heat.

Raif felt it and it scared the shit out of him. If he could have run he would have, but he had no place to go. His back was up against the wall. Sweat was beading on his forehead and the ends of his hair had begun to singe. Suddenly he wasn’t quite so handsome.

“I could melt the skin off your bones without having to blink,” I told him.

“You...you can have the job,” he managed to choke out.

I laughed as I took a step back, then another, and another. I stepped back over Alex’s prone body and crouched down alongside of her.

“I’m not sure I *like* you enough to work for you. I’ll think about it. If we decide to take it I’ll send you my requirements in the morning,” I told him, lifting Alex.

“We’ll make it worth your while,” he said, picking a napkin up from the table and mopping his sweat-soaked brow.

“No more tests,” I said as I cradled Alex in my arms.

“No need,” he replied gazing up into the darkness of the fathomless ceiling. “Malcolm is satisfied you can handle the job. You may go. Bruno is waiting outside. He can escort you back.”

“Who the fuck is Malcolm?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Raif replied. “Her first set starts at nine. You should arrive at eight.”

Chapter Five

Alex was stretched out on the king-sized bed, her long dark curls spread across the pillow and a look of pure serenity on her face. I could feel the thrum of each and every one of her heartbeats. I could feel them because they were under my control. They were mine. She was mine. For a beat or two I watched her chest rise and fall. I found myself matching her pace, moving closer, inhaling her fragrance. Her lips were gently parted. They were full and lush and they beckoned me.

“Sleeping Beauty,” I whispered, “it’s time to come back to yourself. Open your eyes.” I moved out of the way and I waited. It didn’t take long.

Alex bolted upright in bed. Her eyes were open in alarm, and her breath was coming in big huge gulps.

I placed my hands on either side of her face and looked into her eyes. No thrall. No magics. Just me. “Slow down. If you don’t control your breathing you’re going to faint again.”

“Again?” she gasped. “I fainted?”

“Don’t talk. Breathe with me, sweetheart. Try to match my pace, all right?”

Alex nodded. She did try and as the seconds slowly ticked away, her breathing came to match mine in perfect synchronization. As I managed to help her slow it down even more, leading and pacing, an imperceptible thread stretched between us, the kind of spontaneous connection that develops between a man and a woman during a time of intense closeness. It wasn’t contrived. It was real. I closed my eyes and rode the wave of intimacy that was building until I simply couldn’t take it anymore. I pulled back and opened my eyes.

“Are you all right?” Alex asked me, reaching for my hand and giving it a squeeze. “What’s the last thing you remember clearly?”

“You’re the one who fainted and hit her head, sweetheart, not me. I remember everything just fine.”

I barely had time to register her intent she moved so quickly. Got to give it to the girl, for a human she’s fast, damn fast. Within the blink of an eye she’d reached underneath the pillow next to her on the bed, pulled out her Glock 19, and had the barrel shoved underneath my chin. I may be an immortal, but I’m not stupid. I froze.

“You’re one of them,” she hissed.

“Alex—”

“Shut up. I can’t believe I was falling for your stupid act. But you all eventually make a mistake.”

"I don't know what you're talking about. Maybe you're in shock," I suggested, trying to sound reasonable.

"You're a vampire, Dell. I lost time. Someone had me in thrall. The holes in my memory... I thought it was that Bruno guy. I thought he'd taken us both. But that's not what happened, is it?" she demanded.

"I don't know—"

"Don't lie to me! The game is over."

I swallowed. "This isn't a game, Alex. We're on the same side, you and I. If I wanted to hurt you I could have, so many times. I didn't put you in thrall to hurt you, I did it to protect you, to protect you from seeing what they are."

"What *you* are, you mean!" She pushed the gun further into my chin. My neck was hyper-extended, my eyes now glued to the ceiling.

"That too," I admitted. "If you know what I am, then you know you can't kill me."

"I can slow you down," she said, her voice strong and certain. "It would take time for you to heal. By that time I'd be long gone and you'd be waking up in a morgue someplace. Who knows? Maybe before the autopsy, maybe after. Just how long does it take to regenerate following a cremation, Dell?"

Christ. I was in trouble.

"I'm one of the good guys, Alex."

"Shut up!" she growled. "Good guys don't put women in thrall. I fall for it every fucking time! You're all the same. In the end you all want one thing from me and that's it. Blood."

She was holding her gun in her right hand. I was starting to feel a slight tremor echoing through the barrel. You can only hold a weapon in that position, that forcefully, for so long before the stance becomes tiring. She was going to have to commit one way or another soon, either shoot me or back off. I was hoping for the latter and I was hoping she'd make the decision on her own.

Could I have placed her back into thrall? Could I have forced her to drop the gun? Yes. But I didn't want to. This was it. This was that moment for us. The make or break. You reach it in every relationship, sometimes without even knowing it, that pivotal turning point that defines everything else that follows.

"I'm not a feeder, Alex. I've never tasted blood. I won't lie to you."

She laughed with disdain. "You've already lied to me. You told me I could trust you!"

"You can. Your blood calls to me, yes. You tempt me more than any other woman I've ever met. But..."

"But what?" she growled, her teeth on edge, strain evident in her voice.

"But I gave someone my word I'd protect you, that I'd take care of you. My word means something to me. Christ, Alex, I had my mouth on your neck. Your blood was roaring in my ears. It would have been so easy for me to take, but I didn't bite you. I didn't. Not even after you bit me."

"You pushed away," she said, lowering the gun.

“I didn’t want to nick you. I told you, I’ve never tasted blood.”

Alex threw the safety back on her weapon and tossed it onto the bed. “I don’t understand...”

“We’re not all blood-sucking fiends, Alex.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know that. Unfortunately, since you all don’t walk around wearing white hats and black hats it’s kind of hard to tell. Come here,” she said climbing to her knees and waiving me over.

Call me suspicious.

“Why?”

She gathered up her hair. “Do you prefer the right or the left?”

“For what?”

“I want to try an experiment.”

I held my position. “I think you should lie down. You probably have a head injury from hitting your noggin on the stone floor.”

She didn’t buy it.

I leaned back onto my elbows and did my best to stay composed as she walked over to me on her knees and batted my chest.

“Come on, be a sport,” she cajoled.

“A sport?”

Alex sighed. “I need to understand what’s changed, Dell. Vampires can’t normally get that close to me. Don’t ask me why, I don’t know exactly why. I only know—”

I sat up. “I think I know why.”

“You do?”

“Magic.”

Alex became very quiet. I watched as a myriad of emotions fluttered across her face.

“I know it sounds crazy but—”

Alex shook her head. “No, it doesn’t sound crazy. It is magic. Strong magic I was told. A curse.”

“Who told you that?”

“Someone...”

“Someone?”

She looked away, embarrassed. “She works in this shop, in downtown Los Angeles. They do readings there. I was—”

I reached up and cupped her cheek in my hand. “I know a bit about magic, Alex. More than a bit, actually. This isn’t a curse. It’s a protection spell, a very powerful protection spell.”

“Did you use magic to get close to me?”

It was a fair question.

“No.”

She leaned in toward me, slowly.

“What then?” she asked, her lips grazing mine.

Did she intend to kiss me? My entire body hummed with the anticipation of her lips pressing firmly against mine, her tongue sweeping into my mouth. Kisses like that were dangerous. They brought with them the possibility of accidental blood spill and that was something I couldn’t risk, something we couldn’t risk.

In one swift move I grabbed her shoulders, turned her body and laid her down on the bed, pinning her to the mattress. I had her wrists pulled up over her head, secure in my hands and her body stretched out enticingly under mine.

“You’re involved with someone, remember?” I reminded her.

She looked away. “Yes. Sullivan Cross.”

“You’re seeing Deputy Director Cross?” Sullivan was the head of the profiling division, he was infamous.

“I guess,” she sighed.

“You *guess*?”

Alex looked at me and admitted, “As soon as we return from assignment I’m planning to break it off with him. It was inevitable. And now...”

“Now?”

She looked away.

“Seems like Sullivan would be a pretty good catch. Successful, athletic, good-looking.”

She scowled at me. “You date him then.”

I laughed. “Sorry, sweetheart, men don’t do it for me.” I started to move so she could get up.

“Me either.”

That stopped me.

“You’re gay?” I gasped. “Because you could have fooled me the way you were responding.”

“I’m not gay.”

“I don’t understand.”

She wouldn’t look at me. Her face was burning crimson. In fact her entire body was on fire. The smell of her arousal was strong and it was getting stronger by the second. Sometimes I’m a little slow on the uptake.

“You crave the touch of an immortal. You like vampires.”

She didn’t answer. My mind was spinning as a flood of questions came to me. I started with the one I thought would be the least threatening.

“Alex, when you said vampires can’t normally get that close to you, what did you mean exactly? It could be important. Maybe even important to the mission.”

She looked up at me for several long moments. I could tell she wanted me. She wanted me badly and my body's reaction to that need was not only obvious to me, it was obvious to her and pressing hard into the softness of her lower belly.

"If you're going to make me talk about sex, can you let go of my wrists and sit up?"

It was my turn to blush. I let go of her wrists and did as she asked.

Alex eased up onto her elbows. "It varies. Sometimes it happens at first base, sometimes second. With one I got all the way to sloppy thirds before he couldn't hold back, tried to take a little nibble, and...bam!"

"Bam?"

"It's like a charge of lightning or something. I tell them up front no biting or pain of any kind, but do they listen? No. It always ends in disaster," she moaned, flopping down on the bed and throwing one arm over her face.

"There are vampires who don't feed, Alex. Lots of us," I offered helpfully.

"I seem to convert them after a few dates without even trying. They start out nice enough, then they go all Count Dracula on me."

"Hmm." That was me. I didn't know what the fuck to say. My mother is a psychiatrist and she says *hmm* a lot. It seems to work for her.

"Is that all you can say?" she asked, leaning up on her elbows again, her temper revving her up to a slow boil. Apparently the *hmm* thing only works for shrinks.

"What I can have I don't want," she moaned. "What I want I can't have. So here I am, this huge mess of unsatisfied, frustrated... And all you can say is *hmm*? Never mind."

It hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Are you saying you've never had sex?"

"Define sex."

"Intercourse."

"Yes."

"Yes, you've had sex or yes, you've never had sex?"

"I've never had sex."

"You've never had sex? Are you sure?"

Alex screamed and pushed me off of her. Actually, it was more like a growl. I reached out to grab hold of her and we both ended up rolling off the bed and onto the floor, wedged between the side of the mattress and the wall. She was on top, draped across my body in a way I was certain I was going to have fantasies about later.

"You know," I began casually, "if you were getting some you probably wouldn't have such a bad temper."

Alex started laughing. I felt her body relax against mine. Her face was buried in my neck.

I laughed too. Maybe I shouldn't have. Because in pretty short order her laughter began to give way to tears, then the tears turned into sobs, heartfelt sobs that tugged at my very soul and made me feel like an ass.

I hadn't been trying to upset her, honestly. It was too unbelievable. Not the part about her being Sophie, which I was pretty convinced she was. Not the part about her being under some big-time protection spell, I figured that was true too. I even bought into the wacky irony that she had a thing for vamps and that somehow the spell identified most of us as a threat. It was the fact she hadn't had sex with anyone, ever, I seemed to be having a hard time grasping.

"Is there anything I can say, anything I can do?" I asked, uncertain.

Alex lifted her head just enough to look into my eyes. Hers were red and still brimming with tears. It wasn't her most attractive moment, but that didn't matter. I took one look at those beautiful green eyes and knew I'd do just about anything she asked.

"I want you to try to bite me," she said, offering her neck to me as if it were the most natural and simplest thing in the world. "No vampire has ever been able to put his mouth on my neck. Maybe the spell is broken."

I reached up to cup her cheek in the palm of my hand. "I'm flattered, tempted even. But you don't understand what you're asking. Besides, I can tell you the spell isn't broken. Raif tried to have himself a little taste tonight and was blown clear across the room. I thought it was my anger adding a bit of extra juice. Maybe it was, but it was also you."

Alex started to panic. There was no other word for it.

"Oh, God!" she gasped as she tried to place one hand over my mouth and pushed up with the other, her eyes darting about the room and her knee grinding painfully into my thigh and way too close to my dick.

I reached out and gave the bed a shove, providing us with more space to move. I rolled, removing her hand from my mouth.

"What the hell—"

Alex wrapped her arms around my neck and brought my ear down next to her mouth.

"They could be listening," she whispered. "What were we thinking?"

"The room's been shielded."

"What do you mean by shielded?"

"It's magic, Alex. What's said in this room stays in this room. It's safe."

"What if I screamed?"

"No one would hear you," I assured her.

"What if I made *you* scream?" she asked, brushing her lips hesitantly across mine.

God help me, the word scream had never sounded so enticing. Maybe it was the fact that I'd suddenly realized in all the commotion her wrap-around dress had become unwrapped. Maybe it was the fact that she was playing with the hair at the back of my neck. Or, maybe it was that she'd parted her legs and lifted her knees so my hips had lowered and the only thing separating my cock from the pull of temptation and the promise of rapture was my well-worn jeans and those wicked black lace panties.

Chapter Six

“Whatever happens between us, it doesn’t have to mean anything,” she said as she pulled my T-shirt out of the back of my jeans and slid her hands underneath, lightly grazing my back with her nails.

I sat up and quickly pulled the shirt over my head. If we were going to do this, if I were going to do this for her, I wanted to feel her, skin on skin.

I didn’t want to look into her eyes, I was afraid if I did I might stop. I didn’t want to stop. So instead I focused on the belt still tied around her waist. I focused on loosening it and peeling back the dress.

“Sit up,” I commanded, and she did. I slid the fabric off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. I eased her back down, my hand skimming the length of her throat, across her collar bone, over the full mounds of her breast. It came to rest on her stomach. I hesitated. I never hesitated.

She’d thrown my own line back at me and I could smell the lie in it. If we did this, it would mean something. Maybe some girls could give it up and have it mean nothing, but Alex wasn’t one of them.

I leaned down slowly and placed a tender kiss on her belly. It quivered under my lips. She laced her fingers through my hair and chuckled nervously.

“Your beard, it tickles.”

It was getting late and I’d shaved early that morning. I looked up into her eyes. “I can shave if you want.”

She shook her head and smiled, only the smile was a bit shaky.

“I would never hurt you Alex,” I assured her. I stood and offered her my hand. With a confused look on her face she took it.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” she asked as I pulled her to her feet. “That’s why you can get close to me, why others have been able to get close up to a point.”

I pulled her into my arms and began to nuzzle her neck like I had earlier that day. I may have felt the pull of her blood earlier, just like I was feeling it now. I might even be tempted by it. But I wasn’t going to take it. Not now, probably not ever.

Did I say probably? I meant definitely, definitely not now and definitely not ever.

“Yes,” I growled, sliding my hands into the back of her panties and kneading the round globes of her delicious ass. I squeezed and pulled her toward me, rubbing my still-encased cock into her stomach, my jeans now a prison. I turned her around so she faced the bed, her back pressed into my chest. My own nipples were already hard with arousal.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered.

“*Etu*,” I murmured, shrouding the room in darkness.

“Dell?” there was an edge to her voice.

“I’m gonna take care of you. I’m gonna give you what I can,” I told her, placing a kiss on the back of her shoulder before falling to my knees behind her and tracing the top edge of her underwear with my tongue.

I hooked my thumbs into the sides of her panties and began to slide them down her long, slender legs all the way to her ankles. She was still in her heels and I wanted it that way. No stockings, just bare legs. A part of me wished the lights were on, but another part was grateful they weren’t. I could tell I’d already started to change. The anticipation of what I was about to do called my beast forth.

“We’re going to do this nice and easy,” I promised her, shaking back my beast as I reached up and slid my hands up her legs, over her ass, then around to her front until they found the tangle of soft curls at the apex of her thighs. “I’m going to make you come, give you some release. It’s what you need now, yeah?”

One of my hands moved to cup her breast, still encased in that enticing bra, the other moved to cup the bare mound of her pussy. I could smell her cream and it made my mouth water.

“Yes!” Alex moaned as I slid my middle finger into the wetness between her engorged lips. She covered my hands with her own, adding pressure, showing me what she wanted.

“This better?” I asked, sliding the tip of my finger inside and using the pad of my thumb to circle her clit. She didn’t utter a word, but her breathing said it all. Her knees began to buckle and she shifted the position of her arms so she could hold on. One hand was now back around my neck, the other reaching behind for my ass.

I lowered the lace cup of her bra so I could feel her breast. Closing my eyes and focusing on my desire to bring her pleasure I rolled her pebbled nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

“Oh, God!” she cried. “Please... I...”

“Talk to me,” I said, adding a second fingertip. She was so fucking tight. My cock was close to bursting. My jeans were becoming painful, but not as painful as what she asked for next.

“I want to turn around. I want to do this right. I want to feel your weight on top of me and your arms around me.”

She wanted someone to make love to her. I have a rule: I don’t make love to women. Sex is about quenching a thirst, sating a hunger. I don’t promise hearts and flowers and happily ever after. I’m only twenty-five, I have centuries ahead of me and a dangerous job that demands my focus. I can’t commit to a pet rock, never mind a woman.

I could feel it down to my bones, this had been a mistake, something I shouldn’t have started. But stopping now would have been cruel, so I was going to see it through.

I stepped back and let her turn around, her hands immediately found their way to my belt buckle.

“There’s an infinite number of ways to do this right, Alex.” I stilled her hands, then walked her back a step so she was closer to the bed. “Sit down, lean back.”

She did, her legs automatically rising and wrapping around my waist. She wanted me on top of her, she wanted to feel my body pressing into hers, my cock plunged deep inside of her. And in truth I wanted that too. In that moment I wanted it more than I’d wanted almost anything. Almost.

Sex is an interesting dance, an ebb and flow between pleasure and pain. It’s about getting to the edge and holding. It’s about being maddened to the point where you can’t stop, but you can’t go on either. Give and take. Surrender and control. I couldn’t even give her that, even that seemed too intimate, too risky somehow. I was merely going to provide a service, one friend helping another. When the assignment was over, we’d go our separate ways. This was about scratching her itch. I’d do this one thing for her, then we’d focus on the mission.

That’s what I told myself as I fell to my knees and buried my face between her thighs. I don’t lie to myself often. Deep down I knew this one was a whopper.

I used my fingers to separate her folds and I inhaled. Her scent was strong and she was sopping with desire. I could feel my fangs begin to descend and I closed my eyes, fighting for control.

“Dell,” she moaned, lacing her fingers through my hair. Did she intend to push me away or pull me toward her in that moment? I’ll never know. I’ll never know because I reached up and grabbed hold of her wrists.

“I need to stay in control here, Alex,” I told her, placing her hands back onto the edge of the bed. “This is about your pleasure,” I promised her, flattening my tongue and swiping it up the length of her juicy slit. “Hmm,” I murmured, taking her bud into my mouth and sucking on it. Her thighs clenched around me. They were already starting to tremble. I’d barely gotten started.

Without warning she reached up again and grabbed my hair, this time definitely pulling me away.

“Kiss me,” she begged.

She meant on the mouth. She didn’t say it, but I knew. She was pulling me in that direction and she was being insistent. I could be insistent too.

“No,” I told her, once again removing her hand and this time placing it on her own breast. I reached up to rub my thumb across her lower lip. “You’re delicious, sweetheart,” I assured her. “Open up. Have a taste.”

Alex leaned up on one elbow and opened her mouth, taking my thumb inside and swirling her tongue around it. It had been a long time since I’d shot my load into my pants, but I came close as she sucked my thumb deep into the wet cavern of her mouth, circling the tip of it with her tongue, baring down then backing off.

I bit down on the inside of my left cheek and pulled my thumb out of her mouth with a pop.

“Roll over, hold on to the headboard,” I told her, sliding my hand underneath her hip and giving her a little shove.

She obliged.

“Up on your knees, baby, spread them wide. I’m gonna drink your juices down until they pour into my mouth.”

Alex turned back and looked into the darkness over her shoulder. Her body was vibrating with need. “Talk is cheap,” she said and it made me laugh.

“Demanding wench!” I growled. I gently spread the cheeks of her ass and released a big long trail of spit that I began to generously spread. Great sex is never neat and tidy. I don’t mind when it gets messy. I assumed Alex wouldn’t either. There are a lot of things you can forgive when you’re in the throes of a mind-blowing orgasm. If she didn’t know that already, she was about to find out.

“Ass in the air!” I told her as I slid the tips of two fingers back into her pussy, not too far, just far enough. I latched back onto her clit with my mouth. My fangs were tucked safely in their sheaths, so I took it between my teeth and began to work her over, sucking and pulling, licking and nibbling.

Alex was panting like a pup in heat, rocking back and forth gently. The smell of her, the taste of her, the sound of her keening, the way her body was responding to mine like it had never responded to any other man’s—it was the kind of thing wet dreams were made of. Well, mine anyways.

“Dell!” she cried. “I...I need...”

“What do you need, sweetheart? Tell me. Tell me what you need!” I blew a cool stream of air across her puckered hole then began to circle it with my thumb, all the while the fingers of my other hand were gently sliding in and out of her pussy.

She was practically whimpering now.

“Too much, it’s too much,” she cried.

Only it wasn’t too much. The problem wasn’t that it was too much. The problem was that it wasn’t enough, not enough to push her over the edge.

I disengaged from her slowly and watched as in the darkness the silhouette of her body slowly slumped face down onto the bed. I ran my hands down the length of her back, over her ass, she was slick with sweat and shaking with need.

So close...she was so close.

“Let me do what you asked,” I heard myself say. I don’t even remember making the decision. “Let me climb on top of you and settle myself between your legs. Let me wrap your legs around my waist. Let me hold you.”

“Why?” Alex rolled over. She was tired and spent, but still not satisfied.

“Because it’s what you need right now.” It was the only explanation that came to mind, and it was the truth. Leaning down I softly kissed her lips. Then I shifted, peppering a trail across her jawline and down her neck until I reached that spot behind her ear.

Alex’s knees lifted and separated and my hips lowered between them. I began thrusting as if I were inside of her, my hips pumping, grinding against her sex, the friction building until I wanted to scream and Alex did. She screamed as she came, crying out my name in pleasure while the orgasm broke over her. She’d be chafed from the rubbing of my jeans. But she wasn’t thinking about that now.

I was.

I was thinking about that, I was thinking about the ice cold shower I was going to get up and take, but most of all I was thinking about wanting to roll over so I could wrap my arms around her and hold her while she came down. I was actually thinking about basking in the fucking afterglow. I hadn’t even come. I was in deep shit.

Chapter Seven

“Dell? Are you sure you’re all right?”

I told her I was going to take a shower when I rolled off of the bed. She could hear the shower running. It had only been five minutes. Did she think I’d drowned?

“I’m fine!” I yelled.

It was a lie. I wasn’t fine. I still had a hard-on and the cold shower wasn’t helping. This was an all-time record. Maybe the fact that I couldn’t refrain from touching my dick had something to do with it. It had been a good long while since I’d had to whack off in the shower. Personally, I have nothing against jerking off. It feels good and it’s uncomplicated. My own hand is free of emotional baggage and it has never let me down. So why was it failing me now? It was her fault. Mr. Happy knew Alex was in the very next room and the fact that he was having to settle for the hand was making him miserable.

I heard the door open and looked up, Alex was standing on the threshold wearing her white silk robe. There was no steam to mask me, cold showers don’t produce steam. She had a nice clear view of the shower stall with me inside, dick in hand.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. *“Etu.”*

The lights went out.

“You can’t shower in the dark,” she said, flipping them back on.

I turned away from her, my back to the door.

“I’m a vampire, Alex. I can see in the dark. Go order dinner for us. Go watch television. Go do something.”

And she did. She did do something. She let the robe fall to the floor, opened the shower door, and stepped in to join me. I half expected her to shriek when the blast of cold water hit her, but she didn’t. Instead she quickly redirected the spray of the shower and set about adjusting the temperature.

“What are you doing?” I was facing away from her.

“I’m going to help you,” she said, matter-of-factly. Alex ran her hands soothingly down the length of my back then around my waist. They were slick with soap and the smell of fresh citrus began to permeate the air. I could feel the tips of her nipples brush up against me.

“Help me?”

She stepped back momentarily, to turn the spray toward us. The hot water was almost scalding on my ice-cold skin. It made me jump. But then she was back, blocking the spray and instead warming me with her body.

“I figured you might need a little help with some of those...*hard* to reach spots. Do you? Do you need some help?”

“Uh huh.” I nodded, my voice sounding rough with want. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feel of her hand as it slid closer and closer to my cock.

“Here, maybe?” she asked, wrapping her hand nice and tight around the base.

“Yeah,” I said. “Fuck, yeah.” I can be exceedingly eloquent at times.

She loosened her grip ever so slightly, letting her hand glide firmly over my shaft, giving it a little counterclockwise turn on the way up and twisting clockwise on the way back down. I was primed and soon she had a nice steady rhythm going.

I had both hands pressed against the tile of the wall, my head leaning between them. I was breathing hard, too hard. I started to feel lightheaded. My eyes had changed, that was for certain. I could feel the rumble beginning to roll, deep down in my chest. My fangs were descending.

“Turn around Dell.”

I shook my head, I couldn’t do anything else. I certainly couldn’t talk. I was so close...so close.

“Turn around,” she repeated. “Please. I know what I’m asking. Turn around. If you turn around I can use my mouth. You’d like that wouldn’t you? You’d like to see my lips wrapped around your cock, sucking you off, swallowing every inch of you and then drinking down your come.”

I spun around quickly with a speed that frightened her. Or maybe it was the bright red eyes, or the glistening fangs that made her gasp? Who knows? It might even have been the fact that I’d taken her firmly into my embrace, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other across her back so that my hand was positioned at the base of her skull, my fingers threaded firmly through the long tresses of her hair.

“You should never tease a vampire about anything oral,” I whispered, striving to maintain control.

Alex looked into my eyes, her gaze unwavering. Good for her, maybe it *was* just the sudden movement that had made her gasp after all.

“Who said I was teasing?” she whispered, leaning back. There was Mr. Happy, his fully engorged head peeking through the valley of the finest pair of tits I’d ever seen. Things were decidedly looking up as far as he was concerned.

Alex stepped back and looked up at me before falling to her knees in the shower, my dick in her hand.

“I’ve only done this once, so if I’m not doing it right don’t be shy. Just tell me how you like it.” Her mouth was so close to the head of my dick I could feel every pulse of breath as she spoke.

“Uh huh.” I nodded, silver-tongued vampire that I am. Tell a woman exactly how I wanted her to suck my dick? I could do that. Sure. No problem.

“Let me control this though. No hair pulling and no forcing me to deep throat.”

“But I love to hold on to a woman’s hair while she... Wait, you can deep throat?”

Alex looked up at me, her amazing emerald eyes sparkling with mischief. “Let’s find out,” she said right before sweeping her tongue in a circular motion around the head of my dick.

The image of Raif flying across the room and slamming into the wall flashed through my mind. I think Mr. Happy saw it too, he suddenly seemed a little less enthusiastic. I guess the prospect of acting like a lightning rod didn’t appeal to him.

I reached down and smoothed my hand over her hair. “Alex...”

“Trust me,” she whispered right before taking the head of my cock into her luscious mouth, sucking on it like some delicious sweet.

And for some absolutely inexplicable reason, I did. I did trust her. I didn’t know why and at that moment I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want to think at all. All I wanted to do was feel, feel her hands reaching around and clenching my ass, feel the suction of her warm delicious mouth and those full pink lips, and feel my cock coming back to life, growing inside of her mouth until it was hard and full again.

“Mmm.” She backed off and released me. Tilting my cock up, she licked the underside, tracing that vein underneath all the way back to the now almost purple head.

My stomach was a mass of coiled springs quivering in anticipation. I had to fight the urge to grab her hair, so I reached for the soap dish on the shower wall instead. I closed my eyes, fighting for control.

“No,” she said, “watch me.”

My eyes flew open, just in time to see the tip of her tongue lap up a drop of pre-come from my slit.

“Christ, Alex!” I gasped.

She smiled, pleased with herself.

“Suck it. Use your mouth, baby.”

And she did, she used it to suck down every inch of me, devouring my cock with a moan that made her throat rumble in the most spectacular way and made me believe she was enjoying it.

“Fuck!”

Alex swallowed and the pressure in her mouth increased, her tongue undulating in a way I’d never felt before. I could feel my balls tightening.

“I’m gonna come, sweetheart!” I warned.

I expected her to release me, to back off, but she didn’t. Instead she added a hand, twisting on the upstroke. She paused and, taking a cue from me earlier, she added a healthy dose of spit, letting it run down my shaft and into her own hand.

“Just like that. Perfect! Oh, God! Alex, baby, stop! I’m gonna—”

She released me then. Her eyes wide, her chest flush, and her lips swollen. Her breaths were coming in hard rasps. She looked glorious.

I wrapped my hand around the base of my dick and leaned over, prepared to finish myself off and jack into the stream of the water.

But Alex placed her hand over mine and stopped me.

“No,” she said.

My eyes connected with hers. “Here.” She leaned forward and arched back, offering me those gorgeous tits and that taut, flat stomach.

I came with a roar so fucking loud it actually rattled the glass doors of the shower. I watched as my come shot across her breasts, the milky fluid dripping down her torso and onto her belly.

A few seconds ticked by and during that time my eyes never left hers.

“So, you liked that, huh?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure I could trust my lips yet. They were feeling a little numb.

Alex stood and took a step toward me.

“Ouch! Shit!” She placed one hand on my shoulder and lifted her foot up. It wasn’t until then that I realized I’d ripped the soap dish clean off the shower wall. There were shards of broken tile in the bottom of the shower and she’d cut her foot on one.

“Don’t move,” I told her. “There’s more tile.” I took a deep breath to steady my nerves, big mistake. The smell of the blood had overpowered everything else.

“Fuck!” I shouted, upset with myself for being so careless. I pushed open the shower door and stepped out, angrily throwing the chunk of ceramic I still held in my hand into the sink before turning back to her. “Let me lift you out.”

I placed my hands around her waist and lifted her effortlessly into the air.

“My,” Alex cooed, “what big strong arms you have.”

“The better to hold you with, my dear.” I placed a playful kiss on her tummy before sliding her down the length of my body.

Alex burst forth in a fit of giggles. “Don’t! I’m horribly ticklish!”

“Yeah? Good to know.” I turned her around and reached for her foot. There was a small shard of tile sticking out of the soft pad of her heel that I easily extracted with my thumb and forefinger.

Alex hissed.

“You all right?”

She nodded. “I’ll heal quickly. I always do. Are you all right?”

“Me?”

“With the blood? You’re still...”

I was still in vamp face. It was the smell of the blood. It was far too exciting. Mr. Happy agreed, and he'd just had a good seeing to.

"Sorry." I turned away.

She caught my chin and turned my face back toward her, then looked down at my cock.

"You're hard again. The smell of my blood excites you."

I closed my eyes. "Yes."

"You want to taste me."

"Yes," I nodded.

"You can."

"Yes, but I won't."

"Why not?"

I opened my eyes and looked down at her. She was so young, so innocent, so...dangerous.

I swallowed. "Because one taste of you would never be enough." That realization was far better than the cold shower. My fangs receded and I let go of her foot.

Alex turned around to face me. "I understand, and I won't offer it again. You change your mind..."

"You'll be the first to know."

She smiled. "Good. Now close your eyes. I have a present for you."

The momentary mistrust must have been evident on my face.

"Hey, what's that look for? I'm not even armed and you're heap big vampire!"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Heap big vampire?"

"Close them." She reached up to cover my eyes with her hand.

"Okay, okay." I relented.

The air around me shifted as she stepped into my space. Her tits, sticky with my come, pressed up against my chest creating a tactile memory I was sure I'd never forget. For a moment, I thought it was going to be my new favorite. But what came next was even better. The press of her lips, the nibble of teeth, the sweep of her tongue teasing until my mouth opened and welcomed her inside. I had never tasted anything so exquisite. Never had I felt anything so intimate. Stroking, exploring, over and over. All that existed was *her*—this moment. I wanted it to last forever. My first real kiss.

Alex pulled back, licked her lips, and sighed. "You're a great kisser, Agent Renfield."

"Am I?" I ran the pad of my thumb across her bee-stung lips.

Alex rolled her eyes and started to step away. "Oh, please! I'm sure you've heard that—"

I held on to her, pulling her back into my embrace and holding her close to my chest, her head tucked under my chin.

"That was my first," I confessed.

Alex looked up at me. "Your first kiss?"

I began to blush. “Yeah. I don’t kiss. Not like that. It’s too easy to get carried away and—”

Alex placed her hand over my lips to silence me.

“You can’t nick me, Dell. I can hurt myself by doing something like stepping on a shard of tile, but you can’t hurt me. You’d be stopped first,” she reminded me.

“If my fangs descend you could nick yourself.”

“We just need to be careful, stay in tune with one another and stop before your lust for blood goes too far.”

“What about your lust?” I asked. “How are we going to keep that from going too far?”

She turned away.

“You want me, I can tell. I can smell it. You want me now even, don’t you?” I curled my arm around her waist and weaved my fingers through the mass of dark curly hair and into her slippery folds.

“Yes!” she gasped. “Yes, I want you.”

“And not just my tongue, my mouth. You want my cock.”

Alex nodded and bit her lip.

The desire to bury myself inside her was strong, to lower her onto the floor, to spread her legs and to push myself deep inside, to take her like no man had ever taken her. But no matter how much foreplay we engaged in, how gentle I was, the first time... It was going to hurt.

“I think I might know how to break the spell, Alex.” I told her, running my hands through her hair.

“You do? Do it!” she begged.

I stepped back, suddenly filled with dread. “You don’t even ask how. You haven’t taken time to consider the consequences.”

“I need to be free of this.”

“Even if it would mean you could get hurt?”

“People get hurt all the time, Dell. That’s life. That’s *normal*.”

I didn’t pull any punches, she deserved to hear the unvarnished truth. “Without any consequence or protection you could probably seduce any vampire you wanted and while you’re having a good time, fucking him, he could bleed you dry.”

She looked horrified.

“Do you think so little of me?” Tears formed in her eyes. I’d hurt her.

“No, sweetheart.” I reached out to her to cup her face in my hands, only she pushed them away. “But I don’t think a lot of feeders, all they want to do it sate their hunger. It’s not about the girl, it’s never about the girl. It’s about the blood.”

“Is that what it’s like with your parents?”

I shook my head. “Blood shared during a ritual mating or during sex between mates? That’s different. It binds them. It makes them stronger. It’s...different. My parents are mates, Alex. They love one another.”

“And we don’t,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Don’t?”

“Love each other. We’re...”

“Partners,” I finished. “Although my feelings go beyond that, Alex. I care about you more than—”

“We’re friends,” she declared. “With benefits, maybe?”

Now, that should have sounded great, right? But it didn’t. This girl had my stomach in knots. How the hell had she managed to turn what guys everywhere tout as the best-case scenario into something unsatisfying? I wasn’t sure and just as I was about to conclude that her continued nudity was probably preventing me from thinking clearly she launched a sneak attack.

“Friends help one another, Don’t they?”

“Of course.”

“Please,” she begged. “Help me fix this.”

I wasn’t even a hundred percent sure I could help her, that I could break it. But I’d remembered something, a spell I’d seen in a book that had been given to me years ago by Basta, a book my father would have sorely disapproved of. It was filled with spells fueled by dark magic, magic that required the kind of sacrifice I’d never been willing to make.

Would the price of reversal be that steep? I didn’t know, but one thing I did know, if it turned out I needed Basta’s help, it was going to come at a price. And chances were, it was going to be a price I didn’t want to pay.

“There are things I need to tell you. Things I need to share with you.” There was so much Alex didn’t know, so much she didn’t understand, that she wasn’t prepared to understand. But she would, in time.

“About the mission?”

I shook my head. “What I’m talking about is more important than this one mission.”

“I thought the mission always came first?” she challenged. “That’s what you said.”

“Yeah.” I sighed and leaned down until my forehead rested against hers. “I was wrong.”

Chapter Eight

I emerged from the bathroom to find Alex sitting in the overstuffed chair with a glass of scotch in her hand. Her legs were draped casually over one arm, her silk robe seductively parted, giving me an unobstructed view of her legs and a good bit of thigh. I'd ordered our dinner while she'd quickly showered and when she'd finished I'd claimed the bathroom for myself. The food had yet to arrive. "I see you found the scotch," I said as I finished toweling off my wet hair.

Alex shrugged. "I have a feeling I'm going to need it."

She stood and walked over to me, a smile gracing her lips that I hadn't seen before on her. I wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"You shaved." She lifted her hand to my face and ran it over my cheek.

The fact that she'd noticed made me feel self-conscious. I'd done it for her, of course. Because I wanted to be close to her, to bury my face between her breasts and between her thighs. It had seemed considerate at the time, now it felt presumptuous.

"I always shave at night," I said dismissively.

She looked into my eyes and grinned.

"What?" I tossed the towel I'd been using to dry my hair onto the bed, then loosened the one around my waist and dropped it on the floor.

She turned around. "Nothing."

I didn't understand her sudden shyness and I didn't want to give in to it. So I closed the gap between us, pressed the length of my body against hers, and wrapped my arms around her waist.

"Okay, the truth is, I can't resist your charms." I swept her hair across her back and over one shoulder, baring her neck so I could nuzzle where I'd kissed her earlier. "I shaved because I want to get close to you again. I want you again. I want you still. I—"

"You what?"

I'd stepped away from her and turned on an extra light. "I just realized I left a mark on you earlier, Alex. It's red."

Alex lifted her hand to her neck, then raced to the mirror. "It is!" She turned to face me. "How?"

I shook my head. "What went into the spell, what exactly the barriers are, I don't know. It's about more than intention, although I think that's part of it. I think it's also about your experience. Did you experience pain when I—"

She blushed and turned away again and the surprise of it had me stopping mid-sentence.

“Are you the same girl who walked into the bathroom an hour ago and blew me so superbly in the shower that my orgasm rattled the doors and made me rip the soap dish off the wall?”

Alex’s hands flew up to cover her face and she shook her head. “That girl was drunk on endorphins or...vampire pheromones.”

I peeled her hands from her face and laced my fingers through hers. “That girl knew what she wanted and she wasn’t afraid to ask for it.”

“I’m not afraid.” She said it with an unexpected fierceness.

I let images of our earlier coupling float through my mind. Within seconds reality gave way to fantasy, what I’d done blended with what I wanted to do. What I’d resisted doing.

“You should be afraid, Alex. You should be very afraid.”

“We’re not talking about sex anymore, are we?” She looked at me steadily. Suddenly she was all business. The blushing virgin was gone.

I moved over to the dresser, opened one of the drawers, pulled out a pair of black sweatpants and slipped them on. “Yes and no,” I replied, yanking on the drawstring and tying it off.

Any further explanation was interrupted by a knock at the door. I checked before answering. It was room service.

“Would you like me to set your dinner up on the balcony? It’s a beautiful night,” the server asked, wheeling the table inside.

“In here will be fine,” I told him as I rummaged through the pockets of the jeans I’d had on earlier in search of my wallet.

“Would you like to taste the wine, sir?”

I offered him a ten-dollar bill. “I’ll open the bottle myself.”

The waiter shook his head in refusal. “Your bill has been taken care of,” he said, handing me his corkscrew. “Enjoy your meal. I’ll show myself out.”

As soon as Alex and I were alone, I set to work opening the cabernet.

Alex pulled out one of the chairs and sat. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a wine drinker.”

“My father has quite an extensive collection. I swear that at our house the meals are planned around the wine, not the other way around.” I pulled the cork from the bottle and poured a small amount into the glass. “Do you want to taste?” I swirled the deep ruby liquid around then offered it to her.

She took a sip and swallowed.

I couldn’t help myself, I winced. “That’s not how you taste wine,” I told her as I poured.

She handed the glass back to me. “I don’t care about the wine, Dell.”

I must have looked crestfallen because she apologized.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude or ungrateful. You've ordered a fabulous dinner. It's just that my stomach is in knots. I'm not even sure I can eat. Whatever it is you have to say to me... Can you just say it?"

I took my seat across from her and looked down at my plate. "I'm not sure where to start, exactly." I picked up my fork and knife.

"Anywhere, Dell," she prompted. "Start anywhere."

I cut into the meat and took a bite. It had been cooked to perfection and normally I would have savored the taste. But I couldn't, her anxiety was practically choking me. Somehow, despite that, I managed to swallow. I set down my fork and began the story.

"I'm not sure how much you know about us, vampires, about our world. Do you know what it means to be Chosen?"

She plucked a roll out of the breadbasket and began to butter it. "It means your blood has an extra kick to it."

"It means more than that. There's a prophecy."

"I'm listening."

"Our cannon, our religious beliefs tell us of the Chosen children, children born of a human mother and a vampire father, that aren't immortal. Children who are favored by God."

"Favored how?"

"One of them is to play a pivotal role in our ultimate redemption. Most vampires consider the Chosen sacred. I believe you're Chosen, Alex." I paused to let what I'd told her sink in.

"Did you refuse my blood because of the prophecy?"

It wasn't the question I expected.

"No," I replied. "I don't believe in the prophecy. What I said earlier was the truth, Alex. But it wasn't the whole truth."

"Meaning?"

"It's not just that I don't want to face the possibility of becoming a feeder and craving blood. I'm sure I could find a steady donor or two. I'm afraid if I give in to temptation I'll want *you*, *your* blood too much."

"And that scares you." She placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin in the palm of one hand.

"Yes. Wanting like that? Well, it sometimes leads to foolish decisions, decisions that will leave me dead. My parents are lucky. What they have is rare. What your parents had was rare, too."

"You know who my parents are?"

That got her attention. It also placed our conversation safely back on track.

"Yes."

Alex shook her head. "Impossible. No one knows who my parents are, Dell. I—"

"I know, you were the lone survivor of the famous Hotel Drake fire in New York, the historic hotel burned to ashes, no one was spared."

Alex leaned back in her chair and sighed. "They found me in the rubble, unscathed. No one claimed me. My parents died in that fire, Dell."

I shook my head. "No. Whoever brought you to that hotel, they weren't your parents. Something happened twenty-five years ago, Alex, something involving my mother. She's a physician, and she helped bring a Chosen child into this world; the child was named Sophie. A few days later Sophie's mother was killed. Then both Sophie and my mother were kidnapped. My father and some others, they staged a rescue. They found my mother. They saved her. But not Sophie, she was never found. Not until now."

"You think I'm Sophie? Why? There must be hundreds of Chosen women my age."

"Sophie was placed under a protection spell. It fits, Alex. It all fits. Do you know what Lilan are?"

Alex shook her head.

"They're succubi." I paused long enough to take another bite.

"Succubi?"

I nodded. "Luna, a succubus, had the spell placed on Sophie, on you, a protection shield to keep you safe. She did it for your father, so he'd know that even though you weren't with him, you were out of harm's way."

"Okay, slow down. My head is spinning."

I smiled. "Chris, your father, he's been searching for you all this time, for all these years."

"Where is he? He's—" Her eyes were welling up with tears.

I nodded. "Still alive, immortal. Your father and mother weren't mated. I've never really understood why. Then there's Hannah."

"Hannah?"

"Your sister. I know this is a lot to absorb. In time it will all make sense, I promise."

"Is Hannah like me, under a spell, protected?"

I could tell she was comforted by the possibility there was someone in the world who could shared her plight, understand her situation. But that would never be Hannah. "No, Hannah is immortal. She's about six or seven years older than me. Your father cares for her, she's...fragile, and she doesn't leave BaMidbar, ever."

"Fragile? But she's a vampire."

"Hannah witnessed your mother's murder. I'm sure it happened very fast, but they were human and—
"

"She could have stopped them."

"She was a child and raised more human than vampire. Her powers hadn't been nurtured or developed. She was afraid. It was a perfectly normal reaction, given the circumstances. But she's never forgiven herself for it."

Alex took a sip of her wine. I noticed her hand was trembling. "How long have you known this?"

"That you're Sophie? I still don't. Not for sure. Not yet. But every sign is there. My father approached me with the suspicion about a month ago. He'd shown me a photograph, at the time. I didn't put together it was you until the day we met. As for the rest of it, I guess for as long as I can remember."

Alex pushed her plate aside. "You said not yet. You said you didn't know I was Sophie yet."

"There's DNA testing pending."

"When were you going to tell me this?"

"As soon as I knew the results. If they're positive, that is."

Alex closed her eyes and started to rub her temples.

"Are you okay?" I asked, hesitantly.

"No."

"Can I get you some aspirin?"

"You can tell me how you think we can break the spell."

It had led back to that.

"Luna gave your father something for safe-keeping. It's a transparent sphere, a globe, a physical representation of the shield surrounding you. It contains a part of you, Alex. I think if we reunite that part with you, we can break the spell."

"You've done this before?"

"Never. And, frankly, I'm not sure I can single-handedly do it now. Someone tried to teach me a spell once that was similar. I'd almost forgotten about it—"

"Can we call them? Can they fix me?"

"There are consequences to think through."

"I've spent years thinking through the consequences, Dell. I just want to be *normal*. I want to *feel* normal. Can you understand that?"

"Yeah, I can," I admitted. "I think our best bet is to track down the caster. If that doesn't work, I'll see what I can do. As a last resort, I'll summon Basta."

"Basta?"

"He's an old teacher of mine. We had a falling out. I haven't spoken to him in a while."

"You're confident he can reverse this?"

"There are many who believe Basta can do anything."

"What do you believe?"

"I believe he can reverse the spell. But I know he has limits, and I'm thankful for them."

“He sounds powerful.”

“You have no idea.”

“Are you going to tell me why you aren’t speaking?”

“No.”

Alex frowned.

“How do you know he’ll help me?”

I refilled my wine glass. “Because he wants something from me and if I ask him for a favor he’ll see it as an opportunity to get it.”

“I don’t want you doing something you’ll regret. I’ve been a freak my entire life. If breaking this spell—”

“Alex, I understand. I understand what this would mean to you. I’ll figure it out,” I assured her. “Trust me.”

“I do.” Alex reached for my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah.”

“But?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said there will be consequences.”

I looked down at my plate. Suddenly I’d lost my appetite. “There always are...”

“Cough it up. What do you think is going to happen?”

I stood, tossing my napkin on the table before walking over to the French doors leading onto the balcony. It was after midnight but I couldn’t see a star in the sky. There were too many lights in most big cities to truly enjoy the night sky. That was especially true in Vegas. That wasn’t true in BaMidbar.

“I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. I’m going to take you home, Alex. We’re going to break the protection spell. We’re going to do it because it’s what you want. We’re going to do it and it’s going to leave you vulnerable in a way you aren’t used to,” I told her, not turning around.

Alex sighed, then walked up behind me. She slid her arms around my waist and pressed her cheek against my bare back.

“Don’t worry about me, I can handle it,” she murmured.

I reached for her hand, lifting it upward so I could place a kiss on her open palm. The problem was, I wasn’t sure *I* was going to be able to handle it.

What was it I couldn’t handle, exactly? Was it fear over Alex’s safety? Or was it more about not wanting to face the potential cost to myself?

Even if I managed to get through this without compromising my own values, without becoming indebted to Basta, the fact of the matter was, deep down I knew giving Alex the freedom she desired meant I was going to lose her. Maybe not right away, but eventually.

Eventually, I would lose her to an immortal who would be older, more powerful, and most importantly, willing, without hesitation, to give up life, to invite death, just to be with her. Eventually, but not tonight. Tonight I was going to pretend she was mine, that I was the hero and that in the end I'd save the day, get the girl and live happily ever after...forever.

Chapter Nine

As I began to waken I became aware of the weight of her breast in the palm of my hand, the sensual smell of her hair and my painfully hard erection. I was spooned up behind her, my body comfortably following the curve of hers. I could tell by the pattern of her breathing she was still asleep, so I resisted the urge to grind myself into her ass. We'd stayed up all night, me telling her everything I knew about her parents, how they met my parents and what her father was doing to support the revolution. It was after sunrise when we finally crawled into bed and went to sleep. I slowly lifted my head and looked at the clock, it was now two in the afternoon.

Alex began to stir, her body unfurling and stretching, her legs rubbing against mine, her shoulders rolling, her ass pushing back against me before she slid onto her back. I lifted my arm from around her, leaned up on my elbow, and rested my head in my hand so I could watch as her eyes opened and sought out mine.

"Good morning, beautiful," I said softly before reaching down and touching the side of her face with my fingertips. "How did you sleep?"

"Wonderfully," she replied. "You?"

"I don't think I moved all night."

Alex grinned.

"Let me assure you, Agent Renfield, you moved. You're a snuggler."

I rolled on top of her and she parted her legs to accommodate me. I had slept in my sweats. Alex had worn a silk nightshirt, which had managed to ride up around her hips. I reached down and hooked my hand underneath her knee to open her up a bit further.

"That's classified information, Agent Sanchez," I murmured as I ran my hand up the outside of her leg, over her thigh and past her hip. Apparently she had decided to forgo wearing underwear last night. "You tell anyone, I might just have to tie you up and spank you."

Her eyes widened. "Spank me?"

I nodded. "Like the naughty girl you are."

Alex smiled as though the idea appealed to her, then raised her legs, and wrapped them around my hips. I leaned up, supporting my weight with one arm so I could use the other to unbutton her nightshirt. In the blink of an eye she'd used her legs and momentum to switch our positions. I saw it coming. I could

have countered her move, but why? I'm a big fan of having the woman on top. In fact, I've yet to find a sexual position I'm not a fan of.

"Maybe I should tie *you* up?" she whispered into the shell of my ear before sitting up. I could feel the heat and moisture from her pussy through the cotton of my sweats.

"If you want," I said, unbuttoning her nightshirt before placing my hand around her neck, running it down her collarbone, then back up again, this time slipping underneath. As I slid the rich green silk off of one shoulder I told her, "This brings out the green in your eyes. You have spectacular eyes."

"He says while he's staring at my breasts."

I let my hands slide down to her waist, before slowly lifting my eyes to meet hers. "You have spectacular eyes," I repeated.

Alex blushed.

"Your tits are pretty nifty too."

"These are breasts," she said, cupping them in her hands as if she were measuring the weight of them. "Can't you call them breasts?"

"I don't think so," I said honestly. "I'll never remember that. Guys don't say breasts. Hey, can you lick your nipples?"

"What? No!"

I clasped my hands behind my head and let the image of her tongue circling the large dusky pink areola fill my mind. "Try," I begged, my throat dry. I licked my lips. "Or, let me. I bet I can make you come just by sucking on them. I'll make you come until you scream from pleasure." My cock was as hard as nails. Creating a very obvious tent in my sweatpants.

Alex glanced down at it. "I bet I can make you come without touching you at all," she challenged.

Could a guy ask for a better partner?

"What are the stakes?" I asked.

"Stakes?"

"What are we betting?"

Before she could answer, my cell phone rang. It was the first few bars of *Beethoven's Fifth*, the ring I'd designated for my father.

Alex glanced at the clock, then back at me. "The test results?"

"Probably." I reached for the phone. "Dad?"

"It's her," he replied. No preliminaries, he said it. Just like that. I knew it was true. I expected it. But that didn't stop the wave of nausea, the kind you get when you're kicked hard in the stomach.

Alex was watching me, intent on every expression, every word. I suddenly wished I were alone.

"I want you to escort her home, Dell. I've made arrangements for both of you to take a couple weeks off."

“Dad, we can’t just drop everything and hop a plane to BaMidbar. We’re in the middle of a mission.”

“After the mission,” he said. “And not to BaMidbar, here. Your mother thought it might be best if Sophie came here for a while, so she’d have someone to talk to. Jennifer and Stan are on their way to BaMidbar. They’ll look after things there. Chris will come here.”

I sighed. “The sphere Luna gave to Chris? Have him bring it. Any chance you can find out who did the original spell?”

“Maybe. Why?” His voice was cautious.

“I need to find out as much about it as I can. It’s outlived its usefulness,” I said vaguely. “There are issues.”

“It was supposed to keep her safe. What’s going on, Dell?”

“It’s complicated. I’ll explain when I see you.”

“Believe it or not,” he said, “I can grasp complicated. Explain now.”

“There are experiences Alex hasn’t been able to have, experiences she wants to have, things she wants, *no needs*.”

“Such as?”

I hesitated. I looked up at her. Tears were spilling from those beautiful green eyes and rolling down her cheeks. I reached up, brushed them away and offered her a reassuring smile.

“That’s between Alex and me. I’m going to do this for her, Dad. I’m not asking for your permission.”

“Jesus, you’re fucking her,” he accused. “I warned you, Dell. I thought I could trust you with this. I’m sending Chase out. He’ll escort Alex back. You need to get some distance.”

Chase and I had been raised as brothers. Prior to the revolution, Thomas, one of the eldest of the Dominie, had chosen him to be my father’s replacement. The plan had been for my father to spend the next twenty-five or thirty years training him so he could step in and fill dear old Dad’s shoes. Thomas’s proposal was simple: Dad would retire and Chase would assume his identity. The rest of the vampires in the clan would be none-the-wiser. No one would ever know one of the mightiest among them had fallen.

Would Thomas really have let my parents eventually walk off into the sunset to live out the rest of their lives? Doubtful. Sun-tzu said, “Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer.” Always practical, when my father discovered where Chase was being held, he went to retrieve him under contrived orders from Cain. Chase was four years older than me and looked and acted more like my father’s son than I ever had.

“If you think I’m going to step aside and give her to Chase, you don’t know me at all,” I told him. “I gave her my word.”

“Randell, for heaven’s sake...”

“Look,” I began, “I’m tired. I’m not going to argue with you about this. Not now. Alex and I have work to do. We need to maintain our focus on the mission. This little personal drama will have to play itself

out later, after we've gotten what we needed. We're going in tonight. We'll start laying the groundwork and we'll wrap this up as quickly as we can. Do you know anything about an immortal named Malcolm? He's local to Vegas, powerful, probably older than dirt."

"Malcolm?"

"Yeah. Raif put on quite a show last night at dinner. I think it was all meant to be a test of some sort, a test of my strength. He had his opulence on display, great food, a lavish presentation and a consort on a leash. What that slimy bastard could have done to rate a prize like Rita, I'll never know. Anyway, he said he'd introduce me to this Malcolm."

There was nothing but silence on the other end of the phone.

"Dad? You still with me?"

"I'm with you," he answered. "Rita, dark hair, dark eyes, skin like dappled moonlight, cute little red mole on the top of her left breast?"

"Are you kidding me? I don't even know what the hell dappled moonlight looks like. Are you and Mom reading poetry to one another again? And I was just trying to explain to Alex that men don't call them breasts. Dad, you're really disappointing me here. What even makes you think I noticed her...breasts?"

"You're my son. Now answer me." I could hear anticipation in his voice. My father was on edge, Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected.

"Yeah. That's her, right down to the 'cute little mole'. Who is she?"

"Is she all right? Tell me that."

"I don't know. She seems to be. Raif's a feeder. I think his sexual tastes run a bit off the beaten path. She didn't look bruised or battered, but we heal fast. Hard to tell."

"Can you get her out of there?"

I practically dropped the phone.

"What? Why?"

"Because Rita doesn't belong to Raif. She's mine."

Chapter Ten

“Yours? Does...Mom know?”

I hadn't seen that one coming.

“She was given to me long ago. Long before I met your mother. I managed to acquire her from one of the other Dominie. Someone who was very loyal to Cain and always hated me.”

The pieces started falling together like some jigsaw puzzle.

“Let me guess,” I began, only my father interrupted and finished my thought.

“Malcolm.”

“What's going on?” Alex slid her silk nightshirt back on and starting buttoning it.

“I need coffee,” I told her.

“On it.” Alex scrambled off the bed. No sooner did her feet hit the floor, she turned around. “Wait a minute. You're not asking me to make the coffee because I'm a girl, are you?”

“Who said anything about *making* coffee. Call room service.”

“Why call room service when there's a coffee pot here in the room?”

“You know how to make coffee? Have at it!”

“Are you telling me you don't know how to work a coffee pot?” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I have other skills.” I flashed my most disarming smile.

Redness crept into her cheeks, down her neck and across her chest. She was remembering some of those skills, no doubt.

Dad cleared his throat. It was a reminder that we weren't alone.

“Dad, I'm going to put you on speaker,” I told him before hitting the button. “Dad, this is Alex. Alex, meet my father, Byron Renfield.”

Alex nervously ran her fingers through her hair in an attempt to smooth out the morning tangles.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Renfield.”

“Please,” he said, smooth as silk, “call me Byron. I can't wait to see you, really see you. Randell tells me you're even more beautiful in person.”

“Now I see where he gets his charm from,” Alex laughed.

“You find my son charming?”

I interjected before Alex could respond. “Dad, that's irrelevant, let's stay focused on the important stuff.”

"I've got to put you on hold for a second. Someone's on the other line." Only I didn't hear him click off. Was he still there, listening? I didn't know.

Alex turned around and walked over to the mini-bar where the coffee pot was.

I climbed out of bed and followed her. "I didn't mean to imply that how you feel isn't important."

"Of course not."

Shit. I'd hurt her feelings.

"I can make the coffee," I offered, it seemed like a nice conciliatory gesture. How hard could it be?

"You don't know how to make coffee." She opened a bottle of water and began to pour it into the reservoir of the coffee maker.

I slid my hands around her waist and pulled her back against me. "You could teach me." I brushed her hair back over one shoulder and nuzzled at her neck. "Right after you teach me how to stop being so incredibly stupid."

"Stop," she said. "I'm mad right now. I'm angry with you and if you melt that away..."

"Then what?"

"I won't be mad at you any more," she murmured, her voice soft. She leaned her head back so that it fell against my chest and she released a sigh. "God, you make me crazy."

"I'm sorry," I told her. "Whatever it is that's happening between us? Well, it's happening fast, it's intense, maybe too intense. I'm off balance. It's confusing and I don't like being confused. It feels weak."

Alex turned around in the circle of my arms and faced me. "Running away from your feelings, Dell, that's weak."

"I'm not running away from them. I'm putting them in a box, slowing things down between us. We have to get this mission out of the way. The rest can be sorted out later. We have all the time in the world," I told her as I caressed the softness of her face.

"No," she said. "*You* have all the time in the world. My time is limited, Dell."

"I swear your sister is going to drive me to drink!" My father came back on the line, suddenly breaking the silence between us.

I smiled. "This I can't wait to hear. What's she done?"

"She's insisting on going away to college. I compromised on an all-girl school. Acceptance letters are coming in right and left and not one of them, not a single one, is for an all-girl school." I heard the bang of a drawer and imagined him throwing the latest into it and slamming it shut.

I scratched the back of my head and wondered whether I should say anything or keep my mouth shut. Me? Keep my mouth shut? Nah.

"Let her go, Dad." I was thinking about what Alex had said. You see my sister Lily is human, human and eighteen. How much of her life has she already lived? Twenty-five percent? Twenty percent? "She deserves to live, to experience life. She's not like us, she doesn't have all the time in the world."

"You mean she's not like you, I don't have all the time in the world either. Not anymore. Course, I wouldn't change that for anything. Not for anything, Dell."

I forget that my parents are going to die someday. It's easy to remember with Lily, she's so purely human. But my father and mother are both strong. They both still look so young. It's likely they'll live another couple of centuries.

"But this isn't why I called."

Dad was turning the conversation back around and focusing once again on business. I was okay with that. More than okay. I'd had enough introspection and self-examination in the past few hours to meet my quota for the month.

"How did you arrange for time off for us? Do I even want to know?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not really."

"Good, let's move on. Antoine will be arriving shortly. He'll be staying at the hotel. The private jet is on standby at McCarran airport. Call Antoine once you have this little matter wrapped up. He'll drive the three of you to the airport and then fly you to Bella Bella. The boat to bring you over to the island will be waiting for you."

"Three of us?" Alex asked.

"Dad wants us to bring Rita. He thinks she's being held against her will," I told her.

"I *know* she's being held against her will," he emphasized. "If she could have gotten away, she would have returned to me."

"Apparently, Rita used to belong to Dad," I explained to Alex.

"She *still* belongs to me, Dell," he insisted.

"And what do you propose I do? Just walk in there and tell Raif you want her back?"

"If you have to, yes. She's mine by right. He can return her or face the consequences. Tell him I've agreed to pay you handsomely for her return."

Alex seemed stunned. I couldn't blame her. Dad's little surprise had shocked the shit out of me as well. I couldn't imagine arriving at my parent's doorstep with Rita...naked...on a leash. As far as I knew, my father had always been faithful to my mother. I couldn't do what he was asking me to do. I couldn't.

"Have you lost your mind? I can't bring Rita home, Dad. I can't." There, I'd said it.

"We can't leave her here, Dell," Alex interjected.

Shit, they were going to gang up on me.

"Randell?" he called out.

"Yeah?"

"Rita is important to me. She's much more than my consort. She's my friend. I'd given her liberties, freedoms. When your mother and I first mated it was Rita who I trusted to help your mother through the

awakening. I trusted her with your mother and she didn't let me down. I can't let her down." His voice sounded thick and strained.

"Dad..."

"Don't let me down," he added.

I'd been awake for less than an hour and already the day had turned into a complete disaster.

Chapter Eleven

“So, let’s see if I’m getting all of this,” Alex began. “Cain, the father of all vampires is being held in some secret underground fortress.”

“BaMidbar.”

“Right. And he’s been guarded by my father for the last twenty-five years while your father has been leading a quiet revolution hoping to mainstream the vampire race.”

“That’s about it. Dad’s been chipping away at Cain’s powerbase by diverting funds from the Dominie and instead investing in things he believes will bring about lasting social change. Things like medical research, educational scholarships and specialized training programs.”

“Programs like the PSF?” she asked.

“No. The PSF is an invention of the Feds and they control their own budget. But they recruit from the Academy, that’s for damn sure. The Academy is my father’s baby. That’s where the PSF found me. And, I’ll tell you right now, we’re not the only government making use of creatures—”

“You’re not a creature, Dell.” Her tone sounded scolding.

I shrugged. “Thanks to one of those medical breakthroughs I can walk in the sunlight among you, work with you, but I’ll never *be* one of you. I’m not a man, Alex.”

Alex sauntered over to me. She was dressed only in her stockings and panties. “You feel like a man,” she said quietly as she slid her arms around my neck.

“Sometimes with you I wish I were.”

The admission seemed to shake her. “Why?”

“I don’t want to hurt you. Not ever.”

Alex smiled. “You being a man wouldn’t prevent that, Dell.” She reached up and straightened my bow tie. “You look handsome. Very James Bond.”

My fingers traced a path down the length of her neck and over her collarbone. “You look pretty amazing yourself.”

“I have to get dressed.”

“No you don’t. You should definitely stay like that. Clothes are over-rated.”

We were in Alex’s dressing room. She made her way over to the rack that held her gowns and selected the strapless red chiffon. “I don’t think this is *that* kind of club, Dell.”

I checked my watch. We were about to open. I'd be expected on the floor soon. Alex's first set was less than an hour away. "I've got to go. They need me on the door."

"Go be a tough guy."

I paused at the door. "Remember, once I leave, the temporary shield on your dressing room will dissolve."

"Got it. Zip me up before you go?"

"Only if I get to unzip you later."

Her back was to me. She was holding up the bodice of the strapless gown with one hand, and holding on to the edge of the wall with another. "Deal," she said, before stepping into a pair of ridiculously tall stilettos.

I made short order of the zipper, kissed Alex on the shoulder, then stepped out into the hallway.

The area was deserted. The entrance to the room across the way was open. The door was marked security and someone had left it ajar. Sloppy. I could see a wall of flat screen monitors. The images on display were changing to show different angles, different rooms. Some of the video was from inside the club, but the majority was being streamed from someplace else, from several other places. I reached out with my senses and quickly determined that the room was empty. Of course there was the possibility it was being monitored, that I was being monitored, that this was a test. Like a good little soldier I headed straight for the main floor, eyes peeled, ears open.

The lounge was reminiscent of an old speak-easy. Its elegant décor was positively dripping with sultry southern charm. White linen tablecloths covered each of the small cocktail tables. The lights had already been dimmed, the candles on them lit. A waiter dressed in a white dinner jacket was adding the final touch, tiny centerpieces of fresh floating gardenias. I snagged one as I walked by and inserted it into my lapel.

Bruno was waiting for me by the door. "We might have a problem."

"What's up?"

"Roxanne, one of the cocktail waitresses, got a call from an old boyfriend last night. He's out of prison. He told her he might stop by and buy her a drink for old time's sake."

"I take it she's not interested?"

"The last time she went out with Tiny he broke her jaw."

Now I haven't met a lot of men called Tiny, but my gut told me this guy was anything but.

Bruno turned away, lowered his head, and listened intently for a moment.

"Victor managed to retrieve a picture from an old tape." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "He's not to get in."

"Understood. Who's Victor?"

"Head of data security."

"For the bar?"

He shook his head. "For all of Malcolm's properties. Victor knows where all the bodies are buried. I'll introduce you later. He'll be setting you up with a login and password so you can access the network. It's how you'll punch in and out. There's an instructional video and everything. Bor-ing."

"Raif didn't say anything about me working with computers. I'm a disaster in that department, man."

Bruno smiled. "Really? Me too. And unfortunately, the higher up the food chain you go the more they seem to expect. After closing I have to do the nightly deposit for Raif. He's hosting a private shindig tonight for Malcolm and a couple VIP's in the back room. I can talk you through it after if you want, watch you do it the first time. Won't take but a few minutes."

I nodded eagerly. "That'd be great."

"Meet me outside his office once you've locked-up."

"Will do. Sorry if we got off on the wrong foot." I extended my hand in friendship. "I can be a wise-ass."

He grasped my hand. "Mind if I ask you a question?" He lowered his voice. "What the hell went down the other night? I saw you leave, carrying the girl. I don't think I've ever seen Raif so shaken."

Obviously, Bruno didn't know about the magics. "He offended me and he insulted my lady. I made it clear from the beginning that we weren't interested in anything but the job. He pushed too hard. I had to push back."

"I'm impressed. How old are you?"

"Age is just a number," I said vaguely.

Bruno smiled. The idea that I'd been able to hold my own against Raif seemed to appeal to him. "The boss isn't usually content to take no for an answer."

"I'm stronger than I look."

"Good thing." Bruno held up his phone. "This is Tiny."

The man was enormous. He looked like a sumo wrestler.

"Well, the good news is that he should be easy to spot."

"He's probably bulked up, dropped some weight. Victor said he'll have his release photo for us shortly."

If they had access to prisoner release photos, someone on the inside was on the take.

"Shit, I'm late. I've got to get Rita, she's tonight's *entertainment*."

"Entertainment?"

"At the party." He looked uncomfortable. "Rita doesn't have anyone strong looking out for her. She does what she's told."

My gut clenched. Dad was right, I had to get her out of there.

Bruno checked his email one more time. "Bingo."

He handed the phone to me and started to unlock the front door. "Lean and mean."

A fresh image now filled the screen. Bruno was right. Tiny was now a wall of solid muscle.

"It's showtime, man." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an earpiece. "Ralph's in the back, Greggor is covering the entrance to the hotel, Patrick is on the bar. He's like you."

I looked over toward the bar. An unassuming-looking man was nursing a glass of something pink and frosty. He wiggled his fingers in my direction. I waved back. "He's Canadian?" Bruno handed me the earpiece and I slipped it into my left ear.

"Immortal. You need a break? You ask him to relieve you. We're all connected." He tapped his ear. Then he was out the door, leaving me to deal with the masses that were lined up on the other side.

"It's Ralph, you're needed back stage."

"Bruno told me to watch the door."

"Bruno told me you were the possessive type. By the looks of things, your girl's going to need mouth to mouth any second. Patrick will cover for you, I'll take the bar."

"What's wrong?"

By the time the words were out of my mouth, Patrick had taken my post at the door. I took off in a hurry.

"Bad case of nerves, I think," said Ralph as we passed one another in the narrow hall behind the stage. "She's over there."

Alex was sitting on the floor, her back to the wall, her knees drawn up, her head between her legs. Her heart was pounding so hard I felt the beats reverberating through my own body. I crouched down next to her and surrounded us in a small force bubble.

"I heard you missed me."

Alex looked up, she was as white as a sheet. "I made the mistake of taking a peek out there." She nodded toward the curtain.

"And?"

"The place is packed. It's filled with people."

"You'll knock them dead. They'll love you."

She nodded. I waited for her to say more, but she didn't. "It's safe to talk, Alex."

She lowered her voice anyway. "I'm not sure I can do this."

"You can. I've heard you."

We sat there quietly for a moment.

"I can have them turn down the house lights," I suggested. "Will that help?"

"Maybe."

“Listen, we may have lucked out. It sounds like the nightly receipts from the club feed into a network along with Malcolm’s other properties. There’s a private party of some sort tonight. Raif asked Bruno to do the upload for him. I’m supposed to meet him outside of Raif’s office after closing.”

“So I’ll plant a camera on him before hand. I have one in the lining of my purse. It’s no bigger than a speck of dust. He’ll never know it’s there. It’ll record what he does. We can analyze the feed later and maybe use it to gain access.”

“You’re brilliant.”

She smiled. “Thanks for distracting me.”

“You’re welcome.” I stood, breaking through the shield. “Break a leg.”

I watched as Alex took her position in front of the microphone.

“There you are.” Bruno’s deep voice sounded in my ear. “I was just about to come back and check on you. All we were getting was static.”

“Same here.”

“Tiny’s outside. Patrick spotted him in line.”

“Have Patrick put him in thrall and send him home.”

There was a short pause. “Patrick’s not very good at thrall and...”

“And what?”

“Did I mention Patrick thinks Tiny is an Akuma? We could use you back out here. Now.”

Fuck me.

“On my way. Do me a favor? Have them drop the house lights before opening the curtain. We’ve got a stage-fright songbird back here.”

“You’ve got it, pal.”

As I stepped onto the main floor the lights went off. A hush fell over the crowd. I easily made my way across the room in the dark, carving a path through the maze of small tables. I heard the swoosh of the curtain opening and turned to see a single spotlight on the stage, Alex in the center of it. All eyes were on her. I would have rather mine continued to linger there too. But I had a tiny problem that needed taking care of.

In essence an Akuma is a body snatcher, an evil spirit of Japanese origin that lives for booze, brawling and boffing. They’ll occupy the same body until eventually, they burn it out. When that happens they hop as quickly as they can into another shell, hopefully trading up. The ultimate prize? An immortal, taking up residence in a body that will never wear out, never die. Not a bad gig...if you can get it. But controlling an immortal’s psyche isn’t an easy thing to do.

“Thank God,” said Patrick. “He’s almost at the door.”

“What makes you think he’s an Akuma?” I asked.

He looked away. “I can feel him. I’ve got to get out of here.”

“No fucking way,” said Bruno. “We need you.”

I could smell Patrick’s fear. “If this goes south, we can’t afford to have Patrick anywhere around.”

Bruno scanned the room. The place was packed. “We can’t afford to have this go south.”

“I can handle it.” I swiftly walked over to the bar. “Give me a bottle of your best single malt.”

The bartender looked over my shoulder. I turned in time to see Bruno give him the high sign. Within seconds I’d cracked open the seal and pushed through the door. I didn’t waste any time, I walked straight up to Tiny and handed him the bottle. He’s an Akuma, so of course he took it. Before he swallowed down the first gulp I had us enclosed in a containment shield from which he couldn’t escape. Perhaps even more importantly, that nothing, no one else, could penetrate. He sensed it the instant it occurred.

“Try,” I said to him. “I double dog dare you.”

“What game are you playing, vampire?”

I took the bottle from him and helped myself to a sip. “Unless we can come to an understanding it’s going to be a quick and dirty game of spontaneously combust the Akuma. I make Tiny here go kaboom, you have no place to go. Bye bye Akuma.”

He took the bottle back and grinned. “You can’t do that.”

“Wanna bet?”

I felt him reach out. I swept away the intrusion like a speck of dust then let my power crawl over him. His smile wavered.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to go find another girl to obsess about.”

“Why? What business is it of yours?”

“My boss has asked me to make it my business. I protect his interests. He’s interested in having Roxanne continue to show up to work every day. It’s a great big world out there. Let this one go. Walk away and stay away.”

“What if I don’t?”

“I’ll find you and I’ll kill you. It’s as simple as that.”

He frowned.

“Now ask me what you get if you walk away?”

The question obviously confused him. Big head. Little bitty brain.

“You get to keep the bottle,” I told him.

“Big fucking deal.”

I grabbed the bottle, dumped the remaining contents out onto the sidewalk, then turned it upright again. The Akuma swiped it from me and held it up to the light. It was clearly full.

“How many times will it do that?”

“You get within ten feet of Roxanne, it stops. Otherwise? Infinite.”

“Infinite,” he whispered, reverently.

Just then a buxom blonde walked by. His gaze followed her as she joined a small group of people at the crosswalk. The Akuma grinned. “Nice doing business with you, vampire.”

He shook my hand, then he was off. When I walked back into the club Bruno greeted me. “You got him to leave for a bottle of scotch?”

“A very special bottle of scotch,” I said with a wink.

“Patrick’s such a pansy,” he groused.

I was beginning to wonder why the hell Raif kept him around. Although admittedly he looked fetching in a white dinner jacket draped over the bar. “Why would Raif hire an immortal with so few skills?”

“He’s skilled, just not in the way you mean. He and Raif have been together for a long time.”

“Huh, I distinctly got the impression Raif played the field.”

“He does. Patrick isn’t allowed to.”

“And that’s just fine with Patrick?”

“Raif told me once Patrick was the best bottom he’s ever had. He’s very...accommodating.”

“Good to know. Next time the horny bastard hits on me, I’ll remind him of that.”

Bruno laughed and slapped me on the back. “I’m gonna like having you around.”

The remainder of the evening flew by. Alex wore a canary yellow slip dress for her third set. It was cut on the bias and dipped low in the back. The rich charmeuse silk called to me. I wanted to run my hands over it, over her. She sidled up to the bar just as they announced last call. Men were drawn to her like bees to honey. Before her amazingly fine ass hit the barstool, there was one on either side of her jockeying for position, both of them trying to buy her a drink.

I locked up the entrance to the street. “Swap places with me, Patrick.”

I didn’t have to ask twice. The pecking order between us had been established.

“Thank you, gentleman. I appreciate the offer, but I can buy my own drink,” I heard Alex say as I approached the bar.

I swept her hair over one shoulder, exposing her neck. Then I placed a possessive kiss behind her ear. “While you’re at it, buy one for me.”

“Make that two,” she said, not missing a beat.

I spun her around. “You were incredible tonight.”

The bartender set our drinks down behind Alex. I picked them up and handed one to her.

“You were incredible last night,” she said, touching the side of her glass to mine.

“You know, they say practice makes perfect.”

“How much longer are you going to be? I bumped into Bruno before my last set. It sounded like he thought he’d be able to spring you early.”

“Yeah?”

“Tell him I want to buy him a drink to celebrate my opening night. We’ll have a quick nightcap before turning in. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect.”

I kissed Alex lightly on the mouth, then went in search of Bruno. I found him just about to walk into Raif’s office.

“Hey, the night flew by. I never did catch up with Victor and get my login.”

Bruno pulled a slip of paper from his pocket. “Something came up. He called me with the information. Come on in and have a seat. This won’t take but a few minutes.”

“Fantastic.”

Bruno took a seat behind Raif’s desk. “That girl of yours brought the house down tonight.”

“Which reminds me. She wants you to join us for a nightcap.”

“Sure. Come around. I’ll show you what you need to know, then I’ll finish up and join you.”

I moved around to the other side of the desk. There was a standard login screen showing on the display.

“Here’s the login and temporary password. Once you’re in, it will ask you to change it.” Bruno handed me the slip of paper.

I leaned over the keyboard and started typing, following when prompted to change the password. “What next?”

“Right now you only have two options. Messages and Time Card. It’s pretty self-explanatory. The messages work like e-mail. You can forward them if you want. I forward mine to my cell. You’ll go to Time Card at the beginning and end of each shift. You can access it from any computer in the place. Simple.”

Bruno was right. It was exceedingly easy and we were finished in a flash. In no time he’d wrapped up what he needed to do and joined Alex and me at the bar. We indulged in a one last quick drink before saying goodnight. It was Alex’s third and when she stood she stumbled straight into Bruno’s arms. He gallantly set her right.

“Sorry.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, casually removing what looked like an innocuous piece of lint before slipping off her shoes. “These things should have come with a ‘do not mix with alcoholic beverages’ warning. Ouch. My feet are killing me.”

“Don’t know why you insist on wearing those torture devices.” I swept Alex up into my arms. “Come on, baby, let’s get you tucked in bed. Can you get the door for me, Bruno?”

“Sure thing. See you two tomorrow night.”

Chapter Twelve

Between us we probably hadn't slept more than five or six hours. We'd spent each waking minute since returning to the hotel room painstakingly crafting what I thought was a foolproof plan. The one thing we hadn't covered? Alex's wardrobe. She said she was going to throw on a little something that would distract Raif. The problem was it was also distracting the hell out of me.

The black leather skirt matched her halter and left little to the imagination. The girl was built, with curves in all the right places. She had lifted one foot onto the desk chair and was about to slide her Glock into her thigh holster when she paused and turned to stare at me.

Now, normally I'm of the opinion that a thigh holster isn't a practical choice. It's too hard to get to. But not in this outfit. The skirt fell to her mid-calf, and when she stood still it looked almost conservative, insomuch leather on a body like hers could. But the second she moved you could see all of the slits. Occurring every two to three inches, they traveled up above her knee giving her all the mobility and access she needed for a quick draw.

She walked over to me, draped her hand over my shoulder and gazed up into my eyes.

"What's wrong?"

I sighed. "Nothing."

"Liar."

"Raif's going to love the outfit. It's a good call." I ran my hand over her bare shoulder and down her arm, grazing the outside of her breast along the way.

"But?"

"But I'm going to *hate* the fact that he's loving it, that he's getting to see you like this."

"Why?"

Why? Why the hell was it she was always asking the hard questions? I couldn't put it into words. Or maybe I was afraid to. Instead I leaned down and did something I'd never done before. I initiated a kiss.

For Alex, no doubt, it was a familiar dance, done hundreds of times. But I was nervous, hesitant and oh-so-wanting. As my lips brushed hers I released a shaky breath that I'm sure telegraphed my uncertainty, my fear. I was afraid I was going to mess up. I was afraid I wasn't going to be any good. I was afraid that either Alex or I would lose control.

Then, quite suddenly, I realized nothing about this, about us, had been perfect. Why should this kiss be any different? So what if it wasn't perfect, if we weren't perfect. So what if our relationship had been

comprised of a spectacular series of missteps, awkward moments and almost impossible circumstances? Together, we were pretty damned good.

I closed my eyes and inhaled her scent. I let it wrap around me, wash over me. I softly, slowly, pressed my lips to hers, melting into her. The kiss started out sweet, almost chaste. But it wasn't going to stay that way. I lifted Alex off the floor so her mouth was level with mine. She opened it to me and I slid inside. I pinned her between my body and the wall. I could feel her hand, the one that wasn't holding the gun, clawing at my back in urgency. I could feel her breasts pushing at my chest, their nipples hardened and peeked against the soft leather of her top. Alex wrapped her legs around my waist and sucked my tongue into her mouth. It was warm and wet and delicious, so unbelievably delicious.

I was vaguely aware of my cock straining against my jeans, begging for relief, begging for release. Her skirt was now hiked up around her waist. I couldn't see her underwear and I didn't bother guessing as to what they looked like. I didn't care. I tilted my pelvis, grinding my erection into her pussy. I wasn't trying to be gentle. I'd forgotten all about being gentle. Until Alex pulled back from the kiss, that is.

"Stop," she gasped.

"I don't want to stop," I admitted, my voice rough. The desire in it so heavy it sounded almost foreign to my own ears.

Alex let her head fall back against the wall and closed her eyes.

"I don't really want to stop either. But we have to. Unless you've changed your mind about tasting me, we have to. Your fangs... I might nick myself."

I was aware of it then, my fangs had descended. How had I missed that? I lowered her to the floor; the scent of our arousal was practically choking me. The desire to bury myself inside of her was so strong it was taking every ounce of control I had to step back.

I looked down into Alex's eyes and revealed my heart's desire. "I want to make love with you. I want that more than anything in the world right now. No holding back. No being careful. No fear of repercussion."

"I wish—"

I placed my fingers over her lips to silence her.

"Let's get this done, Alex. Let's download whatever we can get from the club's database, then let's get the hell out of here...you, me and Rita."

"What then?"

"We head for Renfield Island. Once we're there, we'll submit our report. The Agency can spend as much time as they want sifting through the data and building their case."

"You'll start working on breaking the spell."

"Are you sure you're ready?" I asked her for the umpteenth time. "Are you sure it's what you want?"

"Yes." Her voice was certain, her gaze steady.

“Good.” I sighed, leaning down and touching my forehead to hers.

“Dell?”

“Hmm?”

“You realize, the next time we have sex... It’s going to mean something,” she whispered.

If I’d been honest with myself I’d have admitted what was true. The sex between Alex and I had always meant something. Since the moment I’d laid eyes on her the attraction was there. I was consumed by lust, the desire to touch her, stroke her, to feel her pressed against me. I wanted to hear her cry out my name in pleasure. I wanted to cover her in my scent. I wanted to mark her as mine. But mostly, right this very minute, I wanted Raif to stop staring at her tits.

The sheer simplicity of our plan was pure genius. Kidnapping and human trafficking were federal crimes. It didn’t matter to Alex that Rita wasn’t human. The way Raif treated women bothered her before. But now? Miss By-the-Book was ready to nail his ass to the wall.

“You’re early,” Raif said.

Alex shrugged. “I was bored. I thought I’d come down and rehearse. I want to try out some new material. Do you mind?”

“Mind? Not at all. Can I offer you a drink?” Raif walked behind the bar.

Alex smiled. Then she did that thing where she bites the corner of her lower lip. Groaning would have given away my position, so I was careful not to. I’d used a cloaking spell and the last thing I wanted to do was ruin it by revealing myself too soon.

The mission had come with prior authorization for what I liked to call a little sneak and peek. The video Bruno had unwittingly provided us with the night before was going to make the job nice and easy. Alex and I were going to carry out the operation in two phases. Phase one was for her to distract Raif long enough for me to slip into his office, log in, complete the data transfer, then infect the system with a nice little virus called Lestat that was guaranteed to suck the life out of the entire network the next time anyone logged on. The virus was Alex’s idea.

Phase two was to get Rita. That was going to be a little more risky. How easily we could pull off rescuing her was going to depend on how accurately we’d judged Raif.

Alex hopped up onto a stool and leaned onto the bar, her arms crossed in front of her in a way that made her tits practically spill out of her top.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” she said.

Raif leaned across the bar. “Have you ever tried absinthe?”

I had to go. I had to trust that Alex could handle herself. The logical, rational part of me knew the protection spell would prevent her from physical harm. But sometimes it’s hard to remain logical and

rational. It's especially hard when things get personal and this was. What had started out as a simple, routine mission was turning out to be something altogether different.

I made my way down the hall. When I reached the door to Raif's office I threw off enough magical energy to cause a few seconds of static in any video or audio equipment that might be monitoring the area, then I slipped inside.

Now, I'm the first to admit I'm not a computer expert. That's really more Alex's specialty. But between the two of us we thought she'd have the best chance of appearing non-threatening and charming with Raif for an hour. That's how long we thought it might take to complete the entire data transfer. So here I was, inserting the boot CD and flash drive and beginning the command sequence, just like she told me. See? I can take direction when I need to.

I watched as the little blue bar popped up. Estimated time, forty-two minutes and seventeen seconds.

"Hi, honey!" Alex chirped.

It was a little after six. The club had opened and already there were a fair number of patrons milling about.

I slid onto the barstool next to Alex and glared at Raif.

"What?" he asked innocently.

"We need to have a chat," I said.

"It's only absinthe. We were just talking."

Alex leaned toward me and loudly whispered, "My lips feel numb."

Great. She was drunk.

"Is Malcolm here yet?" I asked Raif.

"She really is adorable," he sighed, ignoring me and staring at Alex. "You sure you don't want to reconsider? You, me, Alex, Rita..."

I looked down at the surface of the bar and pretended to think it over. Then I slowly raised my eyes to meet his. "Where is Rita?"

Raif leaned onto the bar, rested his chin in his hand and fluttered his eyes provocatively at me. "Why, I do believe perhaps I've finally gotten your attention. So, you've taken a liking to her have you?"

"I want her."

Raif smiled. "You can do Rita while I do you. How's that?"

Huh, maybe *I* should have entertained Raif while Alex retrieved the data after all. Nah, there's no way I could have spoken to him for an hour without hitting him.

I let my power leak out so that it crawled across his skin. "How about this? You call Bruno and have him bring Rita to me now and I'll return her to her rightful owner."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, breaking into a sweat.

“Let me make this easy for you. I recognized her. I’ve been in touch with her owner. He’s offered me a handsome reward for her safe return. You cooperate and I’ll take her and leave you here. You don’t and I’m taking you in as well. BaMidbar is lovely this time of year.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“She’s the property of someone important, someone very important. But I’m guessing she told you that.”

“Malcolm...” he began, a tremor in his voice.

“Has been a very naughty Dominie.”

Raif looked like he was going to be sick. “Shit, I’m screwed. Malcolm, he’ll...”

“Don’t worry about Malcolm, he has bigger things to worry about.” I checked my watch. “In about five minutes all of his assets here in the U.S. are going to be frozen. The Treasurer has already gotten to his Swiss accounts. Malcolm’s a traitor. He’s broken the code. He’s been doing things his own way. And to top it all off, he’s been breaking human laws. You know we can’t afford that kind of scrutiny. Think of the damage it would do, someone of his stature... There’ll be a bounty and it’ll be big.”

“You’re a bounty hunter,” Raif groaned.

I stood and looked him in the eye. “You’ve had a good thing going here. Call Bruno. Tell him to deliver Rita to the lobby in five minutes. Then start transferring your assets. A Swiss account’s been opened for you. There’s a quarter of a million in it. Let’s call it your cut for being cooperative.”

I handed him one of my father’s business cards with the number for the account and the location of the bank on the back. Raif’s hand was shaking as he accepted it. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

“Five minutes?” he asked.

“Five minutes,” I repeated.

Chapter Thirteen

“I can’t believe you’re drunk,” I growled. “Who gets drunk in an hour?”

Alex’s head was resting against the window of the airplane. Her eyes were closed.

“I’m not drunk,” she whispered. “I think I’m hung over. I have a headache and I swear to God, if you keep yelling at me I’m going to throw up.”

I lowered my voice. “I’m not yelling at you.”

“Your father used to be quite fond of absinthe. It’s not a drink everyone can tolerate well. It’s very strong you know. The wormwood packs quite a punch,” Rita interjected.

“Worms?” Alex clenched her stomach. “Oh, God!”

She jumped up and ran down the aisle of the plane toward the bathroom.

“She’ll feel better in a minute or two.” Rita reached over and gave me an affectionate pat on the knee. “Don’t worry.”

“Who’s worried?” I asked, doing my damndest to ignore the sounds coming from the bathroom.

She didn’t answer. Instead she turned to gaze out the window. Her hand rose to her neck for what was probably the twentieth time in the past hour. It seemed to be a nervous gesture. I watched as she once again traced where the collar had been. When Bruno had brought her to the lobby she had been wearing a silk pajama shirt and nothing else. Now she was in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that belonged to Alex. She didn’t fill the clothes out like Alex did, she didn’t have the curves. Not anymore. Maybe never. She looked almost lost and childlike with her freshly scrubbed face and the oversized clothes.

“You’re staring.”

“How long were you wearing the collar?” I asked her.

She looked at me, her eyes empty. “A long time. Even when I was in the cage and not on the leash, I had the collar.”

“He kept you in a cage?” Why I was shocked, I don’t know. It shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did.

She clasped her hands together and placed them in her lap. “It could have been worse. Malcolm could have kept me himself.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“Because I made him feel weak and Malcolm doesn’t like feeling weak.”

“I don’t understand.”

"I belonged to him. Even before I belonged to your father. I did my duty. I saw to his pleasure. I serviced him well. But that is all. For him it wasn't enough," she explained.

"He was in love with you?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps he was in love with what he couldn't have."

"He lost you to my father?"

Rita nodded. "Malcolm hated your father. He thought him...undeserving."

"Of what?"

"Cain's trust. The position he was given. No one ever questioned your father's dedication, no one. But Byron was young and a few, Malcolm in particular, thought him...naïve. In the end Malcolm's concerns were dismissed. Cain favored Byron. He believed in him. It was at his behest that Byron was elevated."

"I don't think my father's ever mentioned Malcolm."

"Or me?"

"Or you."

Her eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. I didn't quite know what to say.

"All this time, I thought he was gone. That my weakness had been their undoing," she said.

"My parents are both alive and well, I assure you." My curiosity about Rita was mounting. She and my father had a history, and I imagined it was a very long history. "So you've known Dad since before he was Dominic?"

She shook her head. "No. I met him for the first time the night he was elevated. There was a party. There's always a party, and everyone is to bring a gift. I remember it as if it were yesterday."

"Tell me."

"I belonged to Malcolm. We were in Paris. As I watched him get ready for the evening I noticed him sliding an envelope into his pocket. I never knew what it contained, the true gift I imagine. He brought me that night to show me off."

"To the party?"

"Yes. I was seated next to your father. He was such the gentleman. Malcolm taunted him throughout the evening, but Byron never so much as raised an eyebrow. As the evening progressed and the wine flowed, Malcolm's insults became more frequent, more direct. It was a clever game of cat and mouse. Only Malcolm ended up being the mouse. You're father waited, until just the right moment. Without breaking a sweat, or batting an eye he bested Malcolm in a way that would never be forgotten or forgiven."

"How so?"

"At the end of the evening your father stood without warning and raised his glass in a toast to him, thanking him for such a precious and extravagant gift. Then he reached his hand out to me. The sound of the applause bouncing off the walls of the caverns was almost deafening. There was a standing ovation for Malcolm. Even Cain commented on the extravagance of the gift, lauding him for his generosity. Malcolm

smiled, nodded and said nothing. He just sat there and let your father escort me from the room. It wasn't until we were in the privacy of his waiting carriage that he spoke to me. Do you want to know what he asked?"

"Yes," Alex answered as she placed her hand on my shoulder. I hadn't even realized she'd returned, I'd been so lost in the story.

"He apologized to me for letting his emotions get the best of him, for acting so impulsively. Then he offered me something no one had ever offered me before, a choice. He asked me if I wanted him to return me to Malcolm."

"I take it you declined?"

Rita nodded. "I fell in love with your father that very instant and he's had my heart ever since," confessed Rita. "Malcolm lost me to him, truly lost me to him. Having me back was an unpleasant reminder of that. He thought giving me to Raif would teach me a lesson in humility."

"Did it?" I asked her.

She smiled. "No. Patience perhaps."

I didn't know about this part of my father's life and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. How I felt about Rita. I wanted to dislike her, I thought I *should* dislike her, but I didn't. Did my father love her? He hadn't used that word. He'd said she was his friend, but they had most assuredly, also been lovers and for a very long time.

"You're thinking awfully hard about something," Alex observed as she traced an invisible line across my forehead.

I reached up for her hand, lacing my fingers between hers I lifted her hand to my mouth and kissed it. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," she said, taking her seat once again. "But that doesn't answer my question."

I was still holding on to her hand, examining the inside of her palm, tracing her lifeline with my fingertip.

"Tell me your story," Rita asked.

I looked over at her. "My story?"

"When did you fall in love with Alex?"

Before I could even begin to panic, Alex beat me to it.

"Dell's not really in love with me," she said as she slipped her hand from mine. "We've been posing as lovers, working under cover."

"Merely posing?" Rita asked with a knowing smile. "And who are you posing for now?"

"No one," muttered Alex, nervously wiping her hands on her legs.

I reached out and stilled them.

"It's all right," I told her. I looked back at Rita. "Back off, okay?"

Rita held her hands up in surrender. "I apologize, Randell. It didn't occur to me you'd be ashamed and want the affair kept secret. What, with your parents' views..."

"I'm not ashamed," I told her. "It's complicated."

"It always is, dear," Rita replied.

"My father knows—"

"Your father knows?" Alex asked. "Do you think he'll tell my father?"

"God, I hope not," I replied.

Alex gasped, "You *are* ashamed!"

"I'm not *ashamed*," I turned to Rita. "Would you mind giving us a couple minutes alone?"

"Are you kidding? We're what, thirty thousand feet in the air? Where do you propose I go?"

"The bathroom?" I suggested.

She pointed to her ear. "Vampire. I'll still be able to hear you."

I gave her the look. The one my father swears I inherited from my mother.

"Fine," she sighed. "I guess I could freshen up, make myself more presentable." Then she was off.

I waited a moment before saying anything. It wasn't so much that I didn't know what to say. It was that I wasn't sure how to say it.

"We'll be landing in about thirty minutes. An hour after that we'll be at the house. It's unlikely your father will be there yet, but we probably won't have a lot of time alone and we certainly won't have enough time to strategize. How do you want to play this?" I asked her.

"Play this? Is that what we're doing? Playing?" There was an emotional edge to her voice that made my stomach clench.

"No."

"What are we talking about here? Formulating a cover to explain our relationship?"

"Not a cover, exactly. Those people know me Alex, they'll take one look at you and they'll know—"

"That you're fucking me," she spat out. "Well, they would be wrong and I'll tell them that. You're not fucking me."

"Alex, sweetheart, I think you're splitting hairs."

"Whatever we've been doing, Dell, *sweetheart*, doesn't really matter. Does it? Because it didn't mean anything. Did it?" Tears started to spill out of the corners of her eyes.

I reached up and brushed them away with the pads of my thumbs. "It meant something, you know it did."

"Just not enough," she whispered.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. "That's not true. It meant more to me than... What do you want me to say, Alex? I'm twenty-five years old. I'm immortal. I've only known you a few days. I'm not ready for a commitment."

Alex looked surprised. "I'm not asking for a commitment."

"You're not?"

Alex laughed. "Good Lord, no! Can't we just be honest with them?"

I nodded. "Tell them the truth?"

"Exactly."

"We started as partners—" I began.

"Became friends..."

"...with benefits," I added pulling her onto my lap.

Her arms wound around my neck and she leaned down to nuzzle my ear. "And soon we'll be lovers," she whispered into it.

"I think I'll let you tell them."

She laughed. "Okay, how about we say—"

"I think I'm falling in love with you, Alex," I declared, interrupting her.

"Really?" She pulled away from me, a smile lighting up her face.

"Yeah."

For a second I thought she was going to say it back, but she didn't. My stomach dropped to the floor.

"When you know for sure, promise you'll tell me?" she asked.

"Absolutely," I assured her, hoping, waiting.

Alex slid from my lap into the seat beside me.

The moment began to feel awkward, silence stretched between us. I closed my eyes and began to wonder whether I should have kept my trap shut. I don't know what the hell I expected.

"Dell?" She snapped the seat buckle into place.

"Yeah?"

"I think I love you, too," she confessed.

I swear my heart actually swelled.

"When you know for sure, promise you'll tell me?" I asked.

Alex wrapped her arms around mine, then laid her head on my shoulder. "I promise."

Chapter Fourteen

“The place looks deserted,” said Rita as we pulled up to the dock.

“Charms were cast ages ago to keep everyone on the island essentially invisible to outsiders, with the exception of my father. The perimeter is closely guarded.” I slid the fenders over the edge of the boat, jumped onto the dock and tied off the lines.

Once Antoine cut the engine, I could hear my mother’s voice calling down to me.

“Dell!”

I held my hand out first to Rita, then to Alex. “Come on, there are people anxious to see both of you.”

“I know the way.” Rita sprinted down the dock. “Violet!”

We followed her, Alex gazing up at the house I’d grown up in. It was located at the top of a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean with a steep path leading up to it. Several windows were open, curtains blowing in the breeze, the porch empty, and the house peaceful. The instant we stepped off the beach, onto the trail, a different view came into focus. I could now clearly see Mom waving cheerfully from the front porch, her fiery red hair blowing about her head.

“Rita!” My mother flew into motion, bounding down the stairs and onto the trail, the edges of her long sweater fluttering behind her like a cape.

I placed my hand at the small of Alex’s back and began to guide her up the incline.

“That’s your mother?”

“Yup.”

“She looks so young.”

I reached for Alex’s hand. “She’s in her fifties. It’s a side effect from the mating. It slows the human aging process. My mother’s likely to live three centuries or more. I thought you understood that.”

Alex stopped dead in her tracks. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

“And your father?”

“He’s four hundred and five. I’m betting he sees seven,” I replied, tugging gently on her. “Come on.”

“Seven *centuries*?”

“Why are you so surprised? Surely some of the vampires you’ve come across have been older.”

“It’s not like there’s been a parade of them, Dell. It’s only been a few, and none of them were that old.”

We had resumed our ascent and by the time we reached my mother and Rita the two of them had unwrapped themselves from a joyous embrace and were both wiping tears from their eyes.

I saw my mother glance down furtively to my hand, which was still joined with Alex's before opening her arms wide and pulling Alex into a warm hug.

"Welcome home," she said to Alex. Then she turned to me. "You look tired, dear. Are you working too hard?"

"I'm fine, Mom."

"He's working too hard, isn't he?" she asked Alex.

"I—I don't—"

"Where's Dad?" I asked changing the subject and resuming the climb.

"Interviewing a prospective candidate for the Academy, a young man from Texas he's been trying to recruit without much luck. Your father almost cancelled the interview, but I managed to talk him out of it. He's so looking forward to meeting you, Alex. I swear if he hadn't been working today he would have paced a hole in the floor of the living room."

"You've extended the front porch and screened it in I see," Rita observed.

Mom climbed the stairs to the porch and paused to hold the door open for the rest of us. "We did it right after Lily was born. Ren and I love to sit out here in the evening and watch the sunset together."

Rita appeared to be completely at home. She walked across the expansive porch, then through the front door of the house.

"Honey, I'm home!" she cried.

I winced and my stomach clenched with a sense of foreboding. I managed to steal a quick glance at my mother who was smiling brightly before my thoughts were distracted by the sound of thundering feet running down the upstairs hallway toward the stairs.

"My sister, Lily," I leaned over and told Alex. Only it wasn't Lily, it was my father, flying down the stairs faster than I'd seen him move in ages. Within the blink of an eye he had Rita in his arms, he'd lifted her up and was swinging her around, her feet dangling in mid air as they laughed.

"Dad." I stepped toward them. I don't know what I was going to say, but I had to say something.

My father sat Rita down and as he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead I felt my mother's hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right," she whispered to me. "They're friends, Dell."

I've never been particularly good at hiding my feelings from my mother and I expect my concern and worry were evident. "Mom—"

"You don't have to protect me. I know what your father's relationship to Rita is. The three of us worked things out long ago, Dell. Your father and I have discussed this many times. I'm perfectly fine with it, really."

My stomach churned. This wasn't right. Something seemed horribly wrong. "You're going to let him fuck her?" I cried, incredulous. My exclamation was much too loud, everyone in the room had heard and were now staring at my mother. I expected her to be embarrassed, but instead she broke into laughter.

"God, no!" she managed to choke out. "Whatever on earth... Dell!"

Now I was embarrassed. My face was becoming hotter by the second.

"Rita will be staying with us for a while," announced my father, "that's all." Looking back down at Rita he added, "You can stay for as long as you like or not at all. The choice is yours." He reached into his suit-coat pocket and pulled out an envelope. "You're freedom."

Rita reached for the packet with a shaky hand. "Chadwick?" she asked. "You don't happen to know where—?"

"Rita?"

It was Chadwick, my father's secretary. The one I'd always thought of as asexual. Chadwick was buttoned up so tight I couldn't imagine him fucking anything. He'd been around as long as I could remember. Quiet, faithful, always dressed in a black suit, white shirt and red tie. Always. I'd never seen him with a woman socially, nor a man for that matter. Never even heard him talk about anything personal.

Rita flew at him from across the room, knocking the slight vampire clear off his feet and onto the hardwood floor.

A young man had been next to him, dressed in blue jeans, a denim shirt and cowboy boots. He'd wisely moved out of the way. He wasn't as fast as a vampire, but almost. A shifter of some kind, no doubt.

"Jacob, I'm terribly sorry for deserting you," my father said, glancing down at Chadwick. "Family reunion."

Rita was now straddling Chadwick, peppering his face with enthusiastic kisses.

Jacob smiled good naturedly. "Your reunions seem to put ours in east Texas to shame, sir."

My father gave my shoulder an encouraging squeeze. "Dell, walk Jacob to the door, will you?"

"Sure thing!" Anxious for a breather I began to lead the way. "So, Jacob—"

He extended his hand. "Call me Jake."

"Dell." I accepted it. "You signing up?"

He shook his head, his sandy blond hair falling into his eyes. "No. I told Mr. Renfield straight out I wasn't going to change my mind. He insisted I turn him down in person."

"My father's a persistent man."

We walked onto the porch. "My family's been attending Baylor University for five generations. I'm gonna finish my degree."

"How much longer do you have?" I asked, making idle conversation.

"Two more years, then hopefully law school."

The sun had set and the moon shone brightly in the sky. It was close to full. I could feel the air stir around him, the power rising as he gazed up at it. He didn't have the look or feel of someone who was used to possessing so much strength or controlling that much energy. He still had a lot to learn.

"You were infected recently? Where's your pack?"

Most shapeshifters are born. The condition passed down from one generation to the next. Lycanthropy is one of the few that can be directly transmitted. When it happens, the new wolf almost always abandons their human life to go and live with the pack.

Jake shook his head. "The pack is in Yosemite. I was bitten last summer. It was an accident of sorts. I was hiking and slipped, slid halfway down into a ravine. I dislocated a shoulder, got banged up pretty badly. It got dark and cold. Then the wolves came."

"You were attacked?" Had they left him for dead? That would certainly explain why he was keeping his distance.

Jake looked away from the moon then and back toward me. "They dragged me to safety. I remember the wolf's teeth gleaming in the moonlight as it bit down on the sleeve of my shirt and began to pull. It was just a graze on my forearm. Guess that's all it takes."

"Guess so." I wished I could think of something comforting to say. I'd always known I wasn't part of the human world, that there was something about me that would forever keep me separate from it. Jake had been a part of that world, and now he wasn't. I didn't know which of us had it worse.

"Let me turn the lights on," I offered. "So you can see your way down the path and back to the boat. It looks like Antoine's waiting to take you back."

Jake waved me off then placed his cowboy hat back on his head. "Nah, don't bother. I can see fine at night. Nice to meet you, Dell."

"Same here." I watched him as he quickly made his way down the steep path. Moving effortlessly through the darkness, back to the life he'd always planned for himself, the one he'd never really be able to have.

Chapter Fifteen

“Where is everyone?” I asked, stepping into the living room. My mother and Alex were sitting on the sofa. Everyone else seemed to have disappeared. “Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Alex replied, a little too quickly.

“Your father went to check on dinner,” Mother explained. “Rita and Chadwick have disappeared. I, for one, am not going to look for them and I recommend you don’t either. Chadwick hasn’t taken a day off in... Well, ever. I expect by the time he resurfaces he’ll have a great big smile on his face.”

“That’s...”

“Sweet?” Mom climbed to her feet. “I better go check on your father. He’s been gone far too long, you know how he loses track of time when he’s cooking. Hey, are you two planning on sleeping together?”

“W—what?”

Poor Alex looked stunned. I sat alongside of her and prepared to chastise my mother. Before I had the chance, Mom held up her hand.

“I’m only asking because we’re short on bedrooms and it would be ridiculous to put Alex in with Lily if she’s just going to be sneaking down the hall to your room anyway. Don’t you agree?” She walked behind the sofa and laid her hands on my shoulders.

I let my head fall back and looked up at her. “Why can’t I have normal parents?”

Mom leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. “No one has normal parents, dear.”

I reached for Alex’s hand. “We’ll both stay in my room.”

“Good. Why don’t you take her upstairs? Dinner will be ready in about an hour. That will give you enough time to unpack and settle in.” Then she was off, heading toward the kitchen.

“Oh my God!” Alex folded over on herself until her forehead rested in her lap, her arms covering her head.

“Are you all right? I know my family can be a bit much. You haven’t even met Chase and Lily yet—”

“They think we’re having sex!” she moaned.

“We are having sex,” I pointed out.

Alex raised up, her mouth open in protest. “We are not!”

“Yes,” I said slowly, “we are. And, I’ll tell you something else, it’s been the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“You really think so?”

"Christ, you make me crazy," I growled, reaching for her and pulling her onto my lap so that she straddled me, one knee on either side of my hips.

"Your parents..."

"...are busy in the kitchen."

"Ahem!"

The noise came from the entry to the living room. Alex winced and closed her eyes. I peered around her shoulder to have my suspicions confirmed. It was Lily. She let her backpack drop on the floor with a thud, then walked into the room.

"Don't stop on my account. Just because the more you screw up the harder things are for me. What do you care? It doesn't matter to *you* Dad's been holding me prisoner here ever since you left home." She flopped down in the chair across from the sofa.

Lily was the perfect blend of my mother and father. She had my father's dark hair and my mother's fair skin and green eyes. Thin and willowy she moved with a natural grace. And her pout? Well, it could even melt me.

"Lily, this is Alex." I shifted Alex off of my lap and settled her once again beside me. "And Alex, meet my melodramatic sister, Lily."

"I'm not being melodramatic," she said. "You have to talk to him, Dell. I'm eighteen and he never lets me go anywhere alone! I can't date. He's insisting that if I go away to college it's got to be to an all-girl school. I wouldn't be surprised if he has someone making a chastity belt for me right now! I swear I'm going to be the oldest virgin ever. And you? You can get away with having sex right here on the couch! Hi, Alex."

"Hi. And you're not the oldest virgin ever. I'm seven years older than you."

"What?" Lily gasped. "No way!"

"Way!" she laughed.

"Why?" Lily asked. "I mean, I can understand you not wanting to do it with Raaandy here, that would be... Ew!"

I picked up one of the throw pillows next to me and lobbed it at my sister's head. To my disappointment, she managed to dodge it. Although I did get a satisfying squeal out of her.

"You are such a butt!" she growled.

"Mom, Lily's calling me a—" Before I could finish my sentence Lily had retrieved the pillow and threw it back at me.

"*Ditallu*," I murmured. The pillow transformed, dissolving into a burst of ashes mid flight.

"I hate it when you don't fight fair." She scowled, her hands on her hips. She glared at me for a second, her mouth formed into that signature pout. Slowly, the corners began to turn up and she started to laugh; we both started to laugh.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve managed to work it out,” my mother said as she walked back into the room. “I came to see if you’d like a cocktail before dinner?”

I stood and made my way over to the bar. “Alex?”

“Oh, no. Not me. Just a club soda, please.” Alex stood and stretched, arching her back.

“Do we have any club soda?” I asked Mom, who’d taken my seat on the sofa.

“In the fridge,” she answered. Then she looked appraisingly at Alex. “How are you, dear?”

“Fine,” Alex replied.

Mother continued to look at her, letting the silence build. Most people aren’t comfortable with silence. You let them experience it long enough; they feel the need to fill it and Alex did.

“Tired, overwhelmed, happy, confused.” She rattled off the list as she made her way over to me and accepted the club soda I’d poured. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I told her. “Mom? What would you like?”

“Scotch, I’ll take one for your father too,” she answered.

I poured three, one for myself.

“I’m sure this has all been a lot to take in,” Mom observed.

Alex nodded. “I keep wondering if I’m in the middle of some fantastic dream. When will my father arrive?”

“I suspect tomorrow,” Mom replied. “He doesn’t leave BaMidbar often, arrangements had to be made.”

“I see.”

“Mom?” I held up the two drinks she’d asked for and she came to retrieve them. “Lily, do you want anything?”

“No thanks. I’m off to do some research before dinner.”

“What kind of research?” I asked.

“I’m trying to narrow down my choice of colleges so I can start getting ready to arm myself for the argument of the century with Dad.”

Mom, who was on her way back to the kitchen paused by Lily and leaned down to kiss her on the top of the head. “I keep telling you things will work out. Your father will come around.”

As soon as Mom left, Lily leaned forward and in a hushed voice whispered. “It’s either going to be Baylor or UCSD. They both have great pre-med programs and their medical schools rank in the top ten. I’ve been accepted. I just have to decide, and convince Dad.”

“Baylor? Did you meet that guy who was here earlier, Jake?”

Lily shook her head. “No. Why?”

“That’s where he said he goes. Maybe he could tell you about it firsthand. Chase would have his number. Ask him.”

“I will.” She stood, walked over to me, and gave me a hug. “It’s good to have you home.”

“It’s good to be home,” I told her. “Don’t worry. You know you have Dad wrapped around your finger. He wants you to be happy, we all do. It’s just...”

Lily sighed as I released her. “No one wants to see me get hurt. I know. But I can’t stay here, wrapped up in this cocoon forever. I’m all grown up now, Dell. I want to experience life like other girls do. Can you understand that?”

I glanced over at Alex.

“Completely,” I told her.

Chapter Sixteen

“This is your room?” Alex asked as she looked around. The large antique canopy bed dominating the adjacent wall was covered in cream-colored lace with sheer silk curtains. There was a vanity in one corner, and a small sitting area in the other. In front of the bed was a giant armoire that had been converted into an entertainment center. My mother redecorated the room a few years ago. It looked nothing like the room I’d grown up in.

“Well, it’s the guest room now. It looks completely different than when I lived here. It’s funny, I always picture it as being just like I left it.”

Alex walked over to the vanity and lightly fingered the old silver combs and brushes that had once belonged to my grandmother.

The walls of the room were painted a pale yellow but the soft glow of the bedside lamps made it appear deeper, richer, warmer.

“We need to file our report,” she said, changing the subject.

I pulled my laptop out of its case, walked over to the sitting area and plopped myself down in one of the overstuffed chairs.

“Hand me my drink?” I pointed to the nightstand where I’d set it down before retrieving our luggage. “I’ll check in for us and send them the data file. If I start the transfer now, it should be finished before dinner.”

Alex unzipped her suitcase. “Maybe I’ll take a bath and freshen up.”

“Bathroom is through that way,” I told her. “Help yourself to whatever you want.”

Already I was entering in the sequence that would unencrypt the contents of my computer and permit me to sign in via the Agency’s virtual network. I stared at the center of the screen, allowing it to complete the retinal scan.

“Alex?” I called out quietly, not wanting to disturb her.

“Come in.”

I heard a splash of water.

The bathroom was dimly lit by candles. There was a large assortment of them on the bathroom counter. I’d thought it was a strange place to have candles. Now I was happy my mother had placed them there.

Alex was submerged up to her shoulders in the deep claw-footed bathtub, surrounded by bubbles. Her eyes were closed, her head leaning back against a pillow.

"This is glorious," she said. "I'm never coming out."

"Not even for dinner?"

She opened one eye. "That would be rude, huh?"

I set the laptop on the counter and knelt down next to the tub, resting my arms on the edge. "They'd understand if you wanted to take a little time for yourself."

Alex lifted her head slightly, motioning towards the laptop. "You finished the report?"

"Yup. Just need your imprint." I stood and walked over to the counter to retrieve one of the towels.

"Thanks," Alex said as I handed it to her.

I carried the laptop back over, holding the screen up so Alex could read it. She began to nibble on her lower lip in that way that made me crazy.

"Out with it."

"What?"

"Whatever it is you're worried about."

"Did you leave in the part about my getting drunk?"

I smiled. "No. I did report you distracted Raif by agreeing to have drinks with him while I infiltrated his office and completed the download of the data file."

"Okay."

"But there's no mention about the absinthe, nor did I say anything about how wonderful your lips taste." I reached out and traced the outline of her mouth with my finger. "Or about how great they looked wrapped around my di—"

Alex sucked the digit into her mouth and was provocatively swirling her tongue around its tip. My cock instantly hardened.

"You're going to make me drop the computer."

Alex reached out with a dry hand and touched the screen, signing the report. "Now you can send it off and join me."

I set the laptop aside. "In the bath? I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well, there's bubbles in there for one."

"Is the big strong vampire afraid of bubbles?" she mocked.

"No. I'm not a bubble bath kind of guy."

"But I'm in here..."

"True," I said, slowly warming up to the idea.

"...and, I'm all wet," she continued.

Mr. Happy was beginning to think that a bath sounded like a great idea. I quickly toed off my shoes, confirmed that the file transfer and data transfer were underway, then turned my attention back to Alex.

"I want you," I told her as I began to unbutton my shirt. "You have no idea how much I want you."

She glanced pointedly at the bulge in my jeans. "I think I have some idea."

I worked first on unfastening my belt, then the zipper. I slid down the pull and let my cock spring forth.

"You're beautiful," she murmured softly.

I stepped out of the last of my clothes. "I think you mean ruggedly handsome."

Alex licked her lips. "Bring that great big beautiful cock over here so I can suck it."

Who the fuck am I to argue with a request like that? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? Plus, I can tell you without a doubt, the sight of my dick sliding between her gorgeous pink lips? It *was* one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

"Oh, baby," I moaned, closing my eyes as she took me into her mouth.

I laced my fingers through her hair and she paused. "No hair pulling," she reminded me.

"No hair pulling." I removed my hands from her hair and placed one of them on the door adjacent to the tub.

Alex wrapped her mouth around the bulbous head of my cock, sweeping her tongue tantalizingly along the bottom.

I closed my eyes for a moment, savoring the sensation.

"Mmmm," she moaned, opening her throat and swallowing me down.

"Fuck," I gasped, eyes now wide open. "Never been so deep."

Alex looked up at me. It was hard to believe this was only her third time. The girl had a gift.

She wrapped one hand around the base of my cock and began to back off, leaving a healthy trail of thick, wet spit. As she reached the tip, she noticed a drop of pre-come and pointing her tongue into the groove, she scooped it up with a smile.

"I want you to come in my mouth."

I wanted that too, God how I wanted it.

She leaned over further so she could nibble at the base before sucking my balls into her mouth, first one, then the other, sucking and licking.

My cock was so unbelievably hard. My knees were beginning to feel weak. I could feel the pressure building, my balls tightening. I was ready to explode.

Alex abandoned my balls and masterfully licked up the path on the underside of my shaft. "Alex!" I gasped listening to the changing sound of my own breaths, evidence that the end was approaching.

A rumble rolled from deep within my chest.

Alex swirled her tongue around the head taking me one last time, full and deep. She swallowed and swallowed again, building the pressure within the cavern of her mouth. The intensity of it was amazing, then there was another sensation. One I hadn't felt before. Her finger, slick from the tub, had slid between the cheeks of my ass and was knocking at my back door. Inside it slipped. I didn't protest. Mr. Happy liked it. And when he's happy, I tend to be happy. Before I could think too much about it, Alex touched something inside of me and I lost control, shooting my come deep into her mouth, right where she wanted it, and I watched through reddened eyes as she swallowed it down, every drop.

"Mmm," she moaned, licking her lips.

I resisted the urge to slide to the floor in a heap. Instead I climbed into the bath, stepped between her legs, and sat down so that my back rested against her chest and she had me cradled in her arms.

I laced my fingers through hers. "I hope no one expects me to talk tonight at dinner. Sweetheart, you've left me utterly speechless."

"That good?"

I sighed and closed my eyes, letting the warmth of the bath and her embrace sink in. "I love your mouth."

"I thought you loved my eyes?" she teased.

"Those too."

"And my breasts?"

"Mustn't forget those."

"Dell?"

"Hmm?"

"Was it really good? I'd done some reading lately and I wanted to try some new things. Sullivan—"

"You said you were going to end it with Sullivan," I snapped, resentful that the blissful feeling I had been enjoying was getting pushed out by the horrible image of Alex blowing Sullivan Cross.

"I'm going to," she assured me.

I began to relax again. "Good. I don't want you seeing anyone else."

"Ah." She kissed my shoulder. "Why?"

"Because I'd have to kill them and that would tarnish my good record."

"Dell..."

"Because I'm in love with you and I want you all to myself. How's that?"

"That depends," she said.

"On?"

"Whether that's the blowjob talking."

"Hmm. I guess it could be the blowjob talking, it was a pretty good blowjob," I teased.

"Pretty good?" she repeated slapping my stomach playfully.

"I hear practice makes perfect," I told her, grabbing hold of her hands. "Seriously, Alex, I'm in love with you, I want you all to myself. How about it?" I asked wrapping her arms around my waist.

"And do I get to have you all to myself?"

Huh. Well, I hadn't thought of that. I should have, of course. I'd never been in an exclusive relationship before. But it seemed only reasonable...right? The truth was, right this very moment, I couldn't imagine wanting to be with anyone but Alex.

"That seems fair," I told her in agreement.

"I don't want you to consent because it's *fair*. Is it what you *want*?"

I picked up the bath sponge that had been floating in the water down around my feet, poured some gel onto it, and began to wash my body.

"Yes, it's what I want," I told her.

"Then it's a deal, for now."

I paused. "For now?"

She gave me a little push. I sat up and looked over my shoulder, so I could see her face.

"Well, we're not talking about getting married."

"Of course not," I agreed.

Alex took the sponge from me.

"Lay back," she coaxed, running the sponge across my chest, creating a nice lather. The slow, circular strokes were soothing and before I knew it, my concerns about how long *now* would last were evaporating along with the last of the bubbles.

"Dell?" a voice called out.

Damn, I was really getting into the spirit of this bath thing.

"I'm in the bath, I'll—"

I'd been about to tell Chase I'd be right out. But he didn't bother waiting. Instead he barged right into the bathroom.

"Shit!" he gasped, quickly turning about. "I'm—I'm terribly sorry."

"Chase, this is Alex. Alex, Chase," I said, by way of introduction. "Chase, I'll be right out."

"Of course," he muttered, before excusing himself from the bathroom.

I rinsed the remaining soap from my body, stood, then stepped from the bath.

"Your father sent me up," he called out. "He's located the succubus who requested the spell."

I grabbed a towel from the rack and hastily wrapped it around my waist. "Talk to me," I demanded as I walked, still dripping, back into the bedroom. "Do we know who the caster was?"

"All I know is that Luna's agreed to come. It seems she feels she owes a measure of debt to Chris. She's willing to work with us."

"Tonight?"

“Not tonight,” he answered. “Tomorrow.”

“What’s going on?” Alex emerged from the bathroom wearing the thick terry robe that had been hanging on the back of the door.

“They’ve located the succubus who ordered the spell on you. She’s coming tomorrow to help us,” I quickly recapped. “We should—”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence. Before I could, Alex was in my arms, covering my mouth with hers and silencing me with kisses. I didn’t even notice it when Chase left, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Seventeen

Although the look of other rooms in the house had changed over the years, the dining room still looked the same. There weren't any windows or overhead lights. We'd always had dinner by candlelight. The edges of the room were lined with tall candelabrum filled with long white tapers. The walls were covered in rich red damask, the same red damask covering the seats of the dining-room chairs.

The china had been in the family for ages, so had the stemware, although my father had purchased that himself in London, many years ago. I think what I liked best about the room growing up was the mural covering the ceiling. The painting of the sky at sunrise meant that the opulent room was set almost constantly ablaze with vibrant hues of gold, orange and red.

There was a second painting in the room. It hung on the wall behind where my father sat. It had been there for as long as I could remember, one of six versions of the Madonna painted by Munch. My father had acquired it long before I was born and it was something he treasured. But I didn't understand the significance of it. Not until now.

"The Munch," I said, thinking out loud. "I didn't realize until now."

Father glanced back over his shoulder. "What?"

"It's Rita," I said. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes," he replied. "We attended his exhibit at the Unter den Linden in Berlin. I found his work to be positively gripping, revolutionary really. All of his emotions were right there on the canvas. It was so...raw."

"Who's Rita?" Lily asked.

"Dad's old consort," I happily supplied. "Apparently she and Chadwick are an item now."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Right."

"It's true, dear," said Mom. "Your father and Rita lived in Berlin for a while."

"For almost two years," he added.

"With a consort?" asked Lily.

"I was studying German. Rita would sit for Edvard in the afternoons." Dad lifted his glass toward the painting. "That one was the last in the series. It was a gift and I've always treasured it."

Lily set her fork down. "And now Rita is seeing Chadwick? Our Chadwick?"

I leaned over toward Alex. "She's usually not this slow."

"I can't believe it!" my sister practically shouted, looking straight at my father.

“What part?” he asked not in the least bit taken aback.

“You had a consort, Dell’s been having sex since...forever, and I can’t even date? It’s just so unfair!”

I reached for Alex’s hand. “I haven’t been having sex since forever. I waited a lot longer than you probably think.”

“And now you’re waiting again, because Alex knows how to say no. Explain to my father, Alex, how it is you’ve managed to maintain your virginity all these years. It seems he just doesn’t believe it’s possible for a girl to do these days.”

Alex looked mortified. Chase sat back, amused. Clearly he didn’t believe Alex was saying no to anything and he couldn’t wait to see how this was all going to play out.

My mother glanced up at Alex, a questioning look on her face.

“My situation is complicated, Lily,” replied Alex in a small voice. “I...haven’t had a choice.”

“The spell,” mother whispered under her breath.

“What spell?” Lily asked.

Alex looked down at her dessert plate. Her pie was untouched.

“You don’t have to explain,” I told her.

Alex nodded. “I...um... I can’t...”

My heart ached for her.

“You can’t have sex because of the spell?” asked my father.

Lily looked at him, horrified. “Don’t you get any ideas. That’s absolutely diabolical!”

“I don’t think it was an intended consequence, Lily,” my father said before turning back to Alex. “Luna meant well. She was trying to give your father hope, to assure him you would be kept safe from harm.”

Mom launched into doctor mode. “Alex, are you sure you can’t have sex? Have you tried? There are—”

“Mom,” I said, shaking my head and holding up my hand.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” she said. “It’s just that I want to help if I can. There are many medical—”

“Trust me,” I interrupted. “It’s not an issue of libido or lubrication or whatever else you’re about to propose. It’s magic.”

“And you’re going fix it, right?” Lily asked.

I looked over at Alex. “Yes. Somehow I’m going to fix it.”

Lily leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, something she hadn’t done in years. “You know,” she said, “sometimes you’re not completely horrid.”

While everybody else at the table was busy laughing, my sister leaned closer to me and whispered, “Someday I hope I find a guy as great as you.”

It was one of those moments you wish you could bottle. The focus of the conversation shifted. I'm not even sure to what, probably the stock market or current events. I found myself looking around the long mahogany table at these people who I'd shared so many dinners with: Chase, Lily, my parents. But tonight Alex was there. And she seemed to fit...just right.

"What?" Chase asked, his voice cutting through the momentary silence. He was holding his hand to his ear as he pushed away from the table. "Message, sir," he said to my father. "Stage One, they've found the location of the target and are standing by."

"Video?" Dad asked.

"Streaming now," Chase replied, and he was off. My father and I followed quickly at his heels.

"Where is the target now?" my father asked as we scrambled down the stairs then ran down the hallway and into my dad's office.

"New York. He just checked into the Waldorf," Chase replied.

There was a private bath inside my father's office, which was far more than a bath. It was the entrance to the command center we all called The Vault, an elaborate set of secure offices designed by one of the best penetration experts in the business, the infamous Stanley Houghton.

"Damn you guys move fast," Alex panted as she rounded the corner to join us in the bathroom. "What are we all doing in the bathroom?"

"Byron Renfield," my father said as he stared into the mirror. "Zebra, tango, bravo, six, four, zero, x-ray."

The far wall slid open, revealing a long, dark hallway with another door at the end, a door with no window and no doorknob. It was always manned and before we'd even made it halfway down the hall it had opened for us.

"Nifty. What is this place?" Alex asked, trying to keep up.

I held my hand up to momentarily silence her. "What's the situation?"

"We have his room surrounded. Hotel security cleared the perimeter. A bellboy brought his luggage up moments ago. He's alone, we're ready to go in on your mark," a disembodied voice said.

"Let's get this on screen one," my father demanded.

Almost instantly the large screen began to fill with images from various vantage points. By my count it appeared as if there were a dozen men and women involved in the operation.

I was unable to contain my curiosity. "Who's the target?"

"Malcolm," my father said with a quiet determination. "On my mark. One, two, go."

With incredible synchronization rounds were shot through ceilings, floors and walls. Seconds later our operatives, masks in place, entered the room. Through the dense fog I could make out the outline of a body lying prone on the floor.

"Fuck!" one voice said.

“Shit!” another chimed in.

A string of colorful expletives followed and as the fog cleared I understood why. It was the bellboy.

“Who confirmed the bellboy left?” I asked.

“Me, sir, George, we have it on tape. We’re pulling it up for you now.”

“Sending to screen two.” It was Pixel, a human who had been stationed here at The Vault on and off for my entire life.

I walked over to him. “Hey, Pixel.”

“Good to see you, Dell.”

Up on the screen was an outside shot of the hotel room. The bellboy wheeling in a luggage cart, the door closing, a minute or so later the bellboy exiting.

“A glamour?” my father asked.

I nodded. “Probably. I can’t tell on film. There’d be traces of magic in the room though. Any of you able to sense anything?”

“Our intelligence didn’t say anything about the target having magical powers. We aren’t prepared for that scenario,” the guy who’d identified himself earlier as George said.

I looked at my father. “You sure Malcolm can’t perform magic?”

“Positive,” Dad replied.

“Then I’d guess the guy you’ve been following isn’t Malcolm. He or she was a decoy.”

“Damn it! Reinitiate the search,” he ordered. “And this time, when we *think* we’ve found him, we continue to look... We don’t stop until we have the target captured and confirmed by *me*. Is that understood?”

I’ve known all my life my father was powerful. I’d even had a taste of it now and then. But those times were nothing like now. His power crawled over my skin; the air was thick with it. The heart rates around me began to speed up; even the other immortals were sweating. A series of affirmations sounded about the room but I don’t think my father even heard them. Blinded by rage, he’d already walked out.

Chapter Eighteen

“You all right?” I asked my father. He was standing in the living room in front of the large picture window, a brandy in his hand. My father was partial to fires and he’d started one in the fireplace.

“No.” His jaw was clenched so tight there was a visible tic.

I walked over to the bar. “Mind if I join you in a brandy?” I asked while I poured.

“I’m afraid I’m not going to be good company.”

“If I wanted *good* company I’d be upstairs with Alex.”

My father smiled, then looked down into his glass. “She’s lovely.”

“Yes, she is,” I agreed.

“And?”

“And, what?” I sat. “Wait, are you asking if my intentions are honorable?”

He sat in the chair across from me. “I suppose I am. I don’t want to see Alex hurt.”

“Come on, Dad. You’ve got to know I would never intentionally hurt—”

“You’re not a cruel man, Dell. I know you wouldn’t do anything *intentionally* to hurt anyone, but you’re playing with fire here. You know it.”

I leaned forward and swirled my glass, watching as the amber liquid circled the perimeter, sloshing up against the sides.

“Do you love her?” he asked pointedly.

“Yes.”

“Have you told her that?”

I looked up at him. “Yes.”

He pursed his lips together into a tight line, which conveyed his disappointment.

“You don’t approve,” I observed.

My father sighed as he stood back up and began to pace. His pacing was never a good sign.

“It’s just that you’re so young. Maybe too young to be making such a big commitment.”

“Who said anything about a big commitment? We’re not talking about picking curtains out together.”

“What are you talking about?”

I shrugged. “Not seeing other people, for now.”

“For now? I don’t get it, why even make such a meaningless—”

“It’s not meaningless, Dad.”

“So, basically Alex has committed to only fuck you once the spell is broken...until she wants to fuck someone else?”

Okay, so when he put it like that, it sounded pretty meaningless.

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

In all honestly, just the idea of Alex with someone else was making me seethe with jealousy.

“No. It’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?”

Good question.

“I want to be confident I’m doing the right thing, confident like you and Mom were,” I told him.

My father looked surprised. “What on earth makes you think your mother and I were confident?”

“Weren’t you?”

“Dell, you’re mother showed up here and in the space of twenty-four hours she’d managed to turn my world upside down. I’d never felt so off balance in my life. It was almost as if I were riding the crest of a wave, as if I were being led, swept up, by a force of nature that was older and more powerful than anything I’d experienced before.”

“The power of the Chosen?”

My father shook his head. “The power of *love*. It was terrifying, yet at the same time there was an underlying...”

“What?”

“Rightness about it.”

I nodded. “When it’s right, I’ll know it.”

Dad shook his head. He swallowed down the remainder of his drink, set the empty glass on the table, then stood and stretched. “Randell, you’re a smart kid and I’m proud of you...”

I sensed a but coming on.

“...but I’m not talking about knowing it was right here,” he said, tapping on the top of my head. “I’m talking about feeling it here.”

My father stood there in front of me, his hand over his heart.

“Good night, son,” he said leaning down and kissing the top of my head, something he hadn’t done in ages, maybe even since I was a boy. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Dad.” I told him. “Go ahead and turn out the lights.”

He did.

Then I propped my feet up on the coffee table and sat there in the dark, staring into the flames of the fire and listening to wave upon wave roll in and crash upon the shore.

Chapter Nineteen

Thick fog swirled around my feet and was swallowed up by the darkness. The night was damp and cold. The ground was wet. There were puddles scattered about. I was running. Not running from something, running toward something. My focus was singular. There was nothing, nothing but the sound of the slap of my shoes against the pavement and the light up ahead. The light...so I'll never lose my way.

Show us the way home.

I jerked awake with a start, dropping the spell book I'd fallen asleep reading onto the floor.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Alex whispered. "I got worried when I woke up and you still weren't in bed. It will be morning soon." She was squatting next to my chair, her hand resting on my knee. She was wearing the same dark green silk nightshirt she'd worn on assignment; only it looked almost black in the dim light. The fire had died down considerably, the glow from the remaining embers casting her face in shadows. I walked over to the fireplace, retrieved the poker and stirred up the embers.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"For what?"

I turned back to Alex. She was sitting in the chair, the book I'd dropped now in her lap.

"Worrying you, I guess."

She nibbled nervously on her lower lip, a gesture I always thought of as sexy. "Are we okay?"

"Of course." I replaced the poker. "Tomorrow's going to be a big day. I should at least get a couple hours of rest. Let's go upstairs and—"

Alex started to open the book.

"*Alka*," I commanded, reaching out with my right hand. The book sailed through the air and I grabbed hold of it.

Alex jumped to her feet. "Whoa!" she exclaimed. Then her eyes narrowed. "What's in the book?"

"It's nothing."

Alex placed her hands on her hips and stared me down. "I don't like secrets. This, us, it's not going to work if we start keeping things from one another."

"I'm not keeping things from you." I sighed and raked my hand through my hair as I walked to the staircase. "It's a book of spells. It was given to me a long time ago. I thought I'd remembered seeing something in it that might help us break the protection spell."

Alex paused as she reached the bottom step. "Well, let's have a look then!"

I shook my head and held the book out of reach. "It's not an option."

"Why not?"

"We have to find another way."

"Why? Does it require the sacrifice of a blonde virgin? I saw that on an old *X-files* episode once."

"You don't understand. This is serious stuff, Alex. It's old, powerful magic."

I looked down at the book in my hands, the book Basta had given to me, the one I swore I'd never use. "Dark magic," I added softly.

"Why can't I have a normal boyfriend who reads porn?"

That made me smile. "I'm not into dark magic, Alex. I swear I'm boringly normal."

Alex laughed. "*Boringly normal* says the vampire who just hocus pocused the book right out of my hands."

"Hocus pocused?" I repeated.

"Abra cadabraed?"

"The command was *Alka*."

Alex climbed to the top of the stairs, turned around, and reached out toward me, toward the book I was still holding. "*Alka*," she whispered, hesitantly into the darkness.

Nothing happened. The house was quiet, still.

"*Alka*," she said again, this time her voice was steadier, more certain.

"The words are just words, Alex. The spells are of no use to you," I told her as I walked up the steps, then preceded down the hallway.

"Why be so secretive?" she asked, following me into the bedroom.

I shrugged. "Habit, I guess. You may not possess the gift, but knowledge is a power. Spells like these in the wrong hands..."

"I get it," she said. "We'll find another way."

"Yes, we will. There's always another way."

Alex walked over to the bedroom window, the one that overlooked the cliffs and the beach below. The moon was almost full and the sky was unusually clear.

"How did you discover you could do magic?" she asked, her voice soft in the quiet of the night. In a way, I was surprised it had taken her this long.

I walked over to her, wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed myself against the back of her body.

"That's kind of like asking when you discovered you could see or hear. Magic is a part of me. It's who I am, who I've always been. I guess I was around six when I realized I was...different. I was out trick-or-treating with my parents and our flashlight stopped working—"

"Trick-or-treating? Don't tell me you were a vampire."

I smiled at the memory of the look of shock on my father's face when he saw me that night. "Werewolf. Anyway, when the light died, I conjured Sparky."

"Sparky?"

I held my right hand out in front of Alex, then looking over her shoulder I watched as a small light the size of a nickel appeared to emerge from the center of my palm growing in form and shape until it was a bright, burning ball of fire.

"Meet Sparky."

Alex gasped. I released my hold on her and she momentarily pulled away from me.

"You made that?"

The light took off, flitting about the room in a pattern reminiscent of a firefly.

"We traveled a lot when I was young, going back and forth to BaMidbar. It was a dark, frightening place," I told her, remembering the immense receiving area and the dozens of spooky, eerie hallways. Shoving my hands deep into my pockets I confessed, "It's still a place that frightens me. I haven't been back for years."

"And Sparky would light your way in the darkness?" Alex asked, her eyes glistening with wonder.

"More than that. He kept me from getting lost, always showing me the way home."

The light skittered back over to us, hovering overhead and bathing Alex in a breathtaking radiance.

She looked up, into the light. "Back here?"

"This is just a house," I replied, realizing I'd never in my life seen Sparky glow so bright. "My mother always says 'home is where the heart is'."

Alex looked at me, her eyes connecting with mine. She was shining, it was as if she were burning from within.

As I lowered my mouth to hers I admitted what was true.

"You seem to have stolen mine."

Chapter Twenty

The ecstasy of my lips brushing ever so gently across Alex's was interrupted by the sound of a voice I didn't recognize.

"Intruder alert," it said.

"Security system?" Alex asked.

Before I could reply my father came bounding down the hall, crashing into my room with what looked like the latest Browning automatic in his hand. I'd never seen my father armed before.

"Dad?"

"Someone's penetrated The Vault," he said. "Alex, join Lily and Violet in the safe room inside the master closet, they'll re-open it for you. Dell, you're with me."

Alex was already slipping on a pair of sweatpants. I opened the bedside table where I'd stored our weapons and tossed Alex her Glock.

"Alex comes with me." I disengaged the safety on my pistol. "We're partners, Dad."

Before he could protest, I went into motion. I pressed my back to the bedroom wall next to the door and reached out with my senses, then leading with my gun I stepped into the hallway. Nothing.

"You take point." I told Alex. "We'll follow."

Alex's eyes widened in surprise, then she smiled. "Got it."

Alex took off. I started to follow, but my father reached out, holding me back. "What are you doing?"

"Trust me."

Alex had paused at the end of the hallway right before the stairs. It took just a fraction of a second for us to catch up. She continued as trained, holding her weapon in front of her, careful to sweep each area before proceeding. The three of us advanced quickly. There were no signs of danger or disturbance in the living room. Alex held down the fort in the hall while Dad and I quickly swept through the dining room and kitchen. As we circled back to rejoin Alex the door to the basement burst open.

I didn't even have time to register what kind of weapon Chase was holding. It had been pointing toward Alex when he came through the door and, apparently, in that split second before recognition, his intent registered as dangerous. I watched as he flew down the staircase, landing solidly on his back. If he hadn't been a vamp he would have been knocked out cold.

"Dell—"

“That was Alex, not me,” I called out, proceeding down the stairs two at a time. “You okay?” I reached out and offered a hand up.

“What the fuck was that?” he asked.

“I’ll explain later,” I promised. “What’s happening?”

Chase gingerly touched a spot on the back of his head. When he pulled away, the tips of his fingers were tinged with blood.

“Someone claiming to be your succubus has arrived. She materialized inside The Vault,” he said.

“Claiming?”

“Something about her seems off, wrong. Pixel swears it’s her but I thought I better sweep the rest of the house.”

“The upstairs is clear,” I said.

“Off how?” Dad asked.

Chase stepped aside, letting him take the lead. “You’ll have to see for yourself.”

Dad walked past me, into his office. We all followed. The entrance to The Vault had been left open. I made a mental note to chastise Chase later for that. It was a careless thing to do and not like him at all. But this was a succubus we were about to encounter and succubi had a well-earned reputation for driving men to distraction.

We hastily made our way down the narrow hallway. Pixel opened the door at the end of the corridor; there was a stricken look on his face. Not the look I’d expected. I’d been in the process of drawing all of my energy inward, preparing for the need to erect a shield. But as soon as I crossed the threshold and moved into the room, I knew that would be unnecessary. I understood Pixel’s reaction and Chase’s alarm.

“Luna?” my father gasped, his throat sounding constricted.

“I am sorry for the late hour, Dominic.” The Lilan lowered her eyes, then she pressed her hands together as if in prayer. I watched as she struggled to lower herself to the floor, the liquid-like layers of her gown swallowing her up to the point of almost sweeping her away. Her frayed wings were fluttering frantically in an attempt to keep her on even keel.

I’d seen this once before, only that case was far less advanced. It was when I first started with the PSF, I’d been called in to help with a touchy situation. We had two succubi assigned to the unit. One was half human, the other, pure Lilan. The Lilan had been captured and imprisoned in Beijing. She knew things, important things. Before she’d joined us, she’d collected rich and powerful men like some women collect shoes. One of them decided perhaps he could make use of some of the secrets she’d learned through her new position at the Agency. With the help of a mercenary mage the rat bastard had captured her. Unable to escape, to feed, she was on her way to starving when I found her. The mage was none other than Basta.

The night I penetrated his shield and rescued the succubus was the last night I saw him. I shouldn't have been surprised it was Basta. I didn't want to believe he was capable of such a thing, but deep down I'd known he was. I'd known for some time. That's why we'd parted ways.

My father had hired Basta to do a job and like all of his jobs he'd done it well. He'd been paid an exorbitant sum over a period of twelve years for mentoring me and I'd proven to be an apt student, so apt he found he couldn't resist the temptation to teach me more. Then on my eighteenth birthday he gave me the spell book and asked me to come live with him, promising to teach me, to give me all his power.

I joined the Academy.

Basta went back to selling out to the highest bidder. Damn the consequences.

Luna swayed and my father reached out to steady her.

"You're ill," he said.

Alex pulled out the chair Pixel usually occupied. "Here. Sit."

"How long since you've fed?" I asked her.

Luna raised her eyes slowly to meet mine. They were sunken, dulled with a haunted hollowness. There were great big dark circles underneath reddened rims. Her flesh was pallid and dry, her hair thinned, her lips cracked and peeling.

"It's been a very long time, vampire," she answered ignoring Alex's offer of a chair. "But not long enough."

"Luna, this is my son, Dell," my father interjected. "And this is Alex. Christian's daughter. The one—"

Luna nodded. "Yes. Yes. You look so much like him. But I see your mother in you too. That will please him, no doubt. He loved her very much, you know. Very much," she said, the last but a whisper.

I reached for Luna's hands.

"Luna? I'm hoping you can put us in touch with the person who you had cast the spell, the protective spell that was placed on Alex. Can you do that?"

Luna looked past me to my father. "How is Christian? Is he well? Has he found another?"

"No," Dad replied. "No, he hasn't. He'll be here tomorrow. Or should I say later today?"

Luna closed her eyes. "I must rest. I must be gone before he arrives. I don't want him to see me and remember me this way. May I impose on you for a place to lie down and a glass of wine?"

"The spell, Luna," I repeated. "We need to find the person who cast the spell."

"Ah, yes. Basta."

"That's impossible!" my father sputtered.

I wished I could have agreed with him.

"Unfortunately, it's very possible."

“No. Luna, you must be mistaken. Basta worked for me for years. He’s known we’ve been looking for Sophie, for Alex. If he knew something...”

“Basta does no one favors, Dominie. But no matter, it is not Basta you need,” Luna said. “You only need the sphere. The sphere is the key. Reunite her with it and the spell will be broken. It was never meant to be permanent.”

“Reunite me how?” Alex asked.

Luna’s knees buckled beneath her. I swept her up into my arms. She was frail and delicate. “Trust in the magic. It will know,” she whispered. Then she lost consciousness.

“She needs to feed,” I said, thinking out loud.

“I can make her a sandwich,” Alex offered.

My father smiled. “Alex, Luna is a succubus, she gets her nourishment from sex.”

“By the looks of things,” I told him, “it’s been ages since she’s fed. I’ve seen what starvation like this can do in a year’s time. This? She can’t have had anyone for decades. Let’s get her upstairs.”

“Show’s over,” Dad announced to the staff. Turning to Chase he asked, “What were you doing down here?”

“Research,” he replied, trying to suppress a yawn.

“We all need to get some sleep. You included,” Dad told him, waving his arm out in front so that Alex and I could lead the way, Luna still in my arms.

We retraced our steps out of The Vault, up the stairs and through the living room.

“Where should I put Luna?” I asked my father as we began our ascent to the second floor.

“How about Lily’s room for now? Speaking of Lily, Chase, can you let her and Violet know they can come out of the safe room? Lily’s probably beside herself by now.”

“Lily got stuck in one of the caves on the island when she was five. She’s been terrified of small spaces ever since,” I explained to Alex, turning sideways so I could get through the door to Lily’s bedroom. I paused in the threshold and Alex bumped into me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Looks...different,” I said, moving into the room so I could place Luna on the bed. “Where’s the collection of stuffed animals?”

“You’re sister’s eighteen, Dell. She got rid of the stuffed animals a long time ago,” Dad answered while he straightened the sheets on the bed. I placed Luna in the bed and then helped him replace the covers. Our eyes connected and I saw the sadness in his.

“I’ve never seen this before. She’s dying, isn’t she?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so,” I acknowledged. “I don’t understand it, there’s no spell surrounding her, she’s not imprisoned. What could be preventing her from feeding?”

“Conscience,” my mother speculated as she walked into the room. “Chase is with Lily. I had to sedate her. He told me about Luna.”

I moved out of the way so my mother could approach the bed. She wrapped her hand around Luna’s wrist, presumably in search of a pulse. “Dell, get my blood pressure cuff, will you? It’s in my bedroom closet, on the shelf just inside the door. I want to get a set of vitals.”

“Do you even know what’s normal?” I asked her.

“No, but Wes does. He’s treated succubi before. I remember him telling me about some similar cases. Ren, see if you can get him on the phone.”

“You think her conscience is preventing her from feeding?” Alex asked my mother.

“Yes. Succubi are by nature sexual predators. They require sexual energy to survive, like we require air or water. These two patients, they were both very young, their powers not well controlled. They each ended up inadvertently killing one of their victims—”

“If you’ve got to die somehow...” I murmured. Alex backhanded me in the stomach and my mother frowned disapprovingly.

“This isn’t something to joke about, Randell, we’re talking about rape here,” Mom chastised.

“There are plenty of succubi who have partners that are willing, more than willing, wanting. Trust me,” I said. “I know what I’m talking about.”

“You fucked a succubus?” my father asked, sounding incredulous. “Of all the stupid...”

I should have stopped there, but I didn’t. “I shielded myself.” Even to my own ears it sounded ridiculously risky.

Mom shook her head. “Sometimes you don’t think. What if she decided she liked you and came back for more?”

“Hard to imagine,” Alex interjected, her hands on her hips. They were ganging up on me.

“I’ll go get that blood pressure cuff,” I said, backing quickly out of the room.

I headed down the hallway, preoccupied with the fact that I was probably going to have to explain the whole succubus thing to Alex when the sound of my sister’s voice coming from Chase’s bedroom caught my attention.

“Please, don’t go. Stay with me,” she begged. “I don’t want to be alone.”

I paused outside the open door and looked inside.

Lily was lying on her side in Chase’s bed, her hair spilling like a splash of black ink across his stark, white pillow. She was wearing a white cotton nightgown and it had slipped off of her right shoulder revealing it, as well as the top of one ample breast. Their hearts were beating, loudly.

“You’re not alone. I’m right here. Just close your eyes and go to sleep. You’re safe, Lily,” Chase said, smoothing her hair in a comforting gesture.

Lily reached for his hand then placed it over her breast. “My heart, it’s pounding so fast, can you feel it?”

“Yes,” he replied, his voice laced with a hint of desire. He turned his hand over and clasped onto hers. Raising it to his mouth, he placed a gentle kiss on the inside of her palm. “I know you don’t like the safe room. The sedative will start to work shortly.”

“It’s not the safe room,” she whispered dreamily, rolling onto her back. “You know it’s not the safe room.” Then she drifted off to sleep.

Chase turned around and our eyes connected. His looked guilty. I stepped out of the doorway and back into the hall.

“She’s like a sister to me, Dell,” he lied, quietly closing the door. “I feel the same way you do, it’s nothing more.”

“Do you lie to yourself about it too, or are you just lying to me so I don’t turn you into a toad or place some horrible curse on you?”

Chase smiled. “You wouldn’t do that. Deep down you love me.”

“Are you kidding?” I crossed my arms. “I don’t even like you.”

Chase held my gaze, his unwavering.

I sighed. “Fine. I love both you and Lily. No matter which way you slice this, Chase, bottom line is that Lily isn’t your sister. You’re attracted to her. I can smell it and honestly? It’s sort of creepy.”

“What should I do?”

Well, that shocked the hell out of me. “You’re asking *me* for advice?”

Chase reached back and touched the back of his head. “You’re right,” he chuckled. “Don’t know what I was thinking. I guess that fall down the stairs did more damage than I thought. That was the protection spell I take it?”

“Yeah.”

Chases’s gaze drifted down to my dick. I swear my balls drew up. It was if they were trying to tuck themselves behind Mr. Happy.

“Now I understand why you’re so hot to remove that spell,” he said, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“You’d be wrong,” I told him, surprising even myself. But the truth was that I was doing this more for Alex than I was for myself. Yes, I wanted more of her. Yes, I wanted to bury myself inside of her, to fuck her seven ways from Sunday, to make love to her until we were sore and spent. But more than that, I wanted to give her what she deserved. I wanted to give her the life she was meant to have, a real life, free of the influence of magic.

“You expect me to believe you don’t want to fuck Alex?”

“So, is that what you fantasize about doing to Lily?” I countered. “Fucking her?”

Chase's eyes grew cold. He took a step closer to me and lowered his voice. "I can control myself, and I don't need the threat of some spell hanging over my head to do it."

Score one for Chase.

"Lily hasn't even begun to test your control," I told him. "You know Lily. She's relentless. In the end she gets what she wants."

"Yeah? Well, she doesn't want me."

I reached up and tapped his nose. "This broken?"

Chase batted my hand away. "Cut it out. I can smell it. I'm the only guy here even close to her age, Dell."

"You're ten, almost eleven years older. That's not it and you know it."

"I'm convenient, that's *all*. You heard her tonight. She can't wait to start dating. It's all she ever talks about dating, sex, college. She'll be gone soon, off to Texas I imagine. You know what they say..."

"Everything's bigger in Texas?"

Chase cuffed me on the side of the head. "I was thinking 'out of sight, out of mind'."

"Right."

Denial. Apparently it ain't just a river in Egypt.

Chapter Twenty-One

The light from the moon poured in through the bedroom window. It was bright and full against the pitch-black sky. A soft breeze drifted in, cooling my blazing hot skin. I was covered in a slick sheen of perspiration and so was Alex, her body writhing beneath mine, responsive and ripe. Her breasts tasted of salt, her lips tasted like honey. Sweet. Delicious.

The air around us was heavy, the energy building, growing, just as I was growing, long and hard and oh-so-thick. And I was there where I wanted to be, where I needed to be. The desire was burning. Our love-making becoming increasingly frenzied, out of control. I was close to bursting. Alex was panting, her breaths ragged as she held on, arching up, angling her hips.

I could feel my beast rising. There was a flash of fang. Sweat from my forehead dripped into my eyes and the night was suddenly bleeding red. Hunger. Passion. Uncontrollable. Undeniable.

“Mine,” I growled, then I sheathed myself inside of her.

Alex screamed.

I woke with a start, the sun-filled room a stark contrast to the darkness that had filled my dream.

“It’s burning! It’s burning!” Alex cried as she clawed and ripped at her nightshirt. “Help me!” She scrambled from the bed, squinting. Alex fell to the floor, her cries rapidly turning into huge painful sobs.

“What’s wrong? Tell me what’s wrong!”

I jumped out of the bed to join her on the floor and tried to gather her up in my arms.

“Don’t touch me!” she shrieked. “Stay...stay away! It’s too much...too much.”

I barely registered the pounding of footsteps on the stairs and in the hallway. It wasn’t until they were in my room, all of them shouting at once, Mom, Dad and Chris, the now-blackened sphere in his right hand. Chris had arrived with it while we’d slept. The proximity to Alex was all that it had taken. The spell had been broken. It had been broken and there were consequences, consequences I’d failed to anticipate.

Trust in the magic.

“What have you done!” Chris shouted, moving further into the room. He tried to get past me, to Alex, but I blocked his path.

“The protection, it’s gone. I think she might be in withdrawal,” I told him, lowering my voice, trying to remain calm for Alex’s sake. I lifted the sphere up so he could inspect it. “It looks different, yeah?”

“Yes!” He pushed me aside and reached for Alex.

“No! No yelling. No yelling. No yelling. Shh. Shh.” She was almost in a fetal position now, rocking back and forth, her eyes closed.

“*Utulu*,” I whispered, then watched Alex slip into a state of quiet unconsciousness.

He placed his hand in the center of my chest and gave me a good shove. “What the fuck did you do to her!”

I shielded and absorbed the force. “We don’t have time for this now.” I pulled the sheet off the bed and covered Alex’s now naked body.

“What kind of withdrawal?” my mother asked, always practical.

“Magical withdrawal. I should have thought of the possibility earlier. It just didn’t occur to me that anyone would...”

The echo of Basta’s voice drifted through my mind. How many times had he said it to me over the years? *When you’re facing an opponent, trying to anticipate their next move, don’t ask yourself what you would do. You already know that. Ask what you wouldn’t and be prepared to do the unimaginable. That’s how you win. That’s how you become a master.*

“Damn it!”

“I don’t understand. Explain,” Chris demanded.

I ran my hand over my face. “Whoever did the protection spell, they didn’t bother to instill a process to take her down slowly. She’s lived in what amounts to a protective bubble her entire life. She’s on sensory overload.”

“Like walking into the sunlight after sitting in a dark theater?” Mom offered.

“Exactly. Sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, it’s all going to be overwhelming.”

“Why the hell did you tell me to bring this thing and... Why was she naked in your bed?” Chris roared.

“Chris, calm down,” Mom soothed. “They’re in love with one another. You remember how it was—”

“That true?” He stepped closer to me. We were toe to toe. He was shorter than I was, but wiry and feisty as all get out.

“Yes,” I replied, looking him straight in the eye.

“You sure as hell better fix this,” he ground out, his entire body trembling, whether out of anger or fear I wasn’t certain. Maybe it was out of both.

My mouth was suddenly dry. “I’ll shield her, then bring her down gradually. But it’s going to take time and it’s going to take my focus.”

Chris nodded. “Get started. You do whatever you have to do. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“I’m not going to lose her. I can’t.”

“Neither can I,” I assured him. “Now, let me do my job. Leave us. A breakfast tray would be good. Leave it outside the door. Don’t knock. If I’m not out by lunch, prepare a lunch tray.”

“Will do,” my father said. “Come on, folks, let’s clear out.”

By now Lily and Chase were lurking in the hallway. They moved back. Mom and Dad stepped out to join them.

Chris didn’t budge. “I’m not leaving her.”

“You made me promise,” I reminded him. “*Elu Ezubu Arhis Sube’u*.” A blast of ice-cold air rose up from within me, propelling Chris backwards, out into the hallway until he was pinned against the far wall.

“Holy shit!” Lily whispered.

I walked over to the bedroom door. “I keep my promises,” I said. Then I stepped out of the way and let it slam shut.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When I reached up to wipe the sweat from my brow I noticed my hand was trembling. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on my breathing to steady myself. Instead, I stumbled back, bumping into a bedside table and knocking over a lamp.

“Is everything all right?”

It was Chris, he was just outside the door. I’d sealed it right after I’d ejected everyone from the room, right before I placed Alex in thrall and shielded her. Hours had passed since I’d started the desensitization process. Taking down the level of protection around her slowly, assessing her reaction, absorbing any discomfort, it had gone painstakingly slow and I was close to exhaustion.

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine,” I called out, forcing down the bile rising up in my throat, burning the back of it. I didn’t know what time it was. I couldn’t remember when or what I’d last eaten. I didn’t want to think about that. My mind was too full of her.

“It’s been close to thirty-six hours, Dell. Open the door.”

I glanced over at Alex. She was floating about three feet off the bed, nude, so that nothing touched her skin. Her eyes were open but vacant. She wasn’t seeing through them, I was. I was seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling. The shield around her was completely lowered now. The sound of the lamp crashing had produced a normal startle response. I turned the overhead light on, the one attached to the ceiling fan. I set the fan on low. As the blades moved overhead I could feel the breeze rush down and over her skin. It had grown warm in the room and the gentle wind the fan produced was cooling, comforting.

The next step was to release her and get her cleaned and fed. We’d gotten through the worst of it. I gradually lowered Alex back to the bed then sat alongside her and ran my hands down the length of her slender arms. I leaned down, my mouth hovering above hers. I whispered softly, “Come back to yourself. Come back to me.”

A sweetly tender smile graced her lips as she opened her eyes and looked at me.

“I’m all right,” she said, reaching up to cup the side of my face in the palm of her hand.

“I know.”

“I could feel you inside of me, holding me. I…”

“Shh. You’ve been through a lot. You need to bathe, eat, rest.”

Alex sat up. “Are you kidding? I feel fabulous!”

“Trust me, you could use a bath.” I laughed, standing up so I could retrieve her robe from the chair.

I reached down for the robe then paused. My vision clouded over, my legs suddenly like rubber. I shook my head to clear it. I was supposed to be doing something, but I couldn't remember what that something was...

"Dell?"

"Huh?"

"Dell, what's wrong?" She was beside me on the floor, her face filled with concern. "Dell? Dell!"

I wanted to tell her not to worry. I wanted to tell her everything would be all right, that I'd be all right. But the world was fading to black, spinning out of control, and I couldn't seem to form the words.

My shields weren't strong enough anymore to hold up and I'd weakened myself past the point of being able to hold on. The last thing I heard was Alex's voice as she cried out for help followed by the sound of the splintering doorframe.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“His vital signs have stabilized,” I heard my mother say. “I think he’s just exhausted.”

“I’m so sorry,” Alex whispered, her voice thick with remorse. “This is all my fault.”

“I know it’s hard to remember sometimes, dear. It’s hard for me to remember, but Dell’s immortal, he’s healing himself. He just needs rest, and time.”

“You need rest too,” Chris interjected. “You haven’t slept for almost two days.”

“I’m not leaving him. He wouldn’t leave me. He...” A sob caught in Alex’s throat.

“I have to check on Luna,” Mom said.

“Violet—”

“No. We’ve been through this, Chris. There’s nothing more I can do. She doesn’t want to see you. I don’t know why, but she’s been very clear on that point.”

“She doesn’t want you to remember her this way. That’s what she said the night she arrived,” Alex interjected. “How long have you and Luna been friends?”

“We were never friends,” he replied, his voice sounding almost hollow.

“Then why did she feel the need to protect me?” Alex asked.

“Because I’d failed to. Because I was with *her*. When your mother was killed and you were kidnapped, I was with Luna.”

My mother sighed. “It’s not like you had a choice. It’s not like you could have stopped—”

“That’s just it!” he yelled. “I never asked her to stop coming. I *enjoyed* it, Violet. I may be a street rat, but I’m not totally stupid. What Luna and I had...it never could have amounted to anything. I was one of what? Dozens, probably hundreds. I loved Isabelle. I loved her with all my heart but...”

He was crying now, his voice cracking, its pitch high and unsteady.

“You loved Luna, too,” Alex finished softly.

“Chris,” my mother soothed, “it was a long time ago. Let it go. Forgive yourself. Forgive Luna. Move on.”

He laughed. “Move on. I don’t know how.”

“It’s too late for you to save Isabelle. Nothing you do will bring her back. But you have your daughter now, and you have a second chance. Don’t let it pass by.”

“A second chance to do what?”

“To save the woman you love.”

“I thought you said there was nothing more you could do for her?”

“There isn’t. Luna is dying because she isn’t feeding. She hasn’t for a very, very long time. Not since that night.”

“The night Isabelle died? I want to see her,” Chris said again. “Let me see her, Violet.”

“I let you in there and then what?”

“I’ll do what’s right,” he said.

“And what’s right, Christian? Are you going to sit there and hold her hand while she dies? Is that what’s right?”

“I don’t know,” he growled, frustrated.

“You know,” Mom replied, “you’re just afraid to be honest with yourself.”

“That’s not true!” he protested.

“It is true. Have you sat on the fence for so many years that the splinters have crawled up your ass and lodged themselves into your brain?”

“Violet!”

“Christian! Do you love her?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It’s *always* been that simple,” Mom rebutted. “Stop being an idiot. *Save her. Save yourself.*”

Save yourself.

Everything began to slip away, voices fading into the darkness as I drifted deeper into a rejuvenating sleep. In my mind’s eye I could see it, a small bright light, the miniature ball of fire that, when I was healed, would show me the way home, the way back.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When I woke up, I was alone. That shouldn't have surprised me, and it shouldn't have disappointed me, but it did. I glanced at the bedside clock. It was close to midnight. The room was dark except for the stream of light pouring in from the half-open bathroom door.

I could hear the shower running and the exotic aroma of clove drifted out. I climbed out of the bed intent on joining Alex. Stripping my clothes off, I let them fall carelessly to the floor. As I crossed the threshold I could see her through the glass doors that surrounded the shower stall, she was standing in the midst of a blanket of steam, water sheeting down her luscious body, washing away the soap. I took a moment to admire the line of her back, the curve of her ass and her long, slender legs, legs I intended to wrap around my waist.

I opened the door then quietly stepped inside, encircled her waist with both of my arms and held her flush against me. Her body was warm and wet and she smelled incredible.

"Dell!" she gasped.

I released her, but only long enough to let her turn around and face me.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "I've been so worried."

"Right as rain," I told her, cupping her face in the palms of my hands. I lowered my mouth to hers in a gentle kiss that was soft and tender, just my lips pressing against hers. I pulled back to look into her eyes.

"Immortal, remember? How about you, are you all right?"

"Right as rain," she repeated, winding her arms around my neck. She stepped closer, backing me up against the door.

I was momentarily aware of the press of cold glass against my ass, but the sensation of Alex's slick breasts with their pebbled nipples sliding across my chest was much more compelling.

"God, I missed you," she moaned, positioning herself so that she straddled my thigh.

I could already smell her desire and the scent of her arousal mixed with the spicy clove was mouth-watering.

I wrapped my arm around her slender waist and pulled her hard up against me, giving her the friction she was craving. Alex moaned and her head dropped back, the tips of her hair brushing across my forearms, her breasts jutting out in invitation.

Like a starving man I latched on, pulling as much of her into my mouth as I could and sucking hard, working her nipple with my tongue.

“Dell.” Alex moaned, lacing her fingers in my hair and holding on tight. “That feels amazing. More. I want more—”

I released her breast and attacked her mouth hungrily. I wanted more too, was demanding more. I pushed her up against the glass wall. Whether it was the impact or the cool glass that startled her I don’t know and I didn’t care. She’d opened her mouth and I wasted no time slipping my tongue inside. I was on fire with desire, my cock hard between us, pressing into my stomach as I sipped from her lips, releasing every ounce of pent-up passion I’d been holding back.

Her hand grabbed at my biceps, her nails digging into my muscle, searching for purchase as she began to climb up my body. I reached down underneath her ass and lifted her so she could hook her legs over my hips. Her hand was wrapped around my cock, squeezing it, guiding me to her entrance.

My eyes rolled up as the engorged head brushed across her coarse curls, slipped between her warm, wet lips and started to slide inside.

“Don’t want to hurt you,” I murmured against the shell of her ear before dropping down to leave a trail of kisses along her jawline, down the length of her neck.

Alex fisted her hand in my hair and pulled me off of her so I could meet her gaze. Her pupils were wide with desire and she was flushed from the combination of heat and passion.

“Hurt me,” she demanded, pushing down against me, driving me further into her depths, her pussy pulling me in. The sensation was overwhelming, so tight, so ready, so wanting. “Oh, God,” she moaned, her eyes closing, her head banging back against the glass as the length of my cock dragged across her swollen clit.

I could feel my beast rising and I knew my eyes were flashing red, my fangs unsheathing, descending. “Look at me,” I demanded, my voice laced with the rumble of a low growl. And she did, her gaze unwavering as I thrust inside of her taking what I wanted, giving her what she needed.

A small cry escaped her throat and I stilled, ceasing all movement.

“All right?”

She smiled, but there were tears threatening to spill from her eyes. “Right as rain,” she whispered, lowering her forehead until it rested against mine, sinking down further until I was seated fully inside of her. Then she reached up, slipped her hand over the top edge of the shower and used that leverage to pull herself up.

As I withdrew slightly the scent of blood hit the air and something inside me stirred. “Wait,” I gasped.

“No more waiting,” Alex whispered against my lips before taking my lower one into her mouth and biting down.

My world exploded in a sea of desire.

“Yes!” she cried out when I was balls deep, the tip of my dick bumping up against her cervix.

“So good, baby,” I whispered into the shell of her ear. “You feel so fucking good.”

My hips were pistoning fast and furiously; thrust after thrust. I was buried to the hilt. I could hear the pounding of her heart, the rushing of her blood as it flowed through her veins. It was like a roar in my ears. I scented the air. I could still smell it. And I wanted it. I wanted it desperately. And my mouth was right there, hovering over her neck.

“Oh, Christ. Alex, I...”

Alex shattered around me, her pussy clenching down, milking me.

“I love you,” I confessed shooting deep inside her, coating her womb with my come. I was drowning in her taste and smell, the smell of the two of us combined with the perfume of Alex’s blood, fresh and potent.

I pulled out and lowered her to the floor.

She stumbled a bit and I reached out to steady her.

“I came close to biting you,” I confessed.

“But you didn’t.”

“We didn’t use a condom, Alex,” I added, feeling the panic begin to build. I’d never not used a condom before, never been so taken I’d forgotten the possible dangers.

She stepped into the spray of the shower and she pulled me along with her. Then she bent over and picked the sponge up off the floor. When she’d dropped it I wasn’t quite sure. My hand developed a mind of its own, reaching around her to caress her bottom. I couldn’t stop touching her, wanting her, wanting more of her.

“So, next time you’ll wear a condom and I’ll wear a leather collar,” she teased as she poured some of the clove shower gel onto the sponge and began to wash my chest.

And there was definitely going to be a next time. My father was right. We were playing with fire.

Chapter Twenty-Five

When I woke it was early morning, the sun barely up. Alex was splayed across my body, one leg draped casually over mine, her arm curled around my waist, her head resting in the crook of my shoulder. She never even stirred as I slipped from the bed and into the shower. Looking down on her now, I once again admired her beauty.

“Are you hungry?” I whispered, placing a kiss softly on her forehead.

She opened one eye and lazily smiled up at me. “Sleepy,” she yawned, “some very enthusiastic vampire wore me out last night.”

I pulled the blankets up around her shoulders. “I believe that was me.”

“Maybe. There’s definitely a resemblance. If you were to take your pants off I could probably tell for sure,” she whispered, her eyes drifting shut as she once again began to succumb to sleep.

Although I would have loved to crawl back into bed, wrap myself around her warm body and make love to her again, the truth was that I was ravenous and the smell of pancakes cooking down in the kitchen was only fueling my appetite.

“I’ll bring you up pancakes,” I told her, standing up and slipping a T-shirt over my head.

“Pancakes?”

“For food she awakens.”

Alex sat up. “I’m starving.”

“Meet me downstairs. Or do you want me to wait?”

“Promise to leave me some?” she asked, slipping from the bed and snuggling into my embrace. She was completely nude, the scent of our lovemaking still clinging to her.

“Alex,” I murmured. I ran my hands up and down the length of her bare back, my lips brushing across the top of her head. “Right now I think I’d promise you just about anything.”

She looked up at me with those amazing green eyes and they sparkled with unconcealed mischief.

“Anything?” she asked stepping out of my embrace. She retrieved her robe from the end of the bed and slipped it on.

“I live but to service you, my lady,” I declared with a sweeping bow. “What do you have in mind?”

I was betting whatever it was, I was going to like it...a lot.

“Crap,” she pouted when her cell phone rang, interrupting what was shaping up to be an interesting conversation. She moved toward her purse.

“Ignore it,” I told her.

“I can’t,” she replied, even before pulling out the phone. “It’s Sullivan. He’s probably worried.”

He had his own ring tone? Of course he did. He was her boyfriend, wasn’t he? She’d spent the night in my bed. I’d spent the night in her body. But the human had his own ring tone. Bastard.

I reached for the phone, swiping it with one hand while I pushed her down onto the bed with a firm shove from the other.

Alex gasped, landing with a bounce, her robe splayed open to display those glorious tits, taut stomach and thick thatch of dark curls.

Overcome by a sense of fierce possessiveness, I tossed the phone aside, then I climbed onto the bed and straddled her, my conquest.

“He’ll call back.”

“And when he does, you’ll tell him,” I told her, placing my hand around one of her ample breasts and palming it gently before rolling the nipple firmly between my thumb and forefinger.

“You don’t break up with someone over the phone.”

I leaned down and sucked her breast into my mouth, biting down and worrying the nipple between my teeth. I could feel my fangs start to unsheath.

“Christ, Dell!” she gasped as one of my incisors grazed the top of her breast leaving a superficial scrape.

My cock was hard and stiff and it wanted to be inside her again. I wanted to take her. I wanted to make her mine.

“Tell me it’s me you want,” I demanded, pausing in my ministrations to look up at her.

For a moment confusion clouded her face. “It’s you I want. You know it’s you I want.”

I did know. I knew she wanted me but I needed to hear her say it. Now that she had, it wasn’t enough.

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” The reassuring words spilled from her mouth.

I felt like crying. I never cried.

“Dell, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head and looked away, embarrassed. Then I climbed off the bed. “I don’t know. Tired, maybe. I...”

“What? Talk to me,” she whispered, encircling my waist with her arms, pulling me into what should have been a comforting embrace.

A minute passed, then another. I wrestled with my feelings, not sure how to put them into words she could understand, not sure that I understood.

“Dell?”

“It’s not going to be enough,” I finally said.

“What’s not going to be enough?”

I was sick to my stomach. My eyes burned. I didn’t want to turn and face her, but I did.

“This,” I told her, gesturing between us. “You and me. I’m going to want...more.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not human, Alex. Something inside of me has risen and it wants you, it wants to make you mine, to mark you as mine so there’s no mistaking who it is you belong to.”

Alex smiled softly. “I am yours.”

“For now. I want you to be mine...forever.”

“I’m not going to live forever, Dell. I wouldn’t want to.”

I nodded. “What if...”

“What?”

“What about if it was just for the rest of our lives? Really, really long lives?”

“Dell...”

“I’m afraid it’s going to come to this eventually, probably before you’re ready for it, before I’m ready for it, maybe not today, maybe not this year, but eventually. A decision is going to have to be made, it’s inevitable.”

“We have time,” she said, her eyes now glistening with tears.

Soon my aging would arrest. Alex’s would continue. For her, the decades between now and her eventual old age seemed great. In comparison to the years I had before me, even the years we could spend together as a mated couple, they were miniscule. “Not a lot.”

“But things are good.” Tears leaked from her eyes. “I’m happy. We’re happy. Aren’t we?”

I cradled her face in the palms of my hands and kissed her tears away. “Yes,” I assured her. “Very happy.”

“Can’t we leave it at that, for now? Please?”

How the hell had it come to this so fast? I brushed Alex’s tears away. She was right, neither one of us was ready to have this conversation. It was too soon. It made no sense. My head knew that was true, but my heart? My heart had been swept up and was riding the crest of the wave. My eyes were drawn to the phone. Now that the spell had been erased, Alex had a chance at normal. I was standing in the way of that. A relationship with me would never be normal.

“Don’t even think about walking away,” she said with an unexpected fierceness.

I lowered my lips to hers and kissed her tenderly, releasing a promise I knew I’d never have the strength to break. If anyone was going to walk away from this, it was going to have to be her. “Never. I love you, Alex.”

“And I love you.”

I thought we were going to leave it at that.

“But someday that’s not going to be enough, someday you’re going to want more,” she said.

I held her close, released a breath, then spoke from my heart. “Yes, someday I’m going to want more.”

“And if I say no? When that day comes, if I’m not ready, if I need more time... Will you still love me?”

“Alex, I will *always* love you.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

I left Alex upstairs to shower and wandered down to the kitchen in search of pancakes and a talk with my father. I assumed he was cooking and expected to see him standing in front of the stove, spatula in hand. Pancakes were one of his specialties, banana nut. But it wasn't my father, it was Luna and I was totally unprepared.

This time her beauty took my breath away. She was radiant, the air about her humming with an undeniable sexual charge. Her indigo hair framed her face, cascading over her shoulders and down her back in a spill of thick, loose curls. As she turned to me it was almost as if a breeze were blowing about her, warm and gentle. The gown she wore clung to her now curvaceous body like a second skin ending in a pool of what looked like liquid mercury. Her azure blue wings fluttered behind her lazily, releasing what appeared to be a sprinkling of metallic silver powder that disappeared before it hit the floor.

Arousal slammed into me before I had time to shield myself. Every ounce of blood in my body was rushing to my dick making it stiff, hard, ready.

"I am sorry, vampire," Luna said, retracting her wings. She turned back to the stove and busied herself removing the pancakes from the griddle. "Forgive me. It's been so long since I've been this strong, I've forgotten."

"Can you help her contain it?" Chris asked me, he was standing a few feet from her, a steaming coffee mug in his hand. I hadn't even noticed him before. Luna turned off the flame and went to join him, moving into his embrace.

"I'm afraid I am almost drunk on the power," she admitted.

Chris ran his hand over her hair. "A dampening spell maybe?"

"If it's all right with Luna."

"Make it so," Luna nodded.

I cupped my hands and raised them up. "*Habannatu*," I whispered into them, then I blew, softly, propelling the invisible blanket forward. In the space of a moment, Luna's power was essentially shut down. It happened so quickly, the transformation so abrupt, it was staggering.

"Better?" Chris asked.

"Yeah," I muttered on my way to the door that led onto the back porch. "I'm just going to, um, step outside for a minute."

"There's no need to be embarrassed, vampire. I'm used to the affect I have on men." She glanced down at my obvious erection.

"I need coffee," I said, heading over to the pot to pour myself a cup. "Alex is going to be down here in a few minutes and—"

"I assumed since you're well again she'd finally given in and allowed herself some sleep. She wouldn't hear of it while you were in stasis," Chris said.

"I came out of it late last night. Alex slept...some." I took a sip of the steaming brew. It was a dark roast, stout and bitter.

"You kept your promise, for that I'll always be grateful."

I waited for the other shoe to drop and Chris didn't disappoint me. He was a glass-half-empty kind of guy. I've always attributed the rain cloud over his head to the fact that he lost his wife and child at a young age and probably hadn't been laid since. But here he was, with his daughter back and a succubus in his arms and he was about to rain a shit storm down on my parade.

"But you're both so young," he continued. "You have so much ahead of you. I hate to see either one of you do something you'll regret and end up hurt."

I pulled out one of the breakfast-table chairs, spun it around, and straddled the seat. "Is this the part where you lecture me about my impulsive nature?"

Chris looked surprised. "Do I do that?"

I laughed. "Are you kidding? Ever since I was a kid, Chris."

"You're still a kid," he rebutted.

I held my tongue and counted to ten. "No. I'm not. I'm not a kid any more, and I'll tell you something else. I *know* I'm going to have regrets. But give me a choice between regretting what I've done and regretting what I haven't? I'll chose regretting what I've done any day. It's not in my nature to sit on the sidelines. I've been encouraged to push the envelope my entire life. I couldn't have become what I am, gotten to this place, without taking risks, stretching myself."

"And where exactly are you, Dell? You going to tell me you think doing somebody else's bidding, abandoning your father so you could run off to be the errant wizard for some faceless organization is an accomplishment to be proud of?"

"No. But it was something I had to do."

"Why?"

"So it could come to this. So we could all be here...now."

"Bullshit."

"Okay," I said, holding up my hands in surrender. "You tell me... Why did I leave the Academy to go and work with the PSF?"

“Because you’re self-absorbed. Your entire life you’ve been the golden boy, but that was never enough. You always wanted to be the best and you couldn’t be. Not here. Not with your old man around. You’d never be a match for him, be as powerful, not even with the aid of magic. So you left to go someplace where you could be the top dog. He’s given you everything, *everything* your entire life and you couldn’t even manage to remain loyal to him.”

“Is that what you really think?” I asked, too stunned to react. Should I feel angry, hurt, indignant? I stood and replaced the chair, then I turned back to face him.

“I am loyal to my father. I’ve always been loyal to him, because I love him and I believe in him. But I am my father’s son, so above all else, I follow my heart and my conscience. If you don’t know that, you don’t understand me at all.”

I grabbed the plate of pancakes, muttered a quick thanks to Luna, and headed for the exit but Chris couldn’t leave well enough alone.

“And what is your heart and conscience telling you about my daughter?” he called out, stopping me at the threshold.

I closed my eyes and swallowed. “My heart has chosen her, identified her as mine. My conscience reminds me that we’re young. We have time. Think what you want of me, but I would never force Alex to do something she didn’t want to do, something she wasn’t ready for.”

“What if she thinks she’s ready, but she’s not?”

“We’d talk it over. If, in the end, it’s what she says she wants, I would trust her,” I replied.

“You seem to have all the answers,” he said snidely.

I smiled. “Truthfully? I’m flying by the seat of my pants, like always.”

“Yeah? Well this time, if you crash, you take my daughter with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I made it half way to the stairs before I faltered. Something had happened, it lasted only a moment, but in that time the balance had been disrupted. There was the presence of power. Unmistakable. Undeniable. Then it was gone. I wiped the sweat that had beaded on my brow then released the breath I'd been holding. That's when the sound of gunshots, firing from below, rang out.

I tossed the plate I was carrying onto the entry table.

"Alex?" I shouted.

"I heard," she replied racing down the stairs. She threw me my pistol. I caught it in my right hand and switched off the safety.

All hell was breaking loose. Chase, Lily, Mom and Dad flew into the upstairs hallway. My father and Chase began to race down the stairs. Lily and Mom following behind. The intruder alert system hadn't been triggered. The house was silent.

"There's no alarm," said Lily. "Maybe everything's fine."

Chris and Luna came from the direction of the kitchen.

"Or it's been contained to The Vault, for now," said my father. "You and your mother need to go to the safe room. Now!"

"I counted eight, maybe nine shots," said Alex, making her way closer to the basement door, gun at the ready.

"Status!" Chase shouted into his earpiece. "Somebody down there give me a fucking status!"

Like the last time, Alex was poised to take the lead. She was ten, maybe twelve feet from the entrance. Only this wasn't like the last time. Alex was different now. Normal. Vulnerable. "Let me go—"

Before I finished my sentence the door flew open. In it stood an immortal I'd never seen before. The weapon he was carrying I had. It was a Glock just like Alex's. *Alex...*

The sound of gunfire was almost deafening. There wasn't enough time to shield her with magic, instead I tried to shield her with my body.

At times like this, everything seems to happen in slow motion, actions slowing down practically to the point of suspension.

It was going to take less than a fraction of a second for the bullet to travel through the air to its inevitable destination. My mind was clear, my focus singular, my purpose narrowed down to one thing, the need to absorb that bullet.

I launched myself into the air, stretching my body into an arch as I dove in front of it. At the same time I focused my energy on the intruder. He'd gotten off one round, he wasn't going to fire another.

"*Elu Ezubu Arhis Sube'u.*" The ice-cold blast rose up within me, propelling itself outward just as the bullet grazed my side. It was like a hot poker. *Please*, I thought as my hands touched the ground and I tucked myself into a ball, rolling to absorb the force of the fall. *Please*.

But the piercing scream told me I'd been too late, I'd missed my chance, I'd failed.

I climbed to my feet, oblivious to anything around me but the site of Alex on the floor and the rapidly spreading circle of crimson blood.

"Towels!" I heard my mother yell. "Chase, quickly, get towels!"

I was the first to get to her. I peeled the T-shirt from my body, then fell quickly to my knees and reached for her hand. Instinctively, she'd placed it over the wound, it was covered in blood. I didn't care. I placed the shirt on her stomach. Mom took over, applying pressure.

"It...it hurts," Alex cried.

"Shh, I know baby," I told her, kissing her fingers. "It's going to be all right."

"Dell! Release the shield," Chase shouted. "I can't get out."

I looked up to the top of the stairs. Chase was unable to move past the edge of the hallway. I could feel it again...magic...and it wasn't mine. I stood and walked over toward the intruder. The smell of the blood had driven my beast forth. The rage had boosted my powers. The air around me stirred as I moved, snapping and popping.

"Who are you?" I growled, reaching out, intent on probing his mind.

"Malcolm," my father answered. "It's Malcolm, Dell."

Chris had picked up Alex's gun. He was holding it in his left hand, he had his right hand wrapped around Malcolm's throat and he was squeezing, hard. If I didn't stop him, he was going to break Malcolm's windpipe."

"Let him go, Chris," I told him.

"Let him *go*? Are you kidding me? He's going to pay. He shot my daughter!" he shouted, his eyes filled with tears.

"We don't have time for this!" Mother cried. "We have to get Alex to a hospital."

I placed my hand over Chris's wrist and let the power crawl over him, not a lot, just a little.

"Don't make me use force," I whispered. "I'd rather not waste any of my energy on this." I nodded to Malcolm. "This one...he has no magical power. There's someone else involved, someone strong enough to penetrate our shields without setting off any alarms and trap us in one of his own."

The instant Chris released him, Malcolm started coughing and sputtering. He was still pinned to the wall, I left him that way, arms spread out, feet dangling in mid-air.

"Can I...can I have some water?"

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Chris growled, tossing the gun onto the entry table. He stomped over to the fireplace and picked up the wedge and hatchet my father kept there to split logs. Within seconds he'd returned.

"Chris..." I warned.

He glared at me. "Don't worry. I'll make sure he can still talk."

"How's Alex?" I asked.

Mom looked up at me. I could tell by the strain on her face she was worried. "She's conscious. There's no exit wound, no way for me to know where the bullet is or how much damage was done. I'm a psychiatrist, Dell. She needs a surgeon."

"How much time do we have?"

"Not much."

"Fuck!" I growled.

"I'll start with his toes, work my way up his legs, then move to his fingers," Chris suggested.

Malcolm had enough sense to piss his pants. Chris was serious.

"If my daughter dies," he continued, "I'm going to chop you up into twenty-five pieces, one for each year of her life. Then I'm going to box each of them up, encase them in cement and bury them in the most remote locations I can find. Don't worry, Dell, I'll get him to talk."

I didn't need Malcolm to talk. Actually, it would have been really sweet if everyone would just shut the fuck up. I returned to Alex.

"You are not going to die," I told her, relieving my mother and applying pressure to the wound. "Not today."

She gave me a watery smile. I could tell she was in pain and she'd lost a lot of blood. The normally golden glow of her skin was becoming more ashen by the second.

"Dell...I..."

"Shh. Save your strength."

"Please," I heard Malcolm plead. "The b-b-bullet wasn't meant for your daughter. That was an accident. I'm sure the boy can fix things. Right?"

"It was meant for Violet," my father said softly. He was quite a bit taller than Malcolm, so in his current state he was able to look him in the eye. "You came here to kill Violet, to kill me."

"Can you break the shield?" Mom asked me. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand, leaving a streak of blood on her forehead that looked like war paint. It was fitting. No one understood yet, but we were at war.

Behind us, my father was still wasting time with Malcolm. "Why?"

"I am faithful to the Father," he said indignantly. "What you've done is wrong."

“Malcolm is faithful to Malcolm,” my father spat. “You’ve been breaking Cain’s rules for decades. If we hadn’t cleaned you out, you’d still be peddling drugs and whores for pocket money. Who is helping you?”

I knew who it was. Malcolm was inconsequential. He was nothing more than an excuse, a tool.

“Enough!” I shouted, staring down at the blood on my hands. “It’s Basta!” I looked up to meet my father’s gaze. “It’s Basta.”

“No!” he protested. “Dell, that makes no sense. Basta has loved you like a son. He helped raise you. He’s been a member of this family for—”

I shook my head. “A wizard can always penetrate his own shield.”

“But why?” my mother asked. She’d just removed the white linen tablecloth from the entry table and was signaling me to swap it out for the soaked-through T-shirt.

“Because he thinks if I lose everything that’s important to me, I’ll turn to him. He didn’t work with me all those years for nothing. He’s getting old. His power may be endless, but his body isn’t. He needs a new vessel, a worthy vessel. He’s not merely looking to transfer his power, he wants to merge it, grow it...with mine.”

“My God,” gasped my father, the gravity of what I was saying finally dawning on him.

“You refused him?” Chris asked.

“Of course I refused him!” I shouted.

My mother reached for me. “Dell, can you break the shield?”

“That’s not the answer,” I told her. “Is it?” I shouted up to the heavens. “Is it, you sanctimonious bastard?”

“Whatever it is, Dell. Do it!” Chris begged. “Do it!”

My heart was pounding, my eyes burning from tears I refused to let fall. I needed to remind myself to breathe, think. I needed to be in control.

“I can’t lose you,” I whispered to Alex, pushing down my beast and locking it firmly away. Then I lifted one hand into the air. “*Alka*,” I commanded and the spell book appeared, breaking through the shield just like I knew it would.

“Dell, no!” Alex whimpered. “Please. You don’t want to lose yourself either.”

“There’s no other way.”

“You...you said it yourself. There’s always another way,” she countered.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked.

Alex reached for her. “Don’t let him do it. It’s dark magic. Basta’s tempting him so he’ll give in...give up. Don’t...” She was tiring now, her breathing becoming more labored, her vital signs slowing. “Don’t let him...”

My mother's eyes met mine across Alex's body. She'd loved me my entire life, always believing in me, her faith unwavering. I watched a shadow of doubt appear, then vanish.

"You sure about this?" she asked.

"Yes."

I'd never been so sure about anything in my life.

"I love you."

"Love you too, Mom." I climbed to my feet, prepared to do what was necessary.

"Dell!" I heard my father cry out, but it was too late. I was done talking, done listening. I opened the book and held it out in front of me.

"*Elu*," I whispered, releasing the book. I stepped back spreading my arms wide. A wind rose up inside of me, and I embraced it like a lover, coaxing it, encouraging it. My skin itched, stretched, and still I held on, drawing in the power, taking it from where I could. I was limited to the contents of the shield. I started with Chase, Chris, Luna, Malcolm and my father. They were the strongest, the ones who could most easily heal. I started with them, but they wouldn't be enough to finish it. Basta knew that and I knew that.

The house began to shake from beneath; it started as an almost imperceptible tremor.

"*Alla Xul. Ati Me Peta Babka*," I shouted.

Chase dropped to his knees.

"What's wrong?" Lily cried out, trying to grab hold of him.

"Do...whatever you need to do," Chris ground out, leaning on Luna for support. He fell before she did. Most of her energy was borrowed, but the power at the base of it was very old.

Luna dropped then I turned to Malcolm. He slid from the wall, falling onto the floor.

"No!" He shook his head and climbed to his feet. But there was nowhere for him to run. Nowhere for him to hide.

As soon as he felt the intrusion he realized he wasn't strong enough to guard against it and his eyes widened from fear. He should have been afraid, he should have been very afraid. I was. His power was tasty, tempting, and I let it flow into me.

"Help me!" Malcolm gasped, stumbling backwards until his shoulder slammed into the wall.

"You have no friends here, Dominie," I spat.

Malcolm's eyes were darting about the room, searching, hoping.

The power continued to flow. I closed my eyes and rode it, wave after wave, like a vast ocean. It seemed endless. Laughter bubbled up in my throat. But I pushed it back down.

When my eyes opened again I saw that Malcolm had fallen. I turned to my father. He was waiting. He knew what I needed and he gave it to me, without thought, without question. "Remember whose son you truly are," he said. Then he unlocked the door, exposing himself. His energy slammed into me, cascading

down almost faster than I could absorb it. The walls were shaking, the ceiling above cracked and bits of plaster began to rain down.

“Usella Mituti Ikkalu Baltuti!” I cried out. I was close to the point of bursting. The energy crawled over me, tiny pinpoints of light leaking through the pores of my flesh.

I delved into her, my mind taking her mind, my body now her body, blood, sinew, bones, searching, seeking, feeling.

“It’s not enough,” I heard him hiss. *“You are going to have to choose.”* He was here, somewhere, watching, witnessing my struggle, wanting to see me choose. He was here, just like I knew he would be.

“Usella Mituti Ikkalu Baltuti!” I shouted out again over the din. The timbers of the house were being stressed beyond measure. I held my hands out over Alex. I could feel it. I could feel everything. The light bulbs around the house began to explode, one following the other in quick succession. Mirrors shattered. Windows burst showering us with shards of broken glass.

My hand closed around it, hot and scalding, it burned into my palm and still I held on. There was damage to her liver and intestine, extensive damage. Stomach acids were spilling into her body, infection spreading. Her pressure was dropping, her heart rate irregular. She was going into shock.

“It doesn’t need to come to this,” I said, looking at the empty space where I knew he was cloaked. As soon as I’d located him, he dropped his shield.

“Help me. Set this right.”

“Right!” he scoffed. *“What is right? She is your intended mate. Is it right to let her die when you have the power within you to save her? Is that right, Randall?”*

“This isn’t about her.” Turning my still-fisted hand over, I raised it up, slowly. *“And it isn’t about me. This is about you.”* Unbidden, tears leaked from my eyes and ran down my cheeks. *“Everything you taught me, everything you gave me... It was all about you.”*

“Choose,” he said, his snow white hair blowing about his shoulders. He stepped inside the shield, his silken slippers crunching the glass beneath his feet.

“Show me you are worthy and we will become one. Together, we will save her.” Basta stared down at Alex, unconscious on the floor, lying in a pool of blood. *“Then, together we will have her.”* A smile of triumph spread across his face, delight shined in his eyes. He looked victorious.

An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. A life for a life.

That’s all that was left to do to save her, all the spell needed. A death. No, a kill.

I looked about the room. Both Chris and Chase were now in stasis. I couldn’t take any more from Luna without causing irreparable harm. My father was barely conscious. The only others standing were Lily and my mother.

“Choose!” Basta roared.

They made no attempt to hide, no attempt to cower. Their skin was marred by dozens of tiny scratches as a result of the explosion of glass and debris. My mother's hands still covered in Alex's blood. But they stood tall, their trust in me strong.

The biggest danger of magic is that you begin to believe you can do anything. And with enough power, with enough skill, with enough compromise, you can. I had the power and skill, I always had. It was the compromise I wasn't good at. Because when it came down to it, in the final tally, I was my father's son.

"Stop being weak!" Basta growled. "Do what needs to be done. This is your fate. Fulfill your destiny!"

And I did. Basta had been a good teacher. The powerful make up their own rules, he would whisper into the darkness, cheating destiny at every turn. When he'd lost his humanity, I didn't know. Right now I didn't care. Beneath the power, beneath the magic, *I* knew he was human still, even if *he'd* forgotten.

I unfisted my hand and the smell of burning flesh, hot and acrid filled my nostrils. I swallowed down the bile that had risen in my throat along with my childhood faith.

"*Ana Simtim Alaku*," I whispered, lifting my hand up, in front of my mouth. *Go to your fate*. The bullet spun, rising into the air. "You know nothing of my destiny," I told him, dropping all control. My power unfurled, propelling the bullet forward toward its mark.

The look of astonishment on his face as the bullet penetrated his heart clearly telegraphed his surprise. Hands clutched to his chest he stumbled back and fell against the wall.

"No!" he gasped. "Randell..."

"It didn't have to be this way." I told him, then I finished it. "*Ditallu*."

Epilogue

The explosion was blinding and the strength of the blast not only propelled me backwards, it also blew out the side of the house and half of the staircase. Daylight streamed in, flooding the scene in a stark light. A water pipe in the broken wall had burst and water was pouring down, washing away the ash, mixing with the blood.

I'd managed somehow to climb to my feet while I surveyed the landscape of destruction. The beautiful home I'd grown up in, the home that had been a safe haven all my life was in ruins. I shook my head, trying to clear it. Alex...I had to get to Alex.

"Son?" I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder.

It was my father. Before I could respond, before I could say anything, he pulled me into an embrace.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my throat so tight I could barely utter the words. "I should have told you."

He shook his head. "Sometimes a man needs to find his own way, fight his own demons, make his own choices."

"Dell?"

It was Alex. She'd pulled herself into a sitting position and ripped open her bloodied blouse. Water was raining down on her. She was soaked through, her stomach cleansed, its flesh unspoiled, unmarred. There was no sign of injury.

"Good Lord, Dell." My mother ran her hands over Alex's perfectly pristine torso. "I think you healed her."

"Dell?" Alex was trying to stand, wanting to come to me, but Mother was discouraging her.

"Slow down, Alex," she cautioned. "You've been through a lot..."

Alex was only across the room, but it felt like we were separated by a gap as great as eternity itself. As I stumbled toward her, my knees weak, my legs feeling like rubber, I realized both how true that was and how easily the chasm could be breached. All it took was moving forward, both of us, one step at a time.

We met at the edge of the crimson pool. The press of her body against mine, the taste of her lips, the scent of her blood, I couldn't speak, couldn't think. There was nothing, anything to do but *feel* as I covered her mouth with mine and savored that which I'd almost lost. The kiss was long and slow and deep, like all our kisses would be from here on out.

"Are you all right?" she asked when it finally ended.

“Right as rain.” I said even as my teeth began to chatter. The cold water was still raining down on us and exhaustion was quickly taking hold.

“Liar,” she teased. Slipping her arm around my waist she let me lean on her. She seemed strong, steady, certain. “We’ve got to get you out of these wet clothes. Got to get you warm.”

I took one step, then another. On the third I went down. I would have landed hard, too, but she was there to catch me, to wrap me in her arms, to bath me in her warmth, to let me soak up her humanity. I started to slip away...

“Dell?”

“Tired,” I managed to get out just as my eyes closed.

Alex leaned down, her lips brushing against the shell of my ear.

“You’ll come back to me?” she asked, her voice filled with emotion. “Promise me you’ll come back to me?”

“I will *always* come back to you,” I told her. Then I pillowed my head against the finest pair of tits I’d ever seen and drifted off knowing they were mine. Knowing *she* was mine. And I? I was hers. So what if it wasn’t official yet. It would be, someday, when we were both ready. Meanwhile...we had this. One another. Love.

I’d won the girl.

I am my father’s son.

About the Author

Samantha Sommersby lives in San Diego with her husband and teenaged son. She is the author of multiple novels and novellas including the critically acclaimed *Forbidden* series. In 2007 Samantha left what she used to call her “real life” day job as a psychotherapist to pursue writing full-time. She now happily spends her days immersed in the world of the *Forbidden*, a world where vampires, werewolves and demons are real, where magic is possible, and where love still conquers all.

To learn more about Samantha Sommersby, to follow her on Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, or Yahoo, or to sign up for her monthly newsletter, visit www.samanthasommersby.com. You may contact the author through her website or by sending an email to samantha@samanthasommersby.com.

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There's only one way to safeguard the future—fight free of the past.

Forbidden: The Ascension

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Byron Renfield is a master of climbing the social ladder. He's successful, handsome, independently wealthy...and a vampire. As a member of an elite group of immortals, the Dominie, Byron's spent centuries isolating himself from humanity in order to pursue redemption. It's a good plan...until Violet Deeds comes along.

Violet is beautiful, sexy, outspoken...and human, which makes her completely off limits. His society's canon may forbid it, but Byron is rocked by a longing so intense that in one impulsive act of passion, he claims Violet as his mate.

Irrevocably bound together, Byron and Violet enter one another's worlds, threatening the balance of society and nature. He takes steps to protect them both from the Dominie's inevitable retribution, but it isn't enough. Violet is hunted down and kidnapped. If Byron wants a life—any life—with Violet, he must defy the very core of the Dominie itself. And win.

WARNING: This book contains one fabulously feisty redheaded heroine, one hunky holy-man-turned-rebel vampire, a group of corrupt religious zealots, women in chains and plenty of scorching hot sex.

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Forbidden: The Ascension:

A knock at the door roused me from my self-pitying stupor. I wasn't expecting anyone and no one came uninvited. That's one of the advantages of living on an island. My heart skipped a beat and the palms of my hands began to sweat. Yes, my heart beats and my hands sweat. I'm immortal, not dead.

"Mr. Renfield?" It was a woman, on the other side of the door.

I picked up my discarded black cashmere sweater, pulled it on over my head, and hastily combed my fingers through my hair. It was time for a trim. That prompted me to run my hand over my chin to check for stubble. I needed a shave, too.

The knock came again.

I padded barefoot toward the front door, trying to remain calm even though my heart rate was increasing with each step. After confirming the door was locked, I laid my hand on the surface of it and closed my eyes. On the other side I detected a human, a woman. I shivered. Her pull seemed unusually strong. Already it was affecting me. All human women were dangerous, but this one...

“Mr. Renfield?”

“Yes?”

What on earth possessed me to answer? I should have just stood there. She probably would have gone away...eventually.

“It’s Violet. Violet Deeds,” she shouted over the din of the storm. “Could you let me in, Mr. Renfield? It’s awfully cold and wet out here. Grace invited me to stay for the weekend. She said you wouldn’t mind one more. It was so nice of you to—”

The fact that she was here, at my very door was unbelievable. Was it chance? Kismet? Before I was able to talk myself out of it, I opened the door. I told myself it was only idle curiosity. That I just wanted to get a glimpse of her, maybe chat a bit, nothing more.

“Come in.” I stepped back.

Violet rushed past me. “It’s a mess out there!”

I quickly closed the door, then turned to greet her. My breath caught in my throat. She was simply dazzling. Despite the cold, warmth radiated from her body. Her scent surrounded me, enveloping me in an aroma so intoxicatingly delicious it was almost dizzying. It had been a long time since I’d been in the presence of a human woman. I had almost forgotten how enticing they could be.

I swallowed. Perhaps opening the door had been a mistake. “Grace invited you, here?” I asked as she collapsed her umbrella and leaned it against the corner.

“Yes.” She extended her hand. “I received her letter about six weeks ago. Grace said she and Fred were going to be with you for a while and she invited me up. I wrote back to confirm. I would have called you personally as well, but...”

Her hand was small and delicate and it was waiting for me to grasp it. I reached out, slowly, and encircled it in mine. The tips of my fingers began to tingle. A hum spread throughout my body. Her skin was soft, but her handshake was firm and confident. My toes curled, digging into the lush oriental carpet of the entryway.

“I don’t have a phone,” I finished.

“Right.”

Seconds passed before Violet looked down and I realized her hand was still in mine. I cleared my throat and loosened my grip.

“Sorry. You must be freezing. I have a fire in the living room. Can I take your coat, Miss Deeds?”

“Yes, thank you.”

I watched, like a starving man, as she unfastened the buttons and peeled the leather off one shoulder, then the other. I was absolutely riveted. The supple-looking black cowhide slid down the length of her long, slender arms, gradually revealing them to me. I noticed immediately how translucent her skin was. The pale blue cast to her flesh reminded me of the blue moon that followed the eruption of Krakatau back in 1883.

That night had been surreal, too. I had stood in the streets of Singapore, ash raining upon me. That moon had been a spectacular sight, but not as spectacular as the vision before me.

Violet's rain-soaked hair hung in loose rivulets, framing her delicate features. Drops of water clung to her face and neck, glistening like jewels, making her flesh shimmer and making my mouth water. I imagined reaching out, touching her, gliding my hand over her exquisitely sculpted collarbone—better yet—my tongue. I imagined gliding my tongue over her collarbone, dipping it into the hollow of her throat before continuing the pleasurable journey downward to her warm, firm, perfectly round—

My eyes lifted to meet hers; they were green and clearly conveyed her annoyance.

"Sorry. Did you say something? I seem to be a bit distracted today."

"You were staring."

"You have lovely eyes."

"You were staring at my breasts."

There's got to be more to life than studying...

The Trouble With Destiny

© 2009 J.K. Coi

The starving student routine is starting to wear a little thin for Sarah McInnes. If only she could be left alone long enough, she could finish grad school, get a normal nine-to-five and finally afford to move out of her one-room apartment. Maybe even afford a decent wardrobe.

Destiny has other ideas. Not the least of which is the mysterious, overbearing, insufferable Dorian...who also happens to be the hottest thing this side of hell. Three months ago he saved her from certain dismemberment at the hands of a daemon. He also discovered she possesses the ability to send these beasts back to hell where they belong.

Now he not only won't leave her alone, he's forcing her to face certain facts: her social life isn't going to improve anytime soon. And she may never make it to calculus on time again.

It's enough to piss a girl off.

Warning: This title contains a beautiful, capable college student whose mystical tats have gotten her in almost as much trouble as her smart ass mouth. It also includes a devastatingly hot, mysterious warrior whose sense of humor is as non-existent as his humanity.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Trouble With Destiny:

Leaning forward to take the sludgy organ in my hand, I slipped on some goop under my right foot and my body pitched forward. I banged my forehead on the outer rim of the dumpster and it made a hollow *bong* that echoed loudly in my skull as if there were nothing in there but empty space—and that is *not* true. I have a 4.0 grade point average. Or at least I did before all *this* happened to my well-ordered life.

“Ouch. Stupid dumpster.” I kicked the inside panel of the container, feeling an overwhelming urge to hurt it as I had been hurt and not much caring that it was just an inanimate hunk of rusty metal.

Why had I even gotten out of bed today? That had obviously been my first mistake. My second mistake—or was it the third already?—and probably not the last if my luck held true, was climbing into this dumpster.

I moaned at the throb of pain in my head, but didn't dare rub it, not with the crap that was all over my hands from rooting around in the garbage. Great. I was going to have a nasty looking goose egg on my temple tomorrow. Just one more perk of a job I don't actually get paid for—a skyrocketing tab at the drugstore for pain meds and makeup to hide all my cuts and bruises.

Carefully, I climbed out of the large metal bin, which is trickier than you'd think when you've got a sword strapped to your back and a daemon's disgusting black heart in your slimy, dirty hands. I'm not making excuses. Try it sometime.

“What the hell are you doing in there, Sarah? If you’re hungry I can go inside and get you some take-out.”

I groaned and shook my head. Again, *why me?*

I didn’t have to see to know who the smartass standing behind me was. Even in the darkness, with one leg over the edge of the dumpster and my back to the alleyway’s entrance, I just had to hear that disdainful voice and chills ran up and down my spine. And not all of them were bad. While his voice is always dripping with disapproval when he speaks to me, it’s also the deepest, sexiest voice I’ve heard in my twenty-three years.

And so enters the bossman from hell.

Literally. It’s where he was born, or so he tells me. Apparently, he’s also the one who managed to get the last hell gate closed. It’s kind of like a black hole, but rather than sucking everything in the vicinity into it, it spews snarly, unnatural things out from it.

When a hell gate is opened from the other side, daemons can come and go between realms as they please. Just before I came into the picture, one such gate downtown just off of Yonge Street was apparently spilling the things left, right and center.

I thought it an odd location choice at first, but given all the big corporate law firms in that area, it actually makes sense that there’d also be a portal to a hell dimension.

My “boss” was the one who screwed the lid back on that can of noxious worms, and since then the two of us have been busy rounding up the straggler daemons and putting them out of their misery.

Just how he managed to close the gate, I don’t know. Most of the gory details of that feat have not been revealed to me. I pushed him once for more details with no success, and frankly, I’m surprised I managed to get even as much information as I did out of the tight-lipped, modern-day warrior.

What I had been told, though, I believed. The proof was in his deep, chocolate brown eyes. Hard, fathomless orbs that simmered with an unrelenting, unholy fire. A banked fire, but one that was never truly doused.

Even though my ass was pointing toward the sky as I hung over the edge of the dumpster, I was glad not to be facing him. I had a feeling those flames would be burning extra brightly, and that a slight drawing of his brows and barely perceptible tightening of his mouth would go along with the eyes to complete the picture. I had dubbed it his cranky look. Matter of fact, there were only two looks—the cranky look and the insufferable look.

The man sure did find a lot to be insufferably cranky about.

“Dorian.” I hoped my voice sounded calm and in control. Not like I felt. My body was frozen in place, but the essence of my every cell strained toward him. My free hand clutched the edge of the metal bin tighter. I must have looked absolutely ridiculous, and I’m sure I smelled ten times worse.

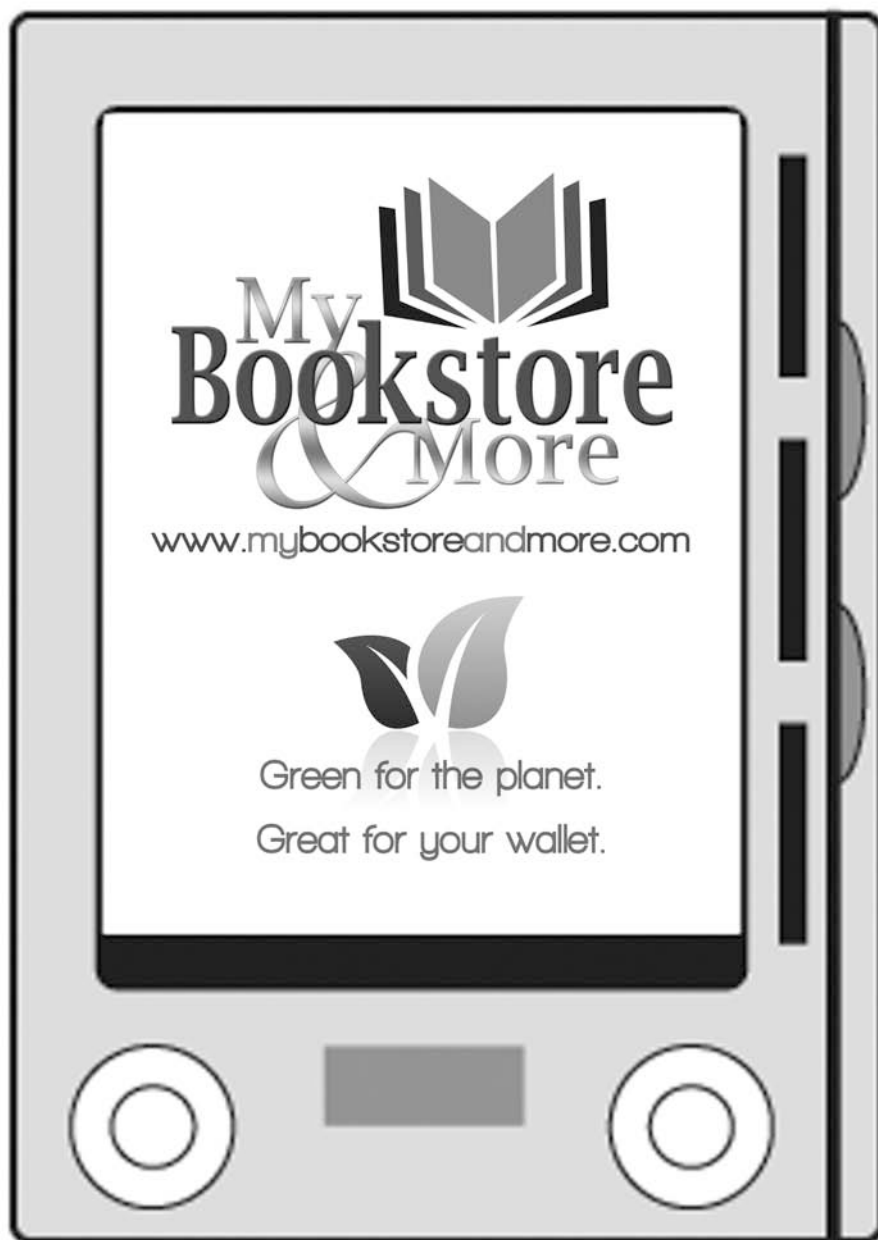
“Sarah.”

Oh man, that low timbre makes my whole body quiver, hot sparks of electricity shooting right through to my toes. I have no doubt that it's the same kind of thing the poor buzzing fly experiences as it's getting struck with a thousand volts of bright blue electricity from the backyard bug zapper.

The fireworks started to go off behind my eyes, popping in my ears, fizzy little bubbles mingling with all the butterflies in my belly. This was my reaction to just his voice. Embarrassing, especially considering he had never once touched me with anything but professional impartiality.

Our forced proximity the last few weeks had been...disconcerting, and it was getting harder and harder to keep my growing attraction under wraps. The long hours of sweaty physical strength and combat training he had me doing with him every night on top of the daemon hunting didn't help. Even now, with the fetid garbage forming a cloud of stench around me, it was a fight to tamp down the inappropriate reactions of my sex-deprived body.

I could feel his gaze on me, but of course he had yet to offer me any help, was probably just staring at my ass. And that worked to bring me right back to my senses.



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