

GIFTED
A
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ANTHOLOGY

OBEY
ME

PAIGE CUCCARO

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Gifted: Obey Me

Paige Cuccaro

Dedication

Thanks to Anne, and cheers to our first accomplishment together! Thanks to my family for supporting me while I chase my dream. Thanks to Jen and Chris for your keen eyes. Thanks to Katie and Wetlyne for your uplifting enthusiasm. Without all of you, exploring the worlds in my head would not be nearly as fun.

Chapter One

There was a dead woman lying at the end of the alley and I had to get to the body.

“Hey.”

I knew the cop was talking to me. One of Pittsburgh’s finest. I ignored him and lifted the crime scene tape higher to duck under.

“Hey. You. Get outta there.” He cut me off with four quick strides to the other side of the alley, planting his big donut-filled body in front of me.

“It’s okay. I’m a reporter.” I held up my press pass. I’d hung it around my neck when I first saw the police cars flying down Eighteenth Street in front of Primanti Brothers Restaurant. I’d been snagging a late-night bite and my spidey-reporter sense had gone all aflutter.

“I don’t care if you’re Geraldo-friggin’-Rivera. No one crosses the tape.”

Power-high jerk. I let go of the crime scene tape and straightened. I could’ve argued, freedom of the press and all, but I only glared at him, frustration tightening across my shoulders, my pen tapping an irritated beat against my note pad. He knew I was pissed.

This was my big break, I could feel it. My gaze left the bright emergency lights illuminating the dead body like some macabre photo shoot, and scanned up and down Smallman Street. Police were everywhere, swarming the area; their marked cars were left running, plain cars parked every which way with their single off-center lights flashing. So many police lights, they flashed off the metal warehouse walls like an outdoor discotheque.

The cops were checking chained doors, shining flashlights the size of baseball bats into car windows and stopping anyone who even glanced in the direction of the alley, asking them what they knew, who they saw, where they’d been. The crackle and hiss of radio dispatch, routing officers to other crimes and relaying info in code, echoed over the small crowd gathered to gawk. This was no run-of-the-mill mugging gone bad. Something was up. Something big. *Damn*, I had to get down that alley.

“So who is she?” I asked donut-cop. “Local celeb? She got political connections? Why the crazy calling-all-cars response?”

Here in the Strip District, a person can find fantastic restaurants, the hottest bars and a treasure-trove of merchandise at fell-off-the-truck prices. But like a coin, the Strip District has two sides, Penn Avenue, full of retail and entertainment bliss and the river side, Smallman Street where the seedier citizens of Pittsburgh find their jollies. The two streets are split by long rows of warehouses and after dark, the wise keep to Penn Avenue and the side streets.

Don’t get me wrong, murders, muggings, rapes and such aren’t nightly happenings down here next to the river, but when the call does come in it’s not exactly a surprise. It’s not the first time I came around the corner to

Smallman Street where I'd parked my car, only to see a cop putting cuffs on some guy for drug dealing or solicitation or whatever. But even the occasional shooting hadn't drawn this much attention before. So why the big hullabaloo? *Dang it*, I had to see that body or spend the rest of my career at the Tribune reporting on elementary school balloon releases, art festivals and dog shows.

"Her name's Miss D. O. A. and she left a suicide note sayin' if you showed up to tell ya to stay outta the way."

"Right." *That tears it*. I didn't really want to use my power on the guy. It kinda feels like cheating. Plus, I'm not completely convinced it's safe. Brain damage isn't always easy to notice in some people. As far as I know though, everyone I'd used it on is still able to feed and dress themselves. So, I figure it's all good.

I closed my eyes—helps me focus—and called my power, clearing my mind of everything except what I wanted most. The hairs at the back of my head tingled, a buzzing sound hummed through my brain, getting louder. It felt like I'd leaned my head against one of those vibrating chair massagers set super-low. Now all I had to do was...make a suggestion.

"C'mon, Officer..." I checked the name tag, "...Pawlicki. Don't you think I should go down there and have a quick peek?"

Officer Pawlicki blinked as though he was struggling to understand what I'd said. He glanced down the alley where the police lights glared bright as daylight, then back to me, his dark bushy brows puckered tight over dirt brown eyes. His mouth opened and shut twice before he said, "Yeah. Right. I guess you should have a look. But stay out of the way."

"Absolutely, Officer." I ducked under the tape without wasting a second. I didn't want to wait around. Sometimes they regain their will pretty fast, and I have to scramble to make the suggestion again or explain why they were doing something they'd been dead set against a second before.

I don't know where my power comes from, or why I have it, or the biology behind how it works. I just know it's always been there, a part of me. I've always been able to use it to *suggest* people obey me. And reconciling myself with those facts has taken nearly all of my twenty-seven years.

The alley was maybe eight feet wide and about eighty yards long. It was dark as pitch everywhere except around the police lights. The dim glow they let off was only enough to outline obstacles like trash bags, abandoned boxes and the occasional pile of rags. At least I think they were rags. God, I hope they were rags.

Beyond the bright lights on the body, at the other end of the alley, the glow of nightlife on Penn Avenue shone through the narrow opening. There were more boxes and debris blocking that end and a slightly larger crowd of people rubbernecking over the shoulders of cops. But the lights and the people meant safety, civilization. Maybe that's what the dead girl was trying to reach, why she'd come down the alley. She'd almost made it.

I stopped just outside the ring of light around the body, notepad and pen ready. Two plain-clothes cops stood on the other side of the light circle speaking low to each other, gesturing now and then to the body. I didn't want to draw their attention.

As dead bodies went, this one wasn't so bad. She was a young woman, close to my age, dressed in a short, golden summer evening dress that sparkled and shimmered in the harsh lights. She wore gold strappy heels and held a matching pocketbook. I couldn't make out her face well. She was lying on her belly, her face to the side with a

wealth of thick caramel hair in big carefree curls blanketing over her shoulder. She had a tattoo on her neck, a few inches below her right ear, but I could hardly make it out. Looked like a closed-off “X”, or an infinity symbol with sharp right angles instead of loops on either end.

There was a piece of paper on the small of her back, a cocktail napkin, white with red scrawling letters. Couldn't make out what it said without getting closer. Her legs and arms were sprawled wide like she'd fallen and hadn't moved a muscle afterward, though I couldn't see any cuts or bruises. She'd kept hold of her pocketbook, even though her gold-tone watch had slipped off and lay in a tiny pile by her wrist.

I leaned a hairsbreadth closer, trying not to cast a shadow over the body. Her ears were pierced twice, and the gold hoops and diamond studs were still in place. There was a ruby ring on her finger, a diamond tennis bracelet on her other wrist and a gold ankle bracelet looped around her slender ankle. I glanced back to the pocketbook clutched in her hand...untouched. Whatever else happened to this woman, she wasn't robbed.

My cell phone, more a mini handheld computer, had a wicked-good camera in it. I dug it out of my backpack-slash-purse and snapped some pictures. Most wouldn't be usable for the paper, but I wanted them anyway in case there were details I was missing.

“Hey, you. What're you doing?” I glanced up in time to see that the cop dressed in a cheap suit and loosened tie had finally noticed me. “This ain't no peep show, lady. Hey, Pawlicki...”

Crap. Think fast. I closed my eyes. *I wanna stay—I wanna stay.* The hairs on the back of my neck hummed with power, electric current sizzling like a flash of lightning through my body. Someone grabbed my upper arm and I opened my eyes. “Wait a minute, Detective. Maybe I should stay. I might notice something you guys missed.”

The vise-like grip the man had on my arm loosened as he blinked over his shoulder at his partner. Even I was surprised to see the blue-jean-and-dress-shirt-clad partner glassy-eyed and confused staring back. There's normally a distance limitation to my power and the other cop was at least fifteen feet away. Way out of range. But I'd been caught off guard and had drawn my power fast. Maybe the adrenaline boosted the output.

“We could use an extra set of eyes,” the blue-jean man said. “Let her stay. See if she notices anything we missed.”

Power still humming through my brain I suggested, “And you should tell me why half the precinct was called out on what looks like a run-of-the-mill mugging.” Except I already knew it wasn't.

“Let her go, Daniels,” Mr. Blue-jeans said. Then to me he asked. “What's your name?”

“Sophie. Sophie Merlo.” I rolled my shoulders to readjust my rumpled sweatshirt after Daniels let go of my arm.

“Ms. Merlo, I'm Detective John Raynor and that's my partner, Detective Mark Daniels.” He stepped around the two big tripod lights, closing the distance between us. “You're right. This case is of particular interest to PPD. We think it might be part of a string of murders over the last few weeks, but other than a few bizarre similarities we can't find a connection between the victims. Can't even say for sure they're murders.”

The guy was spilling his guts pretty easy, which meant there was a part of him that wanted to tell me—or anyone. The case must've really had them stumped. “What do they have in common?”

Detective Raynor glanced at the dead girl and back to me. “They all died of severe blood loss.”

I looked at the pale body. No blood...anywhere.

“Except,” the detective continued, “there’s no wound. Not a mark on them. Any of them. Haven’t checked this body completely, but the coroner already figures he won’t find one.”

“Then how’d they lose the blood?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Raynor said.

“They all had that little tattoo on their necks,” Daniels offered, coming around me to stand next to his partner. “And before this one, all the other bodies had been posed.”

I looked to the dead girl again. “Looks like she just fell. Or someone tossed her there.”

“Right,” Daniels said.

“Hey. Lady. You can’t be down here. I don’t know why I even allowed you to... C’mon. Outta here.” Officer Pawlicki’s voice echoed off the warehouse walls as he stormed down the alley toward us. His brain was probably still scrambling to figure out why on earth he’d let me pass. Poor guy. Oh well.

I really am worried about the effect my powers have on the human brain, otherwise I would’ve pit the detectives against Pawlicki to allow me to stay longer. It takes more effort to push suggestion onto a group of people. The more people the more power needed. I’d already used enough to start a dull ache over my left eyeball. Besides, I’d learned as much as I could from the detectives. No sense to risk turning their brains to mush. So when Pawlicki hiked his thumb back toward the river end of the alley, I went without argument.

My car was around the corner on the well-lit side street in front of Primanti Brothers. It was late when I’d arrived, so finding a spot was easy. The second I was behind the wheel, I locked the doors and flipped through the pictures on my phone. Not bad. I’d caught the scene from a couple angles. But it took a second to find the one I was looking for.

I zoomed in on the cocktail napkin lying on the dead girl’s back. The deep red scrolling letters printed in the center looked like blood against the stark white napkin and read, *Il Piccolo Morso*. My Italian’s not great but I recognized the simple words, The Small Bite. There was a phone number and the name, Todd, written in black ink, and the smoothed quartered creases told me the napkin had been folded at some point.

A cocktail napkin meant bar, or nightclub, maybe a restaurant. But I’d never heard of a place called Il Piccolo Morso. Still, it was a clue, so I filed it away in the back of my brain and started the car. Raynor and Daniels had said there were other mysterious deaths in the last weeks, but I hadn’t heard a peep from any of my competition, which meant for once the police must be keeping their lips sealed. That was both a good thing and a bad thing for most reporters. No one else had the story...and no one would.

But me? I don’t play by those rules. I headed for the police station. With any luck I’d be in and out before my new detective friends finished with the crime scene and returned to their office. Some people aren’t as easily suggestible the second time around. I didn’t know if that was true of either of the detectives, and I didn’t want to find out.

Apparently the front-desk sergeant remembered me. “Oh, no. No. You just turn yourself around and march on outta here,” he said when he saw me walk though the station doors.

“Aw, c’mon, Sergeant Keech,” I said in my sweetest, lil’-ol’-me voice. “Why’d you wanna be like that?”

“Why?” His blond, nearly transparent brows flew high on his forehead, wrinkling his skin all the way back to his receding hairline. He stood, making him a full four feet taller than me—

seeing as how the front desk was raised for that nice intimidating affect. “Because every time you come in here you convince me to do shit that ten minutes later I can’t remember why I agreed to do.”

Okay, so I had used my power for evil a few times—had a couple speeding tickets disappear, and convinced him to send the paperwork on a restraining order to the wrong department. Hey. I was *not* stalking that Yorkie breeder. I was just trying to uncover a price-gouging operation. Seriously, fifteen hundred dollars for a dog that could fit in my shoe? That’s just wrong.

Sergeant Keech was one of those people who could be suggested twenty times a day and I could still make him drop his pants in the middle of the squad room and cluck like a chicken. I didn’t. But I could. He never seemed any worse for wear. So why not, right? I could make him obey just using the latent power flowing naturally through my body. Some people are like that. It took next to nothing. The guy didn’t stand a chance.

Power tingled at the back of my neck. “Okay, fine. Then why don’t you just show me the files on the deaths that Detectives Raynor and Daniels are working on, and I won’t say another word.”

Sergeant Keech blinked, his brows tightening over blue eyes. A heartbeat later he visibly relaxed and let a smile hint at the corner of his mouth. “No. I’ll tell you what you’re gonna do. The file should be in their active pile on their desks across the squad room. You can talk all you want from there and I won’t even hear ya. So get. Raynor’s and Daniels’ desks face each other in the far corner. And not a word. You hear me?”

I did the zipper with a lock-and-key mime across my mouth, and Keech buzzed me into the squad room. Poor guy. I’d send him a cake or something.

The file was on Daniels’ desk. It was thick, full of bureaucratic paperwork, autopsy reports and crime scene photos, including a shot of each of the matching neck tattoos. Maybe it was some new fad. Weird.

I flipped through the file stopping each time I spotted photos and crime scene descriptions. There were three other victims. All had been drained of blood just like Raynor said, with no visible wounds to explain it. When he’d said they were posed, he wasn’t kidding. The first definitely tipped the scales on my weird-o-meter.

I stared at the photo of a girl sitting in the backseat of a cab. Her eyes were open, her lips parted, her hands in her lap. Her skin was a bluish-white, like Elmer’s glue, and she was dressed for a night out on the town.

The cabby said the girl seemed fine when he picked her up. She was quiet during the twenty-minute drive to White Oak. It wasn’t until they’d arrived at her home that the driver realized she was dead. He’d made no stops from pick-up to drop-off except for traffic lights. There was no way someone could’ve gotten in and out between stoplights and killed her without being seen. *Creepy-weird...on toast.*

The report said the cabby had picked her up on the corner of Eighteenth and Smallman Street. The same street Primanti Brothers Restaurant was on, but at the river’s end. That same corner was only a building’s width away from the alley where they’d found the girl tonight. Why would these girls be at that end of the street dressed the way they were? There was nothing down there but parking spaces and warehouse entrances.

I flipped to the next victim. This girl had been left at a bus stop at Penn Avenue and Seventeenth Street. A block down from Primanti. The photo showed her as they'd found her, leaning against the lamppost, arms crossed over her belly. Rigor mortis held her in place, but it wouldn't have lasted long. The discovery of the body was phoned in so the police would find her before she dropped. Just like the other two, the girl was pretty, albeit a little blue, with bleached blonde hair cut pixy style and wearing a sexy red dress that hugged her young body and showed off her long shapely legs.

The third victim was found in the driver's seat of her car, engine running, eyes open, hands on the wheel. She was attractive like the others, with short, ink-black hair and dark eyes, I think. They looked kind of dead-fish-gray in the photo. She was wearing a tight low-cut blouse and a frayed blue-jean miniskirt, with black six-inch fuck-me heels. Had she been on her way home and only made it as far as her car? I didn't want to think about it. I checked the address of the crime scene—Smallman Street, near the corner of Seventeenth Street.

Her car must've been parked only a few hundred yards down from the alley where they'd found the girl tonight. My mind did that slow motion freeze it does when something passed my notice that shouldn't have. I glanced at the map of the city on the wall between the interrogation rooms and found the Strip District before I crossed the distance.

I snagged some pushpins stuck at the bottom of the corkboard and plunged one at the address in White Oak where the first girl was found in the cab. The next pin went where the second girl had been propped up at the bus stop. The third I stuck roughly where the idling car would've been. And the last went in the alley next to the warehouse.

I stepped back. There was a pattern. Maybe. Each death seemed to occur closer and closer to the Strip District, to that section of Smallman Street where the last, un-posed victim was found. But there was nothing there. Even the cops were double checking the area tonight, rattling chained doors big enough to fit a Mack truck through, and checking wire-reinforced windows and bolted human entrances. There wasn't anything there. Unless there was.

"Hey, lady, who let you in here?" I glanced over my shoulder at the uniformed officer lumbering my way.

Time to go. "Hello, Officer," I said, summoning my power. "Why don't I just leave now, and there won't be any need for questions."

The officer blinked, then followed my suggestion exactly.

Chapter Two

I couldn't feel the mark on my neck, but every time I looked in the mirror my eyes went straight to it. It looked good. Exactly like the ones on all four of the victims. I grabbed my black eyeliner pencil and went over the closed "X" symbol one more time.

"Good enough," I said to my reflection. I'd hair-sprayed my short wavy hair to a solid mass, but that didn't stop me from trying to turn a curl this way or that. It looked okay though, provided no one touched it, curling just past my ears and bangs brushing my eyebrows. The color, a black-cherry red, suited my fair skin tone, though as a kid I'd hated it. While the other teenage girls sunbathed for that perfect bronze glow, I had to slop on sunscreen to fend off third-degree burns and freckle infestation. The upside was my big green eyes always stood out against the washed-out skin and blaring red hair. Upside being a relative term.

I checked the knot on my black halter-top for the gazillionth time and tugged the low "V" neckline trying—and failing—to cover more of my boobs. I wasn't obscene or anything, but I had definite boob curve showing. I'm a comfortable C-cup so flashing cleavage is no small matter. I wasn't so concerned with the flash of belly the top exposed. I'm in good shape, swim twenty laps at my fitness club every day. The mini skirt though, was wiggling me out a bit.

I'm a jeans and T-shirt, jeans and blouses, jeans and sweaters, jeans and... You get the idea. And don't think I didn't consider shoving on my favorite pair of faded blues under the tiny black leather skirt. Can't even remember what possessed me to buy the tight leather tube in the first place. *Whatever*. It's a good thing I had, otherwise I'd never look the part. If I wanted to figure out where those girls had been, why they were all down on Smallman Street, I had to put myself in their shoes—or clothes, that is.

Half-past midnight I grabbed my tiny purse, big enough for my driver's license, my black eyeliner—for touch-ups to the fake tattoo—and my change purse. No other makeup. I didn't have much on to begin with and if it didn't last the night...tough.

Twelve forty on a Saturday night and Eighteenth Street was packed. It was nearly three when I'd stopped by last night, before they found the fourth body, and all the bars had already been closing. But now, tonight, they were just hitting their stride. I drove to the end of Eighteenth and turned left onto Smallman. I found a spot past the alley from last night, closer to Seventeenth Street. It worked for me. Smallman Street was where I wanted to be anyway.

I locked the car and started walking along the dimly lit warehouse-lined road, toward the alley they'd found the dead girl in last night. The sound of my black cowboy boots, with the silver toe-tips and heel accents, clomping against the asphalt, echoed off the metal walls and made it hard to hear anything else. I passed a set of cement steps that went sideways up to a door on one of the warehouses. The door was closed. The bare light in the rusted metal shade above flickered as I walked by.

My belly fluttered, the sensation of being watched tripping over my senses. I scanned behind me, to the sides and up ahead, keys laced between my fisted fingers, ready to gouge anyone who thought they could take me. Though truthfully, with my power, if I could talk, I could get out of any situation.

No one was around, but my skin crawled like a million ants marched down my back. First lesson in self-defense, always trust your gut...or your creepy-crawly skin.

Muscles along my shoulders tensed, my hands went clammy, dread twisting my stomach. Two more steps and I reached the alley where a girl was mysteriously drained of blood last night. I willed myself to stop—look.

Nothing special. No dead body. No monster of the night. Just a plain old alley. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I still flinched when a tall leggy blonde in a body-shaping black mini rounded the corner from Eighteenth Street.

“Hey,” she said as she walked by.

“Hey.” I watched her sashay toward the steps I’d passed, swinging what the good Lord gave her all the way up to the heavy metal door. Light shifted, or the man who suddenly appeared in front of her moved. I’m not sure which. He wasn’t there a second ago, but my mind couldn’t help thinking he was and I just hadn’t seen him. Like he’d been standing there the whole time and when she’d neared, he’d shifted his weight and that’s what finally caught my eye. *Weird.*

She handed him a small square paper, white with a splash of something red across it. A cocktail napkin. Was this the secret Il Piccolo Morso club I’d never heard of? My wicked-keen reporter senses tingled. I had to know.

By the time I reached the steps, the door was closing behind her. The guy under the rusted metal light-shade blocking my way didn’t look in the best of moods. Oh well. Not like that would stop me. He was tall. Tall enough he could’ve looked on top of my refrigerator without pushing up to his toes. Six foot something. *Tall.* He was built too. Bodybuilder built. Though wearing the snazzy gray suit over a pale green shirt gave him an air of sophistication most muscle heads lack. No tie, the first three buttons of his shirt were open flashing a brush of dark hair that matched the long wavy strands on his head.

The guy had better hair than me. It shone like silk in the bare bulb light overhead and brushed the tops of his shoulders. His eyes were dark, I’d say black but that’s not really possible. Right? He had a square face, not square-square, but square-ish, with a sharp jaw, defined cheekbones, and a wide full mouth. His nose was a narrow, straight line perfectly fitting the angular lines of his face, and it looked like he hadn’t shaved in a day or so.

As I reached the top step, he backed up and leaned his backside against the round metal railing behind him, hands finding the pockets of his slacks. He didn’t say a word, only stared.

“Hi,” I said, very chipper, very *don’t mind lil’ ol’ me.* “Uh...I guess I’ll get the door myself.” I glanced at the rusted metal and realized there was no handle. The door was one of those that could only be opened from the inside. *That sucks.*

“Do you have an invitation?” His voice was smooth, relaxed, as though my presence didn’t even rise to the level of annoyance.

I wanted to ask, an invitation to what, just to make sure I wasn’t stumbling into something totally weird, like a plushy fetish mixer or something, but thought better of it.

“I, uh...lost it.” Nerves had me tucking curls behind my ear. Stupid habit. His gaze tracked the movement, latching onto the fake tattoo on my neck.

“You’re Mr. Edmunston’s?” He pushed to his feet, reaching toward me as though he’d touch the mark or move my hair for a better view. I flinched away and he dropped his arm, his brow wrinkling tighter.

“That’s pretty dark. You shouldn’t be here. It’s not cool for one of the owner’s girls to be showing like that. Go home. Get some rest and something to eat. Come back in a couple days.” He leaned back against the railing again as though there was nothing more to be said.

Mr. Edmunston’s? The mark had a connection...and owner. I played a hunch. “But I, uh, really need to see him. He’s here, right?”

“Of course.” Suspicion clouded his face.

“I’ll be in and out before you know it,” I said quickly, hoping to forestall any loss of credibility the mark had won me.

The guy shook his head then went eerily still. *Seriously*. I wasn’t sure he was even breathing.

“Pleeease.” I batted my eyes shamelessly, playing on my feminine wiles. Apparently, feminine wiles are one of those things if you don’t use, you lose. The guy didn’t even look in my direction. Nothing. He just leaned there staring.

Right. Time to cheat.

I sucked a deep breath, focusing, calling my power until I felt the light buzzing at the back of my head, and the fine hairs on my neck tingled with energy. “Why don’t you just let me in for a quick peek?”

The guy blinked, glanced my way his brow furrowing again. He shook his head then went completely still.

Oh shit. It didn’t work. That’d never happened before. I’d never met anyone I couldn’t suggest into doing what I wanted. I tried harder, pulling enough power that a dull throb started behind my eyes. “You should open that door and let me inside—right—now.”

This time the guy jerked to his feet like he’d been pulled by strings. He paused for a second, blinking at me, then stepped one foot toward the door and reached out to the seal where door meets wall.

The nails on his hand were long and thick and pointed. *Gross*. I hadn’t noticed before. His nails hooked the edge of the door, and he pulled. My shoulders bunched, ready for a loud moaning creak, but the rusty metal door swung open, smooth and silent.

I glanced at him before I slipped through. He still looked grumpy, but now there was a tinge of confused annoyance in the mix. His creepy black eyes stayed locked on me, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think he was fighting the suggestion even as he obeyed me. I didn’t wait to find out. I turned my back to him and disappeared inside.

Pay dirt. Il Piccolo Morso. How’d I know? A neon sign hung eight feet tall on the wall as soon as I entered—a glowing red tube that spelled out the words in beautiful scrawling letters. Just like the cocktail napkins.

The sign stood out against the soft, blue-lit walls, like blood on white roses. Speaking of white roses, they were everywhere. Crystal vases with tall long-stemmed roses decorated every table. More filled sconces along the walls between endless spills of white silk cascading from ceiling to floor. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust well

enough to see clearly, but the place was big. No surprise. It was a warehouse, though you'd never know it by the looks of things from the inside.

My gaze gravitated to the largest source of light at the center of the cavernous space. An enormous oval bar centered overtop a glowing bluish-white floor, lit from beneath like the bar top itself and stretching ten feet around on all sides. Even the middle island inside the bar, where the sinks and electric mixers and such were kept, glowed soft blue light from between white flowers and green leafy accents that overflowed the sides and ends of a long planter running the length of the island.

I took a step and my boots sank into plush carpet. It was too dark to see the color, and the round tables with their semicircle white-cushioned benches left only a walking path between them up to the glowing dance floor. Semicircles seemed the theme at Il Piccolo Morso, where in each corner huge half-circle couches softened the angles, and long curtains of silk canopied the sides, making the large gathering spots seem intimate.

Music blared from six speakers twice as tall as me, hanging from the ceilings, and when I glanced up, I noticed the high windowed room at the top of the far wall. The two people inside were in silhouette. One bopped to the beat of the music, a hand to the headset over one ear, the other hand on a dimly flashing DJ control panel. The other figure, I assumed, was the mysterious Mr. Edmunston standing watch over his domain.

I navigated my way to the bar, sidestepping tables of amorous couples and even more swaying together on the glowing dance floor. It wasn't wall-to-wall people, but enough to make it difficult to pass without bumping shoulders. I snagged a freshly vacated stool, and my spine deflated, relieved I'd found a port to dock myself in the sea of nightclub goers. I am so not a club person, but I really wanted to talk with Mr. Edmunston to figure out his connection to the mark tattooed on the victims. And through him, make a connection between the victims themselves.

With my forearms resting on the warm bar top, waiting for the bartender to make his way around to me, I couldn't help my gaze from swinging up to the DJ booth. There was a light toward the back of the booth that looked like it could be a doorway or maybe a hall. I traced down the wall with my gaze until I noticed a door on the main floor next to the corner couch and canopy on the left. It must lead up to the booth, maybe his office too. No guards stood watch, not that one could stop me. I swung my legs around.

"What'll ya have?"

Frozen mid-slide on the stool, I glanced back to see one hottie bartender waiting for my drink order. He was tall, though not as tall as Mr. Personality out front and not muscle bound the same way either, though he was clearly built. He was solid, like a baseball player, with hair to match. Light brown with sun-streaks, his hair had that tousled windblown look athletes get, longer on top, clipped close on the sides, over his ears and in back. He looked twenty-five or so and every bit the all-American boy, with bright blue eyes, dimpled cheeks and a knockout white-toothed smile. *Yum.*

"Right. I'll have a glass of wine. Red, please." A quick glance to the booth to check Mr. Edmunston hadn't snuck away on me and I swung my legs back around.

"Lookin' for someone?" the bartender asked, already filling my wine glass.

That was scary fast. I debated my answer for about half a second before opting for the truth. With a nod toward the DJ booth I said, “Yeah. Actually, I was hoping to speak with Mr. Edmunston.”

The bright-eyed bartender followed my gesture then looked back to me, his smile broadening. “You don’t say. Why’s that?”

I shrugged. “Wanted to put in an application.” So much for the truth.

“You wanna work here? As what, a waitress, a bartender, what?” His voice held a ripple of laughter, but I wasn’t sure why. What business doesn’t take applications?

Whatever. “Why? Nervous about job security?”

This time he did laugh. Loud and from deep in his belly, so hard and sudden he stumbled back a step.

Wasn’t that funny. “What?”

The too-cutesy guy collected himself, corking the wine bottle, shaking his head as though dismissing his reaction. “Nothing.” He sat the bottle under the bar, still smiling and fighting his laughter. “How’d you get in here?”

Busted. I knew that invitation thing would bite me in the ass. “Same as everyone.”

“No you didn’t.” His good humor was waning. He gave me a nod. “Tell me your name.”

“Tell me yours, first.” *What am I, seven?*

“Alex.” He braced his hands wide on the edge of the bar. His white shirt gaped where he’d left the first three buttons undone and the rolled sleeves slipped down to just below his elbows. He was wearing black slacks, I think. There was a short black apron hiding them around his waist.

“I’m Sophie. Sophie Merlo.” I glanced back to the DJ booth, seeing my chances of interviewing Mr. Edmunston slipping away.

Like I’d slammed my arm in a car door, crushing pain ripped up through my shoulder so fast it stole my breath. The stab of sensation screamed through my brain. My body jerked halfway up and onto the bar against my will. I snapped my head around to see Alex’s all-American baby face twisted ugly with rage. He held my arm, and with one hand had pulled me up off my stool.

“Who sent you?” His voice rumbled low through tightly clenched teeth.

“Get off. That hurts.” I squirmed, tried to jerk my arm free but it was caught, like it’d been sealed in cement. Panicking, I called up my power fast and hard, my head swam with the rush of energy but fear and pain kept me focused. “You should *really* let me go. Now.”

Alex’s pretty blue eyes narrowed to slits. The color had paled so dramatically the pupils looked like black pinpricks in a sea of white. He wasn’t blinking, wasn’t obeying my suggestion.

There’s only a certain amount of power my mind can take before I simply can’t call it to the forefront again without resting first. After using so much on the guard out front, I was tapped out. My spine iced, instinct tingling down my back. Fear and pain triggered flight instincts, the need to run an almost debilitating urge.

He shook his head, pushing off my suggestion. “What was that? What’re you trying to pull?”

I squirmed again, harder, more frantic like a bird with its wing caught under a cat’s paw. Something in my shoulder wrenched and sent a fresh jolt of pain slamming through my system. I gasped—stilled.

“Nothing. I’m not doing anything. Just...just let me go.” My head throbbed and a steady ache pulsed from my shoulder with each beat of my heart. My ability had never failed me. Never. What was going on?

Alex yanked me closer, bringing me farther onto the bar, so the edge pressed into my groin. He gripped my jaw so hard I’m sure he left red fingerprints on either side of my face, and jerked my head to the left. I stayed the way he posed me while he licked the fat part of his thumb. Before I could think to stop him, he rubbed the mark I’d made on my neck and brought his thumb back smeared with black eyeliner. He let me go and I stumbled back two steps before I caught myself.

“Get out.” He didn’t even look at me. His brow tightly wrinkled, he just stared at his thumb rubbing his fingers against it then pinched them clean on his apron.

I wiped at the spit he’d left on my neck even as my heart struggled for a steady beat. “What? No. Why? I didn’t do anything.”

Seconds were ticking by, but I couldn’t seem to calm myself. Why? With the two-foot-wide bar between us and a couple feet of open space, I was pretty sure I’d have time to dodge him if he came at me again. So why was my brain still scrambled like puzzle pieces and my breaths still shaking through my chest? In fact, it seemed to be getting worse.

With a hard swallow I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts, focus. “I want to speak with Mr. Edmunston.”

I could feel where Alex’s thumb had pressed against my neck. The skin tingled there, warmed as though his body heat continued to mingle with mine. My hand went to the spot, cupped my neck, and I closed my eyes.

“Mr. Edmunston doesn’t want to speak with you,” he said.

“Uhm...you...you don’t know...that.” I rolled my head, like a lazy cat stretching after a long sleep. Heat radiated from the spot on my neck spreading throughout my body. It felt...good, like a shot of brandy warming down my throat, buzzing my mind just enough to be fun without making me stupid. My skin tingled all over. I licked my lips feeling the tickle along my tongue. I couldn’t stop the dizzy smile that took hold.

“Get her out of here,” I heard Alex say, right before two people grabbed my arms. “Send Bruno in while you’re out there.”

I opened my eyes, my head snapping left and right. Two guys, both taller than me, both dressed in suits and all kinds of muscle, nearly lifted me off my feet. “Wait. Hey.”

Even with my weight thrown back and my toes digging against the carpet, I couldn’t stop our progression. I searched for help among the couples cuddling around the crush of tables before the door. Vacant unaffected eyes met mine, though most only glanced and turned back to their partner or fluttered closed as if in bliss. My mouth gaped, my heart squeezing in my chest. I couldn’t believe the apathy.

“What kinda place is this?” I bucked and jerked in the bouncers’ steel grip. “Where’s Mr. Edmunston? Does he know how you’re treating perfectly good customers? Mr. Edmunston. Mr. Edmunston!”

I spied a foot sticking out into the aisle. Nothing else registered, not the size, not the shoe, nothing. I kicked it. “Hey, you. You know Mr. Edmunston? Tell him Sophie Merlo wants to talk. Tell ’im I want to register a complaint. Tell him—”

My words choked at the back of my throat when pale, almost white eyes met mine. It was his foot I'd kicked, this guy with lips so red they looked black and moist enough they glistened in the dim light. He'd been cuddling with the woman beside him. She had the same vacant, blissful expression I'd seen on so many others. Then my gaze dropped to her neck where the man held back her hair and saw two tiny spots of blood beading, trickling, as I stared.

"Wha...what're you doing?" My heart roared in my ears, drowning out the music. This wasn't real, wasn't happening. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't look away.

The woman shifted in the bench seat beside him, her hand coming up to cup the side of his face. She turned him back to her, guiding him to the crook of her neck. Her mouth opened on a moan as he nestled against her. She writhed in his embrace, rolling her hips, fisting his hair, holding him to her.

The bouncers kept me moving and as I passed, I glanced back at their laps, at the man's hand between her legs, at how she'd spread her knees, how his arm pumped rhythmically under her hiked dress. What kind of place was this?

I stopped fighting my escorts. They couldn't get me out fast enough.

Chapter Three

I locked my apartment door behind me—all three locks—and hooked my keys on the kitty key holder I'd bought at a yard sale. And then I exhaled. Finally. "That was totally whacked," I said, laughing to myself. "What kind of freaky drugs and kinky sex games were those people into?"

Shaking my head, trying hard to rationalize, I walked two steps and turned the corner into my living room.

"You didn't tell me you were a reporter, Sophie."

My scream was loud and long and left my throat raw. Alex didn't even flinch.

He sat on the other side of the room with one ankle crossed over his knee, his arms stretched to either side on the back of my couch. He waited until I'd finished and said, "Tell me what you did to my doorman."

My head went stuffy, pressure filled, and a buzzing started in my ears. I opened my mouth to tell him that I'd used my ability on the guy, then realized I didn't want to answer his question truthfully. So why was I about to? I closed my eyes, focused, and the pressure slowly lifted. When I opened them again, Alex was only three feet away, standing right in front of me.

"Holy crap." The words gushed out on my breath. I stumbled back, my heart pounding. "How'd you do that? I didn't hear you move."

"How'd you convince Bruno to let you into my club?"

"*Your* club?" My mind shifted the new information around. "You're Mr. Edmunston."

Alex folded his arms across his belly, rocked back on his heels. "You control other's minds?"

I lifted my chin. "How'd you find where I live?"

"Who told you about Il Piccolo Morso?"

"The Small Bite," I scoffed. "Is that what that man was doing? Taking a little bite out of that woman? I saw him. His eyes were weird, just like yours were. And there was blood on his lips. And the woman looked...drugged. What kind of place are you running, Alex? Some sadistic sex cult?"

His exhale made his nostrils flare. "Why'd you draw that symbol on your neck? What do you know about it?"

"What do you know about the woman killed in the alley beside your club last night?"

"What are you?"

"What are you?"

His brows hiked high beneath the swag of his sun-bleached bangs, and I could've sworn he was fighting a smile. "I'm a vampire."

"Oh shit."

"Eloquent. Now, your turn."

I blinked, gave myself a quick mental shake and waited for him to correct himself, or laugh or something. He didn't. "Seriously?"

"Yes," he said. "And so is the man you saw at my club, and so are my doorman and bouncers and the majority of my clientele. Which is why, dear Sophie Merlo, reporter for the Pittsburgh Tribune, I'm curious to know how you managed to control their minds."

"I didn't. It's not mind control. At least I don't think of it that way. It's more like the power of suggestion." I shrugged, ignoring the stuffy pressure in my head. "I can't *make* people do anything specific. I just suggest things, and they take the suggestion and make it their own."

I blinked when my mouth finally stopped babbling and the buzzing left my ears. Why'd I say all that? A light went on in my sluggish brain. "But *you* can make people do things. Can't you? Like spill their guts whenever you ask."

He gave me one of those old-world nods, a small bow of his head. Looked odd on someone so...young. "But only the minds of our donors."

"Donors?" I tried not to laugh, so it came out as a rude snort.

"Humans," he amended. "I can't affect the will of my own kind. None of us can. Which makes your ability particularly intriguing."

I kind of sidestepped past him, keeping my body tight like maneuvering around a wild animal. "Except my suggestion didn't work on you."

"No. Not effectively." He turned with me, following but not stopping me. "But it worked on Bruno and I felt the push of your power. That's never happened before."

"Why's that? I mean, why didn't it work on you?" I headed for the bedroom, walking a little faster than I needed to. Alex kept at my heels. I didn't look back and I couldn't hear him, but I knew he was right there. I could feel his presence like a warm pressure on my back.

"A man doesn't live to my age, manipulating minds as a part of his daily survival, without building a bit of mental muscle of his own. You're very powerful, Sophie. Quite unique."

I spun in my bedroom doorway, and he flinched backward. Good to know I wasn't completely predictable to the vampire. I blocked his entry with a hand on my door and the other on the door jam. "So it's because you're old. How old?"

He did that little head bow again. "I'm one hundred ninety-seven...next month."

"Happy birthday."

"Thank you." His smile beamed and I think he even blushed a little, glancing away and back again. He looked like any twenty-five-year-old happily discussing his plans. "After a hundred and fifty, birthdays begin to regain their charm. We're planning a birthday bash at the club and... Never mind."

"Fascinating. But you drink blood. Right?" I'm not sure what I was hoping he'd say.

"Yes."

That wasn't it. "Perfect."

"But we don't kill to survive."

“Uh-huh. Aren’t you worried I’ll tell?”

He shrugged. “Who’d believe you? Besides, we have the means to protect ourselves. We’ve survived for eons and will survive eons more. I doubt you’ll be our downfall.”

“Right. What about the other stuff? Sunlight, garlic, holy water, stake through the heart...”

“Sunlight...chafes a little. No worse than any hundred-plus-year-old skin.”

“Good to know. And the rest?”

He smiled, a mocking glint in his eyes. “How best can *I* harm *you*?”

Good point. “Whatever. I have to change. I’m closing this.”

“Of course.” He stepped back so the door wouldn’t smack him in the nose but didn’t make like he’d go any farther. *Creepy.*

I peeled out of my nightclub outfit as fast as I could, and scrambled to find sweats and a T-shirt. Smart or not, I felt a little safer with the door between us. I considered calling the cops, but my stubborn reporter’s curiosity got the better of me. Besides, he didn’t act like he wanted to suck my blood. “So, Mr. Vampire, you gonna tell me you had nothing to do with the dead girl they found in the alley beside your club? Y’know, the one who died of severe blood loss?”

“*I didn’t kill her.*” His voice whispered through my head triggering a wave of goose bumps shivering over my skin. I spun to check he wasn’t standing right behind me. He wasn’t.

“How’d you do that?”

“*A gift of my kind,*” he whispered through my thoughts again.

“Well, stop it. My head’s single occupancy only. Got it?”

“I’m being set up, Sophie,” Alex said, his voice muffled through the door. “That mark on your neck. I assume you copied it because of the girls.”

My hand went to my neck, my thoughts to the way my skin tingled and warmed after he’d touched me there. My body responded again at the simple memory, lower regions warming, wanting more. I closed my eyes, pushed the drug like desire from my mind. “Yeah. Uh, your...your man at the door made it sound like it was a mark of ownership or something. Your mark.”

When he didn’t answer after several seconds I opened the door. “Alex?”

My apartment’s not very big—bedroom, bathroom, living room and kitchen. My gaze found him on the other side of the living room almost instantly. He was staring out the window, his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans, his face stern, his brow creased. He must’ve sensed me staring. He just started talking.

“What do you know about snakes?”

“They’re long, squiggly and fanged.” I walked to the coffee table. Call me paranoid, but I liked to have *something* between us. “Oh. And they’re cold blooded.”

“Many snakes inject venom into their victims to either paralyze or kill. We, vampires, are not unlike snakes in that way.”

My hand went to my neck again, the memories vivid enough to tingle over my skin. “Your saliva. There’s something in it.”

“A healing agent along with a kind of narcotic. A hallucinogen. It heals the wound site within minutes as well as makes our donors...eager, willing.” He glanced my way. “You may have felt a hint of its effect when I wiped the mark off your neck.”

A hint? Holy Viagra, Batman! I shrugged. “Didn’t really notice. Maybe something...”

He swung his gaze back to the window. “Our saliva also acts as a sort of monitoring system. In the bloodstream, it causes the donor’s blood to pool at the wound sight and form a mark unique to the vampire. The more saliva in the donor’s body, the darker the mark. The darker the mark, the less blood in their veins and the closer they are to turning.”

“So the dead girls were all about to become vampires?”

He turned to face me, worry so clear in his blue eyes. “Maybe. It’s not an easy thing to turn a person. There has to be more venom in the blood stream than blood, and the person must be near death from the loss. Do you know how hard it is for a single vampire to drain an adult body of blood?”

“Uh...no.”

“Imagine eating an entire Thanksgiving meal made for ten by yourself. The human body is constantly making more blood, constantly working to replace blood for venom, diluting it until there’s no trace left.”

“And the mark fades away.” More puzzle pieces shifted into place. “That’s why your door guy told me to come back in a few days. To allow my body time to dilute the vamp venom so I wouldn’t turn.”

“Right. At a certain point the balance shifts. The body becomes so saturated with venom it stops producing new blood and makes venom instead. They become vampire. But the organs still need blood to remain viable. A new vampire must refill their body with blood and, the sire, having gorged himself on his fledgling, now has plenty to provide. Once full, a vampire only needs small amounts from then on to make up for our body’s lack of production.”

“So what happened with the dead girls?”

His gaze dropped, his voice softened. “They weren’t given blood and their bodies were left with only their sire’s venom in their veins.”

“So, what, they OD’d?”

“In a way, yes.”

My gut twisted. A disgusted snarl curled my lip. “Why would you let that happen?”

His gaze snapped to mine. “I didn’t. I told you, I’m being set up.”

“But the mark on the girls is yours. Can somebody fake another vamp’s mark?”

He shook his head. “Not that I know. Whosever saliva is most prevalent in the donor, his mark shows at the wound site. There’s nothing to stop or alter it. It’s a natural safety precaution. But...I never fed on any of those girls.”

Right. “Then how do you explain it?”

“I can’t.” He crossed the room to me before I could blink. So much for the coffee-table buffer. “But with your gift, you might be able to. This was the work of a vampire. I know it. But I can’t use my abilities on my own kind to discover the truth.”

“So you want me to use mine? What, just walk around talkin’ up vamps, asking questions? Right, ’cause I’ve heard they love sharing. But first why don’t I do something a little less stupid, liking poking a hungry lion with a stick. Wheeee...” I wanted to turn and walk away but Alex grabbed my arms, pulled me hard against him. My breath huffed out when my chest met the solid wall of his.

“I wouldn’t ask you if I wasn’t sure I could protect you.”

My hands had gone to his chest on reflex. I could feel his heart beating, the heat of his body radiating through his white cotton dress shirt warmed against my palms. If I looked close enough, I could see the pulse in his neck. “You’re not dead.”

“No.” He kept his gaze locked with mine as he spoke, making our closeness all the more intimate. “My heart beats...slowly. And when I rest, I can slow the beat even further. I can *seem* dead. But I’m alive.” His thumbs caressed in circles on my arms. His voice dropped. “I am very much...alive.”

My belly fluttered, feminine instincts reacting to the change in his voice, the look in his low-lidded eyes. “Alive as in you have the same human, uhm, needs? You know, food, sleep, sex...bathroom breaks?”

His gaze dropped to my mouth and I licked my lips. “Yes. But we think of them as more entertainment than needs.” He leaned a fraction closer. “Some more than others.”

Muscles low in my womb clenched. He pulled my body closer to his so I could feel the stiff line at his crotch. I wasn’t the only one sensing the energy zinging between us. My heart clogged my throat, anticipation humming along my skin. Granted, my sex life has been kind of stalled lately, and I’ve always been a little easier than my mother would’ve liked.

But everything about Alex Edmunston screamed mad skills between the sheets. The grace and strength in the way he moved, the masculine tone of his voice, the athletic shape of his body, the way his jaw clenched and relaxed as he drew closer to my lips. His sweet male cologne swam through my brain, demolishing any hope of restraint. His exhale warmed over my lips, the scent of his breath, of him, mixing to create an intoxicating rush of adrenaline storming through my blood.

I raised my chin and he touched his lips to mine, soft, moist, delicious. My mouth tingled, heat seeping through my flesh, rippling down my throat, spreading fast through my body. The gentle suction of his kiss as our lips pulled apart drew me closer, wanting more.

Alex shifted his upper body, kept the distance. My eyes shuttered open.

He smiled, rubbed his thumbs against my arms. “You’re a beautiful girl, Sophie. And those powers, your ability to dominate, to rule my kind with your mind...” He glanced away, exhaled. “I can’t begin to describe the erotic temptation. But I...I have to go.”

He dropped his hands and stepped around me, heading for my kitchen and, like a dim-witted puppy, I followed.

“Come to the club tomorrow night,” he said. “I’ve got an idea who’s behind these murders. I’ll arrange for him to be there.” He glanced at me, his hand on the tall window that opened onto my fire escape.

“Yeah. Right. You bet.”

“Great. See you there.” He swooped close and kissed my cheek then straightened. His perfect white smile plumped his sun-kissed cheeks and sparked in the pure blue of his eyes. He winked, then turned and in one fluid movement leapt up and through the window, vanishing into the night.

I stood there staring at the empty space where he’d been, my body still humming with the narcotic affect of his kiss, the feel of his hands on me, his scent still swirling through my lungs and I thought, *what the...* Maybe they had put garlic in my lunch salad.

Chapter Four

“Merlo, you got company. And where’s my exclusive on that alley DB from the other night?” Micky Boyle, my editor, liked to make an entrance. He blew through the newsroom, too busy and important to actually stand still while he spoke.

I called my power without even realizing I was doing it. The hairs at the back of my neck tingled. “Gimme another twenty-four hours, Mick, and I’ll have a deeper angle.”

He stopped. Looked at me. “You know what, take twenty-seven. I want you to really dig deep on this one. Find the story underneath the news.”

“You got it, boss.” A twinge of guilt prickled down my back. I didn’t like using my power on the everyday people in my life. I didn’t like the feeling I was cheating to get ahead in my career. Every other reporter who made it to the big leagues managed it without the power of suggestion. So could I. Mostly.

“Miss Sophie Merlo?” I snapped my head up following the sound of the male voice next to my desk. I hadn’t heard him approach.

“Yeah?”

He looked like a soccer dad in leather. He was bald, kind of short, maybe five-six, with a small paunch around the midsection that puffed out the bottom of his zipped leather jacket. He wore black leather chaps over jeans, clunky black leather biker boots and carried a black biker helmet with his leather gloves sticking out. Not sure what gave him the soccer-dad look to me, maybe the soft brown eyes and the laugh lines around the mouth. Just too sweet to be biker bad.

He held out an envelope, greeting card sized, aged, tea-stained color, not white.

I took the envelope and read my name scrawled in fancy red handwriting, then flipped it over. The back was sealed with a glob of red wax and pressed with a stamp that read, *Sinners*, and lettered like you’d see on a diploma. I glanced back to the leather-clad messenger. “Who sent this?”

He didn’t answer and I looked back to the envelope, sixth sense tickling at the base of my spine. The letter was heavy and thick. The wax seal broke when I tugged, and I pulled out the multilayered cards. The main card matched the envelope with a graphic of the Sinners red-wax seal at the center and opened like double doors. Inside was a smaller matching card, an invitation with a sheet of red tissue paper in between. Beneath the tissue paper was a response envelope.

I glanced at the biker messenger again. “You’re not waiting for a reply now, are you?”

Again he didn’t answer, his gaze locked on me, brow smooth, his mouth a straight, thin-lipped line. He gave nothing away, no expression. He just stood there... watching. I read the invitation.

Dear Miss Sophie Merlo,

You are cordially invited as my personal guest for an evening of cocktails and fine dining at my five star restaurant, Sinners. 8:00 pm, all necessities will be provided. I predict it will be a night you will not soon forget.

Sincerely,

Mr. Octavius Perrotte

I'd probably be a little more impressed if I knew who the heck Octavius Perrotte was. There was only one option. *I accept your invitation.* I flipped it over. Nothing. I looked inside the little response envelope. Empty. I checked inside the big envelope and all through the wasted paper cards. Nothing.

"Well that's stupid. What if I don't want to go? What if I can't?" I stared at soccer dad, biker-dude wannabe. He didn't answer and it was really starting to piss me off.

My eyes closed to help me focus and I reached for that pool of desire somewhere in the far recesses of my mind. *I want answers.* Electricity tingled at the back of my neck, a soft vibration humming through my head.

I opened my eyes. "You should tell me why this Octavius Perrotte person wants to meet with me."

His brow creased and he shook his head. His mouth opened and shut twice. "I...he—he didn't tell me."

Biker dude's brow creased harder and he clenched his lips together so tight they turned white around the edges. He was fighting my suggestion. The only people I'd ever met who could fight my suggestion were vampires and I'd met all of them within the last two days. *Sheesh*, when it rains it pours.

I called more power, careful not to give myself migraine. "Why don't you just tell me if you're a vampire," I suggested.

"Yes. I. Am."

Perfect. If he was a vamp it made sense the guy who sent the invitation was too. "You could warn me if I should be worried about Mr. Perrotte's intentions."

"Yes. Worry... Yes." Surprise stretched his eyes, quickly replaced by anger. "Stop it, or I'll drain you right here, bitch."

"Right. Like you could. I'd bleed worse from a paper cut." Not exactly accurate but close enough to make my point. Having friends in the know was a good thing. I stood calling another tug of power and throwing it into my voice. "I think you should tell me who Perrotte is, how he knows me, what exactly this is all about. Does he mean me any harm?"

Biker dude, shook his head, his lips a white puckered line, his eyes growing wider by the second. He backpedaled right into the desk of Janice, from the Lifestyles section. Pencils rattled in the holder, a picture fell over, but biker dude just slid around the desk, eyes locked on mine shaking his head.

"Hey. Where're you going? I think you should answer my questions first." Tiny electric sparks snapped and crackled over my skin, down my back, my brain hummed with power.

Biker dude's hand went to his mouth, his head shaking. "No. No. He... Mr. Perrotte, he...he... No. Stop it. Stop it." The vamp turned and ran, leaving the newsroom door swinging behind him.

Drat. Was he saying no to my questions or no to himself? In twenty-seven years, Alex was the only person who'd managed to completely resist my suggestion, so my gut wanted to believe Perrotte's messenger was

answering despite his efforts not to. And the only question I'd actually asked was did Perrotte mean me any harm. *No.*

Still, it seemed kind of coincidental that, according to Alex, a vampire was trying to frame him for the murders of four women and now, after being seen with him at the club last night, this vamp wants to meet. This Perrotte guy could be the one setting up Alex. Or was Alex the one trying to put one over on me? I just didn't know.

I locked my apartment door—all three locks, and straightened the cross I'd nailed over the threshold—then hung my keys on my kitty key holder. Two steps and I rounded the corner into my living room and froze.

A big white clothing box tied with a bright red bow sat on my coffee table. *Shit.* Answered my question about crosses. I went to the box and snagged the card taped on top.

Sophie,

These were meant to be worn by you. You'll look lovely. Please come. We must speak. I'll send a car at 7:30.

OP

Either Mr. Perrotte's messenger didn't give him the scoop on what'd happened at the paper today or the guy didn't care. I untied the fat ribbon and lifted the lid. The dress was blood red, my size and stretchy. There was a pair of high-heeled pointy-toed shoes wrapped in tissue paper at one end and a black velvet box at the other. *Jewelry.* I tossed the dress-box lid and grabbed the velvet box.

A silver chain with a floating heart and a huge teardrop diamond suspended in the center, the necklace was beautiful and exactly my style. Maybe I should talk with this Octavius Perrotte. He certainly knew how to speak girl. Besides, how could I call myself an unbiased reporter if I based my story on only one source? A source, I might add, who by all evidence was the guilty party.

The dress clung to every curve of my body and no matter how much I tugged and pulled I couldn't make it any bigger. The bottom hem hit mid-thigh, the back scooped to an inch or so above my butt and the front showed more cleavage than my halter top had. If I sneezed too hard something was coming out at one end or the other.

At seven thirty I glanced at the clock on the DVD player. I'd just finished getting ready but I wasn't worried about the time. Something just made me look weird. I thought about that for a minute. Was it coincidence or something more? And then I noticed it, that gentle pressure hugging around my head, the soft buzzing in my ears.

"Your car awaits." The words weren't really words, but an understanding, a feeling like warm silk brushing through my mind. I went to the window and gazed down at the street in front of my apartment building where a black limousine sat double-parked. A chill shook across my shoulders. Was this a mistake? I knew vampires were harder to suggest than humans, but I was still able to wield some power over them. The biker-dude messenger had said Octavius Perrotte didn't mean me any harm but did vampires and humans define "harm" the same way?

"Suck it up. Gotta take some risks if you want the story." I grabbed my cell phone and dialed my mom. I had to tell someone where I was going just in case I didn't come back. And my mom would kill anyone who dared touch a hair on my head...even if she thought they were already dead.

Twenty minutes later, after I finished explaining why I hadn't called in the last two weeks, I hung up with Mom and walked down the steps and out the front doors of my apartment building. The limo driver was out and

around to open my door before I reached the car. I peeked in and saw the car was empty. I'd half expected to see Octavius waiting for me inside. And as the driver clicked the door closed behind me, I realized the vampire must've whispered into my head from across the city. My gut twisted, and a fine sheen of sweat chilled across my back. How powerful was this guy?

We arrived on Mount Washington less than a half hour later, the limo idling while I stared through the tinted windows at Sinners restaurant. The entrance side of the building was unremarkable, ivy-covered brick walls, oak doors, arched awning over the entry. There was a valet in a black bolero jacket and bowtie, and a doorman in tails and white gloves. My limo driver stood outside my door, his hands folded one over the other.

I reached for the handle and the driver jerked into action, opening my door, offering a hand. Three steps and the doorman swung open the big oak door and I stepped inside where the view was decidedly better. Built on the side of Mount Washington, Sinners overlooks downtown Pittsburgh and Point State Park where two rivers converge to make a third.

The cityscape stretched out before the diners as they entered, viewed through a floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall window. I couldn't imagine anyone passing through the entrance for the first time and not gasping at the sight before them.

It's an impressive view from just about anywhere on Mount Washington. But in the early evening with candles flickering on white linen tabletops and honey lights turned low, and delicious scents wafting from the kitchen, the view took on a kind of magical elegance that made my belly flutter with excitement.

"Miss Merlo?" The maitre d', dressed in a full tux and tails with white tie and cummerbund, gestured down a small flight of steps from the entrance landing. He led the way to the lower portion of the restaurant.

I followed as we zigzagged around tables of fancily dressed couples and groups quietly enjoying their sparse but expensive meals. I always figured I could tell how expensive a place is by how big a deal they make out of the itty-bitty portions. He led me to one of the tables lining the window wall. All the window tables were set for two. The bigger the tables, the farther back from the window they sat. The maitre d' pulled out my chair and I sat, glancing around the restaurant, noticing the balcony level toward the back above the entrance.

The view would be higher from up there, but not as close to the fantastic window wall. I wondered which were the better tables. Those in the loft's more intimate setting or down here on the main floor right next to the window. The design was such that when I leaned my forehead against the glass, I could see the rocky mountainside all the way to the river. Couldn't get that from the loft.

The maitre d' bowed. "Mr. Perrotte will be with you shortly." I smiled, nodded, and he turned on his heel, heading back to his post at the door.

I'm not the sort who can't sit alone at a restaurant or go to a movie by myself, but sitting there at the center of the huge window wall, I couldn't help feeling as though I'd been lit by a spotlight. Sideways glances, whispered conversations and not-so-subtle points made me feel as though everyone at Sinners restaurant knew I'd been summoned here tonight. Like they knew there was more behind the invitation Mr. Perrotte had sent than the cocktails and fine dining it offered.

Or maybe I was just being paranoid. But instinct tickled across my shoulders, fight or flight urges tingling through my thighs. This was a mistake.

“Sophie.” I flinched when I heard the soft baritone voice behind my shoulder. “You’re not at all what I expected. I’m Octavius Perrotte. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He wasn’t what I had expected either, though I’m not sure what exactly I had expected. But a twenty-something dark-haired hottie was not it. He was short for a man, maybe five-five, five-six, and stocky like a wrestler. His tan suit fit loosely, as was the style, the jacket buttoning low near his navel. His shirt was the kind that didn’t need a tie, but instead had a stiff banded collar for a clean, finished look.

I shook the hand he offered and noted how small and frail mine looked engulfed by his. He smiled, and the sentiment lit his blue eyes. The color was startling, so much so it was hard not to stare, the brilliant blue made more intense set against the frame of his jet black hair. He wore his hair trimmed short, longer on top, brushed back from his forehead so the shorter strands spiked, giving him a young-businessman look.

Our waiter pulled out his chair and Octavius sat, his gaze never leaving me. “Forgive my staring but your hair is so short. I assumed Alexander was too old-world to be attracted to such a modern hairstyle on a woman. In our day, there were few reasons a woman would cut her hair and none of them good.”

My hand went to finger the fringes of my hair along my neck. “It’s easy to take care of.”

He shook his head, brows creasing. “No. Of course. I’m sorry. You’re lovely. Really. You’re hair is perfect. I’m just surprised. It seems my old friend has changed more over the years than I realized.”

The waiter held a menu out to me. I glanced at the single stiff sheet and noticed a small tattoo on the man’s inner wrist when his sleeve hiked up—an “X” like the Roman numeral ten.

“Thank you.” I took the menu. The writing was the same fancy scroll as on the invitation and artfully covered both sides.

“May I take your drink orders while you decide?” the waiter said.

I glanced at Octavius and then to the waiter. “I’ll have a glass of red wine, please.”

“Priceless.” Octavius’ smile broadened. He spoke to the waiter though his gaze stayed fixed on me. “Fetch a bottle from my private cellar, Tony. One of the Romanée-Contis. Thank you.”

A quick bow and Tony scampered off...to *fetch*.

“How did you even know that I knew Alex?” I asked. “I mean, I only met him last night.”

“An employee of mine. He was...running an errand, and he mentioned seeing you. Said you had Alexander’s rapt attention. I must admit,” he said eyeing me as though he could see more than what my skimpy dress revealed, “I can understand why.”

“Oh. Right.” *Awkward*. “So...Romanée-Conti, is that good?” Smooth topic switch.

“It’s French.”

“Ah.” I nodded like that meant something. What’d I know? Most of the wine I buy comes with screw-on lids or in a convenient party-size box dispenser.

Octavius leaned back in his chair, one hand fiddling with the tail of his folded swan napkin on the table. “Tell me about Alexander. How is he? Business good? What’s his place called...Il Piccolo Morso, isn’t that it?”

I nodded. "That's right." But a strange tingle rippled through my belly as though I was betraying some confidence.

"The Small Bite." He laughed to himself. "Moderation. Ironic coming from our dear Alexander."

"I'm sorry, but why'd you invite me here?" My spidey-reporter sense was off the charts telling me this meeting had little to do with me. I was being played. "What was so urgent we had to talk *tonight*?"

"Do you love him?"

My brain went off-line for about two seconds. I couldn't fathom the question. "What?"

Octavius suddenly lurched forward, forearms on the table. I squeaked and flinched at the same time. "He's fed on you. I can smell him on your breath. Do you know what that means to a man like Alexander, a man of...*moderation*?"

"I barely know him." I tried to scoot back in my chair but he grabbed my wrists, held me so we were both leaning toward each other across the table.

I twisted my hands but the friction against his grip stung my skin. "He didn't feed on me. I went to his club and we hit it off. We kissed. That's it. Can you let go? That hurts."

Octavius's brows creased, confusion flickering through his unreal blue eyes. He glanced at our hands then released his hold. "Forgive me. I forget my strength sometimes. Alexander...he...he worries me. Too long he's kept to himself. I'm happy to hear he's finally moving on, making friends."

"Yeah. He's...good. He's doing fine. I think." I rubbed my wrists where he'd held me, scooting back in my chair to put what little distance I could between us without looking like I was trying to inch toward the door.

"That's good to hear. Yes." Octavius leaned back, seemed to relax again. "I haven't seen him in years. Not since...*Bess*. He was having such a hard time of it then."

"Bess?" Being female and a reporter I couldn't let the mention of another woman's name pass without question.

A satisfied smile flickered at the corner of his mouth. He hiked a brow. "He didn't tell you?"

Just then the maitre d' stepped up to our table. "Mr. Perrotte, excuse the interruption but..." He leaned over and spoke to Octavius in a whisper. After a moment he straightened, and Octavius reached into his suit jacket and pulled a business card from his breast pocket.

He held it out for the maitre d'. "Tell him to call tomorrow night. We'll work something out."

With a small bow, the maitre d' reached for the card, flashing his wrist and the same Roman X tattoo as our waiter. "Yes, sir." He hurried off to deliver his employer's message.

Octavius's gaze swung to me. "I apologize. There's no such thing as off duty when running a business. What were we discussing?"

"Bess." I could tell he was only pretending to have forgotten.

"Ah, yes."

The waiter arrived with our wine and poured a glass for both of us, then left the bottle without asking if we were ready to order. My stomach growled in protest, but Octavius didn't seem to have heard.

“Bess turned me,” he said as though it was as mundane as naming his mother. “She birthed me into this world of eternal life and unending love. I was to be her companion, her anchor to the changing world around her. She was desperate for me.”

I sipped my wine, feeling the warmth of it tingle over my lips, down my throat. He wasn't lying. The wine was good. Really good. “Did Bess turn Alex too?”

Octavius scoffed. “No. Bess and I were together fifty years before we met Alex. He'd apparently had an unfortunate encounter with another female of our kind in an opium den. He'd been whoring himself for a fix. His dark mother took advantage of his drugged stupor, turned him and left him to wallow in ignorance. He was pathetically uneducated in the ways of our kind, of our world when we found him, stumbling through life like a filthy animal. But Bess and her sweet nature took pity on him and we brought Alexander under our tutelage.” He took a quick sip of wine. “That was ages ago.”

“Where's Bess now?”

“Dead,” he answered bluntly, absolutely devoid of emotion. He stared at his wine glass, caressing his thumb up and down the slender stem.

“How? What happened?”

He licked his lips, shrugged. “I'm afraid you'd have to ask Alexander. I'd parted ways with the two of them years earlier. I searched for him after I heard she'd been killed. Alexander wouldn't see me. He was devastated. As was I.”

I sipped my wine while he took another drink of his. My head was a little unfocused and my tongue tingled with the heat of the alcohol. Whatever apprehension I'd been feeling before eased, the wine working wonders to relax my muscles, warming through my veins to every corner of my body. “What made you part ways? I figured Bess would've been pretty important to you.”

“Indeed. But Alexander demanded so much of her attention, so needy and nonsensical. He could do nothing on his own. Wouldn't leave her side for a moment. And Bess, she was so gentle hearted. She couldn't bear to risk damaging the strides we'd made with Alexander by turning him away.” He shook his head as though the outcome was inevitable. “I couldn't bear witness to them like that any longer.”

“Did he love her?”

Octavius made a rude noise, looked away. “How would I know? Makes no difference. As the male in the relationship, Alexander was responsible for her and she died, staked through the heart while under his protection. If he loved her, it wasn't nearly enough.”

“You said you didn't know how she died.” My internal bullshit-meter spiked.

He reached for the wine bottle, refilled our glasses. “As I said, it was ages ago. I know Alexander never again drank from a living human. Punishing himself for failing our Bess. Until you, that is.” Octavius raised his glass to me in salute, then took a deep drink.

“I told you. He didn't feed on me.” I gulped half my glass out of frustration and because it tasted so damn good. A light fruity flavor that wafted over my pallet, rippled down my throat and radiated through my body. It was as though I could feel every molecule inside me humming with life.

“No?” He leaned forward in his chair, forearms on the table, his hands clasping his wine glass. “Why ever not? You’re every bit as lovely as our Bess was. Your skin fairly glows and your lips are positively enticing. I think I’ve never seen eyes such as yours. A truly hypnotic shade.”

“They’re green.” My cheeks flamed. I leaned forward, mimicking his posture so our hands on our wineglasses were side by side on the table. I almost giggled. So *not* me.

“Stunning. As is your figure. And your scent...” He inhaled, breathing deeply through his nose. “Heavenly. You’re beautiful, Sophie. What more could Alexander want in woman?” His hands moved from his wineglass to my hands, the warm gentle touch searing straight through me. My belly fluttered and muscles low in my womb flexed. I glanced at our hands, blinked, tried to focus on the ring he wore on his middle finger. It was a dirty gold, flat on top with a big “X” etched in the center and some sort of writing bordering in a circle around it. It reminded me of our waiter’s tattoo, but the thought flittered from my head a moment later. I forced my mind back on topic.

“Maybe he wasn’t hungry.” I wasn’t sure why Alex’s rebuff at my apartment the other night hadn’t bothered me before, but it did now. I wanted to think about that but I couldn’t puzzle it out, couldn’t keep focus. My head felt thick and small beads of sweat cooled across my forehead. I shook my head, small so he wouldn’t notice, trying to clear my thoughts. My mouth was dry too.

“Hungry?” His brows hiked and his smile shown in his eyes. “Drinking from you would have little to do with sustenance and everything to do with sex. You did know, didn’t you...for vampires, taking blood is a very sexual experience.”

My mind flashed on the scene at Il Piccolo Morso, and the man nuzzling the woman’s neck, his hand stroking back and forth under her dress. I’d wanted Alex the other night, but by offering sex had I been offering my blood too? Did I want to offer my blood? I wasn’t sure, couldn’t decide. It seemed too hard to think. “Are sex and feeding always combined? Can you have one without the other?”

Octavius shrugged, his smile still lighting his eyes. “Who would know? The desire is too strong for one while indulging the other, there’s no reason to deny either.”

I watched his mouth move, the way his lips formed the word. They looked so moist and soft, how would they feel pressed to mine? A fine tremble shook across my shoulders, my palms went moist and a sultry heat stirred between my thighs. I flicked my gaze to his. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to close the small distance between us and taste him. I wanted him to taste me.

“Alex was able to deny both with me.”

“Then he’s a fool.”

My heart skipped. Who doesn’t want to be attractive, to be wanted? Octavius seemed to know just what to say. And with each passing second those wants and desires were becoming harder to ignore.

“To make love with a vampire is a singularly exquisite experience save for one. Being the vampire.”

A jolt of adrenaline shot through my system. I believed him utterly. And more than anything in the world I wanted to know what it was like to be the vampire. My chest squeezed, my breath caught in my throat. I was missing something. This wasn’t right. But why?

Octavius leaned closer. Our lips were only a deep sigh apart. “I can give you that gift, let you feel what it’s like to be one of us. To know our passions—life, sex, blood. To know these sweet undeniable pleasures... forever.”

His breath washed over my face, his lips feathering against mine. His voice was like liquid chocolate, smoothing through my body, delicious and warm. I closed my eyes and exhaled my answer. “Yes.”

He kissed me, and the feel of his mouth on mine was everything I’d imagined. My lips parted and his tongue traced along my teeth, the heat of his saliva tingling like cinnamon through my mouth.

Saliva. Venom. I was being drugged.

Octavius broke the kiss. Stood, offering his hand. “Come, Sophie. We’ll need our privacy.”

I put my hand in his, even as my mind screamed, *no*. I didn’t want this. Well, I did, but I didn’t want to want it. It was the venom. It had to be, but how was it acting so quickly? How had I ingested so much with just one kiss?

“Leave the wine, little one. You won’t need it now,” he said.

I glanced at my hand still holding my wineglass. *The wine.* From his private cellar. Had he mixed his venom in the wine? I gripped the glass tighter, throwing all my will into defying him by any measure.

“Sophie, darling. Leave the wine.”

A buzzing in my ears grew louder. I hadn’t even noticed it before, but now, as I stood, leaving my wine behind, I knew it’d been there since the moment he sat down with me. Octavius led the way through the tables toward the back of the restaurant and the doors to the kitchen. I called my power, but under the influence of the venom and Octavius’s mind control, my concentration wasn’t at its best.

Still, the familiar telltale signs hummed through my mind, tickled at the back of my neck. “Octavius. I think you should let me leave now.”

He glanced over his shoulder, brow creased. “Not just yet.”

It’d hardly fazed him. I wasn’t strong enough, not like this, not for someone as powerful as him. I bumped shoulders with a passing waiter and snagged his arm as we passed, my power still buzzing through my head. “You should stop him from taking me. You should make him let me go.”

“Ignore her,” Octavius said. “I’m impressed, Sophie. But there’s no reason to fight me. You’ll enjoy this.”

The waiter blinked, confusion clouding his young face, but he didn’t move to follow my suggestion as Octavius continued to lead me away. I glanced at his arm where I’d touched him, then lower to his wrist. He had the same X tattoo as my waiter and the maitre d’.

Another waiter passed near enough. I glanced at his wrist even as I made the same suggestion to him. “You should stop him. You should make him let me go.”

His sleeve was too low to see his entire wrist, but I could’ve sworn I saw what might’ve been the bottom points of an “X”. What was it, some kind of club?

We’d nearly reached the swinging door to the kitchen. I called as much power as I could and made one final suggestion to a waiter who was just coming through the swinging doors. “Please. You don’t want to let him take me. You want to make him let me go.”

He balanced a huge tray at his shoulder, the “X” on his wrist plain to see. Almost instantly he dropped the tray and snagged Octavius’s wrist. “Hey. She shouldn’t be here. Let her go.”

Octavius jerked free of the man's grip. "Get a hold of yourself, Bartholomew. She's only human."

But Bartholomew wasn't listening to him. He was obeying me. And suddenly so were the other two waiters I'd suggested to. One of them pried Octavius's hand from my wrist, placing his body between us. The other blocked his way into the kitchen. They had him surrounded and with the vampire's need to appear the respectable *human* businessman in front of his customers, there was nothing he could do to stop me from walking out the front door and hailing the first cab I saw.

Not that walking out the front door was easy. I could still hear him whispering through my head, calling me back, so warm and soft, so tempting. It wasn't until I closed the cab door that the desire to turn around and run into his arms lifted, but only a little.

"Where to, lady?" the cabbie asked.

"Il Piccolo Morso." My head was still dizzy and the heat of the venom was still stirring through my body, making me acutely aware of the delicious ache between my thighs.

The driver wrenched his neck around, glaring at me through the thick plastic window. "Never heard of no Piccolo place."

"The Strip District," I said. "Eighteenth and Smallman Street."

Chapter Five

“Let me in, Bruno. Alex is expecting me.” I held myself upright with a hand on the industrial metal railing outside Il Piccolo Morso. Bruno had watched me pull myself up the steps without so much as blinking. Even now he remained still as death, leaning on his butt against the railing, his arms folded over his chest.

He lifted his chin in a half nod. “You smell like vamp. Who’ve you been with?”

“None of your business.” I knew he probably didn’t mean it sexually, but I couldn’t help being offended as though he did.

“It is if you wanna see Alex. You under the influence?”

My brain clicked into second gear and I understood what he was worried about. With Octavius’s venom working its hedonist magic inside me, I’d been nearly helpless to refuse his psychic demands. For someone who’s been bitten, someone with less practice in the psychic arts and under the influence of a vamp, they could be made to do almost anything. Including causing harm to Bruno’s boss. He was just doing his job.

I sighed, exhausted from fending off Octavius. He was gone from my head now though. I was sure of it. “No, Bruno. I’m not under the influence. I think the drink I had at Sinners restaurant was spiked. That’s all. It’s wearing off. I’m good now.”

Bruno pushed to his feet and closed the small distance between us. He cupped my face in his hands, lifted my chin, examining my eyes. He turned my face to the side, checked one side of my neck then the other. After a second he let me go and stepped back. “Yeah. Fine. You’re not showing a mark. But you’ve still got a buzz going, so don’t go and do anything stupid.”

“Right.” Already filled my quota of stupid tonight.

He reached for the rusted metal door. As I watched, his normal stubby male fingernails elongated, turned clawlike, and hooked between wall and door. A small tug and the door swung open. I did not want to know what that was about.

I spotted Alex right away, his tousled blond mop of hair bobbing up and down above the seated customers at the bar as he hurried filling drink orders. Between heads and shoulders, I caught glimpses of his face. He was beaming, talking to club goers, laughing, even rocking to the beat of the music now and then.

He sooo did *not* seem like a hundred-and-some-year-old vampire. With his summer tan and bright blue eyes, he looked like he should be standing on a pitcher’s mound, ready to strike out the next batter. Dark and brooding, he wasn’t. He was young and healthy and hard bodied. And the way he moved, like water over smooth stones, grace and agility, I’d bet anything he could go all night. My belly fluttered and a smile tugged the corners of my mouth.

“Hey, barkeep, got any OJ back there?” With Octavius’s venom still warming through my system, I figured alcohol would be like adding fuel to a fire and my libido was already flaming.

Alex glanced my way at the first sound of my voice. His brows creased, his pretty eyes and flashy smile clouding a bit. He finished the drink he was making, then strode toward me, ignoring other customers snapping fingers and waving bills for his attention.

“What happened? Who’s fed on you?” He was in front of me in a heartbeat, leaning across the bar so his face was only inches from mine, totally invading my comfort bubble.

I flinched back. Then realized he was sniffing me. “What the...? Nobody. Knock it off. You’re creepin’ me out.”

Alex straightened, but his expression remained tense, concerned. “I can smell venom on you. On your breath. What happened? Whose is it?”

“First...orange juice.” My throat was dry as a desert wind, and I was still light-headed and flushed. “Won’t do us any good if I pass out.”

He grabbed a short glass from under the bar and turned to snag the jug of orange juice from the mini fridge under the center island. He poured then pushed the glass toward me. “Talk.”

I drank half of it in one gulp. “You know a guy named Octavius Perrotte? Owns a restaurant called Sinners up on Mount Washington.”

Alex stiffened, his concerned expression turning sour, like the taste in his mouth had just gone bad. “Yes.”

“Right. I’m thinkin’ he feels the same way about you.” I finished the rest of the OJ and pushed my glass out for more. “Anyway, I was cordially summoned to dinner by your old buddy, Perrotte. He sent a car. Sent this dress. The guy seriously wanted to talk to me.”

“About what?”

“You.” He blinked at that, confusion flashing behind his eyes. “Well, I mean, that’s all we ended up talking about. He asked how you were doing, how the business was going, stuff like that. He was sure you and me were...a thing. I told him we barely knew each other but I still don’t think he believed me.”

Alex’s nostrils flared and he clenched his jaws so tight I could see the muscles flexing in his cheeks. “Did he...kiss you?”

“What? No.” Offense made my voice go high. “Well, okay. Yeah. Once. But it wasn’t my fault. He drugged me. I think. Otherwise he wouldn’t have stood a chance. I just met the guy. Sheesh, what kind of women are you vamps used to dating?” Then again I’d kissed Alex the first night I’d met him. And if not for my sixth sense warning me off, I might’ve done a lot more with Octavius tonight.

But that was the venom doing a number on me. Never mind that Alex was sexy as hell that night, being all protective of his club and his customers. And even now, watching him fume at the thought of Octavius kissing me was a helluva turn-on. His hands fisting on the bar, flexing muscles in his forearms up to his rolled sleeves and beyond. His broad shoulders tensed, so very male. Seeing his reaction had my heart doing double time and muscles low in my center turning liquid hot.

“Drugged you? Drugged you how?”

I gave myself a quick mental shake, trying again to stay on topic. “I...I think he spiked my drink.”

Come to think about it, that might have something to do with my current amorous mood. Their venom worked like some sort of date-rape drug...except I didn't really mind. Then again, it could be all Alex.

Alex cursed under his breath, pushing from the bar, scrubbing a hand over his face then paced back to me. "Sounds like something Octavius would do. He's territorial. Likes to mark what he sees as his. His scent on you is a kind of mark, a claim. *Asshole*."

"Right." Couldn't argue that. The guy had used his mind tricks and venom to try to get me alone. Was he really planning on turning me? I didn't want to think about it. "He told me about Bess."

Alex's gaze snapped to mine, his angry fidgeting stopped. "What did he say about her?"

"Only that she was killed and that you were so upset about it you wouldn't see him." I dropped my gaze, traced the rim of my glass with my finger. "I think he kind of blames you."

He laughed but it wasn't a happy laugh. "He would."

"What happened?"

After a moment's thought, Alex gestured with a nod of his head toward the tables that lined the far wall. He walked around the inside of the bar, and I grabbed my orange juice and followed along the outside. We met at the hinged section of the bar top.

"Her name was Elizabeth," he said as we settled into an intimate table for two. "She hated the name Bess, but everyone was using the nickname back then and Octavius was only ever concerned about what he wanted."

"Octavius said she turned him."

"She did, though it was well before I was born." Alex tipped his chin at the bar and raised a finger when the other bartender nodded back. "He'd stayed with her fifty years when I met them."

"Wow, they really must've loved each other."

Alex snorted. "Love had nothing to do with it. When a vampire turns someone they're responsible for the fledgling for the first thirty years. It takes about that long for the sire's mark to fade from the fledgling, and for their venom to be fully replaced by the fledgling's own. The responsibility quickly becomes a burden. No one—no one sane—stays with their sire longer than those first thirty years."

A thin, statuesque woman dressed the same as Alex and the other bartenders, white button shirt and black slacks, placed a glass filled with deep red liquid in front of Alex. He gave her a half nod. "Thanks."

"Is that blood?" I had to ask. Couldn't help it.

"No. Bloody Mary mix. I love this stuff."

Too weird. "So Octavius was what, like a stalker?"

Alex finished his swallow nodding. "In a way. They'd had an infatuation before she turned him, but it was far more to Octavius. He'd become obsessed with her and it only got worse after the change. Later on she realized she'd seen signs, but her loneliness kept her in denial. I couldn't blame her. An eternity walking outside the world, bearing witness to humanity but no longer a part of it, can be maddening."

I looked around the nightclub, customers bumping shoulders, tables filled, people standing two deep at the bar. "Doesn't look too lonely to me."

Alex followed my gaze. “Things are different now. Back then our kind were spread far and wide with no easy way to keep in touch. We are not a pack species but we do feel the need for companionship from time to time, however brief. Now, with telephones, TV, the internet, communication is instantaneous and air travel can have us with others of our kind in a matter of hours. Back then you could go centuries believing you were the only one left.”

I finished off my orange juice and Alex pointed to it with a questioning raise of his brows. I shook my head. “I take it, Octavius never felt the need for alone time?”

“No. He never weaned himself from Elizabeth and she didn’t have the strength to turn him away. She became cruel with him, even physically abusive at times in trying to end his obsession with her. But even her unabashed hatred wouldn’t deter him. His attachment to her was turning her into someone, some thing, she couldn’t bear to be.”

“You sure?” I had to ask. Alex’s version was the exact opposite of Octavius’s. One of them was lying. I wanted to give Alex the benefit of the doubt, but that may have been my hormones talking.

His brows pinched tight. “Of course. The night we met, Elizabeth was trying to commit suicide in an attempt to ultimately, finally, escape him.”

“How?”

His lips sealed, and he glanced away. After a moment he sighed. “Guillotine. She couldn’t reach the lever though and when I asked her if she’d like my help, she cried yes, and then rushed into my arms sobbing.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t imagine the level of desperation that must’ve taken. “But if it was so easy to get lost back then, why didn’t she? I mean, why didn’t she just sneak off? I can’t believe in fifty years there wasn’t a single moment she couldn’t have slipped away without his notice.”

Alex’s gaze swung back to mine, a weariness I hadn’t noticed before darkened at the corners. “He would’ve found her. A vampire is always and forever able to locate their fount. Another safeguard for the fledgling.”

“Is your...sire still, y’know, walking the earth?”

Alex shook his head, staring at his tomato juice. “No. She succumbed to her loneliness before I could help her.”

Our table was on a raised level that ringed the nightclub along the wall. I watched as a couple sauntered toward the table nearest us on the lower level. The guy made eye contact with both Alex and me.

Alex nodded. “Todd,” he said.

Todd lifted his chin back at Alex—a very guy-type greeting. The woman he was with didn’t even glance our way, her long chocolate brown hair curtained around her face, brushing her slender waist. Her dark blue dress that wrapped tight around her body and tied at her side made her legs look like they went on forever. She struck me as pretty, too pretty for a guy like Todd. I have no idea what she was doing with him.

He wasn’t scary ugly or anything, but he had spiky platinum blond hair, little brown eyes and his head looked too small for his body. It was probably the overly broad shoulders. He looked like a weight lifter and the extra muscle was probably what made his head seem small. Or maybe it really was small. Who knows?

It didn’t matter. My mind was busy with other things. As they slid into the half-circle bench seat, my thoughts filled with images of a woman hounded, pushed beyond her limits, where her only escape was death.

I turned my focus back to Alex. “How’d you get her away from him?”

He shrugged. "Like you said. One night when Octavius was out, I had her gather her things from our villa in Paris and we left."

"Did he come looking for you? Did he find you?"

"He found us." Alex finished off his Bloody Mary mix and leaned back in his chair. "Elizabeth and I had moved to a small apartment outside of Naples. For nearly two months we lived in freedom, without someone constantly looking over our shoulders, controlling who we spoke to, where we went, how we interacted with humans. We'd even begun to believe Octavius wouldn't follow, until one night we came home from an evening swim at the beach and found him sitting on our bed."

"Our bed? So...you were lovers?" Yeah, I know, bigger picture and all, but a girl likes to know.

Alex nodded. "We'd become very close. Until that night Octavius was able to hold fast to the fantasy that he and Elizabeth were meant to be. That night he knew he'd lost her long ago."

"So what, did he just leave?"

His brows hiked high beneath the swag of his blond bangs, a ghost of a smile played for an instant across his lips. "No. He tried to kill her."

"You stopped him."

"Yes, but the fight was long and bloody. Octavius had insanity on his side. A sane man has moral limits, pain thresholds. Insanity freed him of such things. In the end though, we left Octavius near death on our apartment floor. Elizabeth..." He looked away, his eyes suddenly glistening with unshed tears, his chin quivering.

A deep breath and he collected himself. "Elizabeth was so damaged by Octavius's relentless pursuit, she took a knife and cut...and cut off his testicles. She told him if he ever dared follow her again, she'd leave him with nothing to prove himself male."

"Ouch. Holy smokes, Alex, I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what the two of you must've endured."

He didn't look at me. He just kept talking. "Elizabeth was never the same after that. We never saw Octavius again, but I think when she cut him, she cut out a piece of her soul as well."

No doubt. The creep had made her as crazy as him. "Wait. Octavius said he found you after Elizabeth passed away. He said you wouldn't see him."

Alex shook his head, perplexed. "No. I never heard from him again after that night."

Another lie or a half-truth? Hard to know with Octavius. "How long did you and she have with each other before she died?"

"Twenty years. And she didn't just die, she was killed—murdered. We spent the next twenty years in each other's company but we were never the same, never truly together the way we'd been before." The tall female bartender from earlier appeared at our table suddenly, replacing our drinks. Apparently someone always had their eye on the boss.

Alex cupped his hands around the fresh glass on the table, aimlessly caressing the sides with his thumbs. He took a quick drink. "It was my fault. I didn't know how to help her, how to bring her back from the darkness in her mind. I let the distance between us grow, let myself become careless. I knew they were hunting our kind. We'd already lost a few friends who'd joined us in the years after we'd escaped Octavius. I only left her for an hour. Long

enough to book passage on a ship bound for the Americas. I had to get us out of Europe, away from the vampire hunters sweeping the continent. I thought she was safe. I was wrong. Good Lord, I was so wrong.”

“Vampire hunters. They staked her through the heart.” I knew now that part of Octavius’s story was true.

Alex nodded, his gaze downcast, his chin quivering again. “I left Europe that night. Never returned. And until you mentioned his name, I believed I’d left Octavius there as well.”

“Maybe you did, but he’s here now, and he’s brought friends. Or made them.”

Alex’s gaze snapped to mine, all evidence of tears gone. “What do you mean?”

“His restaurant, Sinners, it’s full of vamps and they’ve all got the same tattoo. Matches his ring.”

“Tattoo? Where?”

“On the inside of their wrists.” I pointed to the same spot on my own unmarked wrist to show him.

“His fledglings. It’s his mark, unique to his venom.” He leaned forward to rest his arms on the table. “The ring is from another time. Used long ago when our kind kept human servants.”

“Used it how?”

A wince flashed across his face. “We used the rings to mark those who we claimed as ours. There’s a button on the side that releases a sharp edge along the design of the ring. We’d dip the ring in venom and press it to the human’s wrist, hard enough to pierce the skin. It worked much like a tattoo with just enough venom trapped under the skin to pull blood to the wound. The mark was quick and permanent. Even if the person was turned later on, the mark never faded.”

“Where’s your ring?”

“Gone,” he said. “There came a point I wanted nothing to do with the past, with the life I’d led. But a ring like that, something so uniquely connected to me, I couldn’t simply toss it in a river or down a canyon, and trust it would never be found. So I donated it to be sealed in a time capsule nearly seventy years ago. When the capsule is opened, I’ll place it in another. Safely hidden and out of reach in plain sight.”

I could tell by the way his chest puffed and his chin lifted he thought himself oh-so-clever. The idea was good, unless things went wrong.

“You sure? I mean, if someone got hold of your ring and some vamp venom, they could fake your mark.” I could see him making the same connections I had. “Make it look like you’d drained a few of your customers and left them for dead.”

He shook his head. “No. The mark of the murder would still show at the wound sight. Their venom would pull it to the surface. Besides, the ring is sealed beneath concrete. I watched them pour it.”

“You have another explanation for how your mark got on the necks of those women?”

After a few seconds of contemplation he said, “No. But that doesn’t make yours any more possible.”

“Whatever. There should be some kind of record of that sort of thing. A list of items, names of donators. I can check. Make sure your ring’s listed. What building was it?”

“The Cathedral of Learning.”

“Seriously?” The Cathedral of Learning is one of Pittsburgh’s most famous buildings, the centerpiece of the University of Pittsburgh campus.

He nodded then took a sip of his tomato juice. "I donated the ring in the name of the Edmunston family."

"Which was you," I said, to be clear.

"Yes, but at the time I thought it best to remain indistinguishable given the fact I planned to still be around when they opened the time capsule."

"Right. Good thinking."

Alex took another sip of his juice and I did the same, my gaze drifting over the club goers. Unintentionally I found myself staring at the couple in the near lower table, Todd and his date. They were huddled close now, she whispering in his ear, her hand on his lap beneath the table, he with his arm around her back holding her close...to his neck. She was feeding. Now I understood how Todd had snagged such a pretty woman. My gaze slid to her arm and lower to where the tablecloth moved with her strokes. Todd rocked his hips, shifting closer.

Octavius's venom stirred to life through my veins, warming muscles low in my womb. I swallowed hard, tried to ignore the sensation. "Octavius said that vampires equate feeding with sex and vice versa."

I saw Alex follow my gaze from the corner of my eye. By now Todd had all but given up on modesty, rocking his hips so hard the table shook from the effort.

"There's a...connection. Yes."

The lower, rough tone of his voice made me look his way. His eyes seemed darker, more intense, and the way he stared at my mouth made my chest tight. "Connected, how...exactly?"

He licked his lips, glancing at the couple and back again. "We can feed without having sex, but the desire's always there."

"Can you have sex without feeding?" Just asking the question sent a delicious pulse through my sex muscles, my mind flashing on thoughts of his penis growing hard, filled with my blood.

"Yes," he said. "Though it's not as...satisfying. It's easier for a woman. The infusion of blood aids the nerve endings, heightens sensation. But for a man the fresh blood makes things...firmer. Feeding is a pleasurable sensation for both vampire and donor. That pleasure translates easily to sex."

I scooted to the edge of my chair, leaning on my forearms across the table. "So are you, uh, feeding on anyone...exclusively?"

His cheeks flushed and a smile swept across his lips. "No. I'm not. And on that note, I think I should get you home before Octavius's venom has us both doing something we might regret."

I glanced at the couple again, my mouth dry, my palms moist. Yeah, I knew a lot of what I was feeling was the effect of vamp venom. But the connection I felt with Alex, like we'd known each other for years, was a chemical reaction all my own and no amount of sobering up would diminish it.

"Right. And when this stuff wears off I'll make me a quick snack for you. Uh, I mean, I'll make you a quick snack." Subtle is sooo *not* my middle name.

Chapter Six

A faint tingle still tickled along my lips and down the center of my tongue, like I'd rubbed a finger of Bengay over the sensitive flesh—only minus the nasty taste. My finger and toe tips were the same way as well as the most intimate parts of my body. The last is what had me staring at Alex like a nympho at a porn star.

"Thanks for the lift," I said. "Not sure I had enough money in this stupid little purse to afford another cab ride."

He lifted his chin in a half nod, eyes on the road, then glanced at me and back again. "No problem. Besides, the purse matches the dress, right? Uh, nice dress by the way." He glanced at me again just as the cab of his pickup lit with a passing streetlight, a quick flash, enough that I could see the male appreciation on his face before it went dark again.

I kept watching the handsome lines of his face by the green glow of the dashboard, my body warm and tingly with need.

"You said Cook Road?"

I nodded then realized he couldn't hear a nod. "Yeah. That's it up there on the left. Third house. The one with the wide steps. Don't you remember? I mean, you just broke into the place the other night."

I lived in a big brownstone that'd been divvied up into four apartments with a common hall and front door. Pretty nice actually, if not small and overpriced.

I think he blushed, a smile sweeping across his face as he looked at me sideways. "Yeah. I wasn't really paying attention. I was pissed 'cause I thought you were the one setting me up. Kinda just went on instinct. Followed my nose."

"You smelled your way here? I smell?" Ugh, not good.

"No. Well, yes. But no." He pulled the truck into an open spot a few up from my apartment door, bumped the gearshift into park and turned off the engine. "I followed *my* scent on you. Remember, I licked my thumb to try and rub that mark off your neck?"

Yeah. I remembered. I remembered so well a quick shiver raced down my body like a blast of hot air. *Yum*. I bobbed my head in dimwitted affirmation.

"And everyone smells, err...I mean, has a scent. Yours is..." he inhaled through his nose, "...nice. Kind of flowery, with maybe a hint of shea nut, maybe vanilla too."

"That's my shampoo."

"It's nice."

"Thanks." Weird conversation. "You really thought I was the one killing those women?"

He looked away, his mouth opening and shutting twice before he finally said, “I...I thought you might’ve had something to do with it. Yeah.”

“What do you think now?”

“I think...I think you’re a great girl and that you should let me worry about it.” He pulled the key from the ignition. “Mind if I walk you all the way up? I’d feel better if I can check the place. Make sure you’re safe, before I take off.”

“No. I’d appreciate it. Thanks.” I pushed open the truck door and hopped out, ignoring the way my stomach wobbled at the thought of him in my apartment again. I came around the front of the truck and met him on the sidewalk. “I can help figure out who’s doing this, you know. I am an investigative journalist, after all. With, I might add, the power to suggest people, including vampires, do whatever I want. Could come in handy. Especially with the cops.”

“Could also make you a target, bring you to the notice of others like it did tonight.” He followed up the steps behind me, waiting while I unlocked the front door. We stepped inside, letting the door slam closed behind us. “Besides, I’m not all that concerned about the police. If they do connect me to the murders, I have my own skill set that’ll help me deal with them. My worry isn’t the police but the donors. If they get wind someone’s targeting Il Piccolo Morso’s human customers, they’ll stop coming.”

I winced at him over my shoulder, leading the way up the inside stairs to my apartment. “Oh. Yeah, I can see how that’d be bad for business.”

“Screw the business. You don’t get to my age without accumulating a comfortable retirement fund. No. It’s more than business. It’s about blood.” He held out his hand for the key when we reached my door. I gave it to him, and he unlocked the door, then gestured with a raised hand and a point that I should wait there while he checked the place. I did.

Minutes later he was back, holding open my door as I entered. “Nice parting line. But what’d you mean it’s about blood?”

He hung my keys on my kitty key holder and locked the door—all three locks—straightened the cross above the threshold and repositioned the string of garlic cloves so it hung over the door. Answered my question about garlic.

“My club and others like it over the centuries are the only things that have kept our races from wiping each other out. We need fresh infusions of blood, Sophie.” He followed me the two steps to the corner then on into my living room. I tossed the little red purse into the dress box still sitting on my coffee table while Alex went around and collapsed his muscled, wonderfully male body onto my couch.

His blond bangs flopped over his eyes with his bounce. “If vampires can’t get those infusions in a safe, mutually agreeable manner like my club, then they’ll get it however they can. My club allows humans who want to donate, for whatever reason”—I knew the reason—“to make themselves available to vampires. And avoids vampires taking blood from someone who prefers not to...share.”

I perched on the edge of the couch beside him, careful to keep the high hem of my skimpy dress from riding any higher. Knees together. “So you’re afraid this will start a panic that could spread to other clubs?”

“It’s happened before. Not here, but in other countries. During the vampire hunts in Europe. It won’t end well for either side.”

“You think it’s humans again?”

He shook his head, leaned forward bracing his forearms on his knees. “I don’t know. It could be someone with a personal grudge against me, I guess.”

“Like Octavius.”

“But I haven’t seen him in more than a hundred years. Why now? Why risk unmasking our entire race by draining the bodies the way he did?”

“Maybe he didn’t know where you were until now,” I said. “Didn’t you say a vampire can get lost in the fabric of time? Maybe it took him this long to find you and now he’s trying to call you out.”

“Maybe.” He swung his gaze to me and I was suddenly, acutely aware of how close we sat. “But how’s he doing it? He’d have difficulty draining a human once, let alone four times so close together. And how’s he leaving my mark on them? I mean, I never touched those girls. I haven’t touched anyone in that way since...”

I knew how his sentence would’ve ended if he’d finished. *Since Elizabeth*. I put my hand on his knee, wishing I could take away the pain of those memories. “If he has your ring...”

Alex pushed to his feet. “He doesn’t. I wasn’t that careless. I handed it to the time-capsule committee chairman myself. He was a weasel-faced man. Tall, with blond hair and thick wire-framed glasses. I remember distinctly. I watched him place my ring in the box with the other items.”

I stood beside Alex. “Did you watch them seal the box?”

“Yes.” He blinked, seemed to think better on it. “No. I’m not sure. No. I guess not, but I lived a block down from the cathedral. I helped with the planning and the ceremony. I was there nearly every day. I would’ve seen Octavius.”

“Not if you didn’t know to look for him. You thought he was still in Europe, didn’t you?”

Alex nodded, his brow puckered tight over blazing blue eyes. “I often wondered if he’d been captured and killed in the vampire slayings.”

“Clearly he wasn’t.”

“Yes, but why would he act now? He did nothing after that night Elizabeth cut off his... I never saw him again. If he wanted revenge why not strike back then, when he knew where we were? Why not act while Elizabeth was still on this earth? What does he achieve now?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? I don’t speak crazy. Maybe she scared the crap out of him when she cut off his berries. Maybe it took this long to grow a new pair.”

Alex swung a pitiful look my way. “They won’t grow back.”

“Yeah. I figured.” I tried to hide the shudder crawling up my spine at the thought. “I was speaking metaphorically. Listen, we’ll figure this out. I’ve got connections at the college and down at city hall. There’s gotta be some official record of what they put in that capsule. And who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky and find some old photos of Octavius sneaking around the build site like they do in the movies, to prove he was there.”

“We are never photographed,” he said, as though it wasn’t even possible.

Was it? “Is that a vampire thing? Y’know, no soul, no reflection in mirrors, invisible on film.”

Alex gave me a look that I imagine many a lithium patient must see on a daily basis. “Uh...no. It’s just not wise to be captured on film when you don’t age.”

“Oh. That. Well, yeah.” Look at that. I do speak crazy. “Still, we might get lucky.”

“We will do nothing of the sort.” He took me by the shoulders so our bodies were squarely facing each other, then raised my chin with the crook of his finger. “You will drop this investigation and keep yourself from notice. If Octavius is behind these murders, there’s no telling to what depths of depravity he’ll sink. I won’t have you caught in his deranged world. Understood?”

Kinda cute how he thought that would actually work. “Oh, yeah. Sure. You bet.”

I tried to keep sincerity in my eyes when our gazes met. It worked. He smiled, assured, then reached to brush a disobedient curl from my forehead. “Your hair’s so short.”

“You like long hair.” I remembered Octavius’s comment.

His shoulders lifted slightly, a half-hearted shrug. “Depends on the woman. There are no rules to beauty.” His gaze went to that curl again. “The color is...remarkable.”

“Where were you when I was thirteen?”

Amusement shook a quiet laugh through his chest before his attention turned to my mouth. He traced his thumb along my lower lip, so light and tender it sent a cool tingle over my skin, raising the fine hairs all over my body. My breath shuddered with my exhale, a million butterflies fluttering in my belly. I licked my lips on reflex, accidentally touching his thumb with the tip of my tongue.

He stilled for an instant, as though the sensation did wonderful, dangerous, things to his being. Then his chest swelled with his breath and life returned to him. “There’s something about you, Sophie. Why do I find you such a fascinating temptation?”

“My winning personality?” The soft shaky sound of my voice ruined the humor, though Alex’s face still lit with his smile.

“Perhaps that’s it.” Holding my chin pinched between the crook of his finger and thumb, his other hand smoothed down my arm then slipped to my waist. The heat of his palm warmed against the bare flesh at the small of my back. Gentle pressure nudged me closer as he slipped his hand from my chin to cup my cheek, then tunneled through my hair to the back of my neck.

Our bodies came together, my breasts crushed against the hard lines of his chest, my hips nestled against his and the stiff ridge of his arousal pressing a line along my belly. His smile melted in the heat of his eyes, desire lowering his lids, softening the line of his lips. “For more than one hundred years I’ve not fed on a living human being. I’ve not touched a woman in the throes of blood lust. But now—with you... What is it about you that makes me think of nothing else?”

I swallowed hard unsure how to answer or even if I should. My hands had found the muscled rounds of his biceps, their strength cradling me against his body. Anticipation tingled over my lips, made me lick them, thoughts of his mouth pressed to mine filling my head. But he didn’t move, neither toward a kiss, nor away from it. And when I looked into his eyes I could see the inner battle deciding one course or the other.

“Maybe.” I kept my voice a quiet whisper. “Because it’s all I’ve been thinking about too.”

His lips edged closer, his gaze dropping to my mouth, then hesitated. His fingers caressed the back of my head under my hair. The sensation relaxed muscles in every part of my body even as it sent a wash of heat tingling through my sex. God, I loved the way he touched me.

“Do you know? Do you understand what it is I want to do to you?” His breath warmed across my mouth, the hint of wine and some other tempting spice I couldn’t name filled my nose, rippled down my throat to breeze through my lungs.

“Yes. You...you want to take my...blood.”

He lifted his chin and pressed a kiss to my forehead. The skin beneath his lips warmed instantly with a heat that went beyond simple body temperature. It seemed to ripple all along my skin working its way through my body like a drug. “That’s right. But do you understand what the feel of it will do to us?”

I swallowed again, my eyes closed, my nose brushing under his chin breathing in the sweet powdery scent of his cologne, his lips feathering against my forehead. “Blood lust.” The words were barely audible.

“*Lust*. Raw and powerful. To lose all abandon. You won’t be able to stop. You must be sure, Sophie...now.” He leaned back just enough to watch my face.

I nodded, uncertain my voice would be heard. “I’m sure.” I held my breath.

His gaze focused on my mouth again and my lips parted an instant before he pressed his kiss. The taste of him filled my mouth, cinnamon and sweet wine, the flavor swirled over my tongue, warmed down my throat like a fine liqueur. Delicious heat spread like a blaze gone wild, burning me up from the inside, igniting every nerve ending, awakening my body so my muscles pulled tight, need coiled low and my thighs trembled.

His muscles flexed under my hands pulling me closer, tighter. His kiss deepened and my mind swam with the feel of his tongue exploring my mouth, his fingers denting my back, gripping my head, holding me...like prey. I felt consumed and wanted more, but he pulled himself back, trailing his lips along my cheek, nibbling my ear, teasing his teeth over my neck.

I shuddered, each scrape of his teeth sending a fast pulse through my sex. Hot and wet with lust, I squirmed in his arms, fumbling with the buttons down his shirt. Alex pulled back enough to help, shrugging the white cotton off his shoulders, allowing only a moment for me to work his belt and zipper before his hands slipped up to my shoulders.

I unfastened the button of his slacks so they loosened around his narrow hips just as he hooked his fingers on the edge of my dress and slid the red elastic tube off my shoulders and down my arms, letting it fall down my legs to pool on the floor around my feet. I was left wearing only a pair of lace boy-cut panties and my high-heeled shoes. Both matched the dress. The neckline had been too low to allow for a bra.

Alex’s blue eyes took me in, lingering over me from head to toe as though a picture were being drawn in his mind. My heart thundered in my chest, muscles so tight my breaths came in soft, shallow pants. I wanted his lips on mine again, his arms around me, the heat of his hard body pressed to mine.

“Alex...” I fought not to squirm under the intensity of his gaze. His eyes met mine and the heat of his stare nearly took my breath. He swept in and pressed another searing kiss to my lips then bent lower to capture my breast in his mouth.

I gasped as the warmth of his venom penetrated through the pores on the sensitive flesh. The gentle massage of his hand turned my knees to rubber. I wrapped my arm around his head, held him to me as he suckled my breast, tugging the hard nipple into his mouth.

Would he bite me there? A wave a desire swamped through me and I moaned out loud at the thought, arching my back, pressing my flesh deeper into his mouth. I wanted to feel his teeth sink into me, to feel the rush of blood as it spilled from my body into his.

Somewhere in the distant parts of my brain, I felt his hands at my hips, the soft chafe of my lace panties sliding down my thighs, tickling the tops of my feet, hooking on my high heels. I shifted to toe off my shoes, but Alex’s arm clutched around my waist, stilled me instantly.

“Leave them on,” he said, his voice rough and sexy. He gazed up at me, the scruff of his day-old beard scraping my nipple as he spoke. My breath caught at the maddening mix of pain and pleasure, and all I could do was nod.

He lowered his face to my body again, kissing and nipping, the teasing promise of his bite spinning my mind, churning a firestorm of desire through my veins. He tasted my body, kissing the bottom round of my breast, slipping lower to the tip of my breastbone, then lower still to my belly. He sank to his knees and finally, in a heart-stopping instant, he pressed a kiss to the coarse hairs at my sex. With a firm wet lick, he traced his tongue between the sensitive lips. The sensation buckled my knees and in a move far too quick and fluid for me to track, he stood, scooping me into his arms, driving me backwards toward my bedroom. I wrapped my legs around his waist, my high heels catching his back, snagging the belt loop of his slacks.

An instant later Alex was on top of me, his body pinning me to my mattress. He kissed me hard, driving his tongue into my mouth, filling me with the taste of him, the heady burn of his venom. I arched my hips, felt the hard line of his erection trapped beneath layers of cloth. My skin hummed with the feel of his kiss pulsing through my veins, my body moist and ready for him. I reached for his slacks, the tight elastic of his underwear...and pushed.

Alex ground his hips against me, triggered my body to push back, wanting the hardness of him to fill me. I pushed at his clothes again, nudged them to the highest curve of his ass. His stiff sex and the press of his body against mine kept the material from slipping lower.

Enough. I wanted him inside me and with a small point of my high-heeled shoe, I snagged underwear and slacks alike, and shoved them down his thick muscled legs.

Alex pushed up on stiff arms, shifting his legs, kicking and pulling himself free of his clothes. His erection thudded against my groin, brushing through the hairs at my sex again and again. I reached down and took hold, feeling his thickness, caressing his length. Alex stilled for a moment, then rocked his hips, enhancing my strokes.

His was thick and long, but the velvet skin wasn’t as taut as it could be, it wrinkled and gathered at the head moving with my hand. His body didn’t possess enough blood, his heart too weak and slow to flood his penis. He was hard enough to do the job, but he’d never reach satisfaction this way.

I flicked my gaze to his and found him staring into my eyes, reading me.

“More than a hundred years?” I asked.

His lips swept into one of those amused smiles you give a child who’s just said something cute. “It still feels good. Just not...complete.”

“Why’d you wait so long?”

“The last time I indulged my blood lust, my lover cut off the testicles of another man and was lost to me forever. She wouldn’t allow me to feed from her and had no interest in sex without feeding. When she was finally taken from this world, my lust went with her. I’ve met no one in the interim who stirred my desire so greatly my want overshadowed the sorrow of that night—overshadowed the loss of her.”

He rocked his hips back so I lost my hold on him, then lowered his body to mine, sealing us from chest to sex. The smooth head of his penis nudged against my entrance and my legs parted wider in reflex. He nestled his hips between my thighs and pressed a kiss to my lips that stole my breath and dizzied my mind.

I wanted him to finish his answer, to say he’d met no one he wanted enough, until me, but when his thick, firm sex pushed into mine, spreading me, filling me, the need of his words skittered from my brain. A breath-stealing jolt zapped through my body as the length of him nudged the end of me. The sensation was bliss and I held my breath, the two of us stretching the moment. He began to move.

His body slipped in and out of me, drawing friction, teasing nerves, tightening a coil of pleasure deep inside me. He moved faster, rocking his hips, stroking the most sensitive flesh of my body. Wave after wave of pleasure tingled over my skin, glittered through my mind. Muscles tightened, a tempting pressure pushed me toward release. I’d come this way, but I’d come alone. I didn’t want that.

I wanted to call my power, to give him the push he seemed to need. But I didn’t. My voice was small, filled with hope and longing, but not an ounce psychic power. “Alex...join me.”

As though I’d given him permission to breathe, he crushed my mouth with his, kissing me deep and long, flooding me with his venom. He broke the kiss, his hips rocking a steady rhythm in and out of me. His beard-rough cheek slid along mine, he found my ear, kissed and nipped then lowered his mouth to my neck.

His breath washed over my flesh with his whispered words, igniting a riot of tingles. “Sweet Sophie,” he said and then he bit me.

Molten heat poured through my veins. Alex’s penis grew hard inside me, stroking deeper, faster, filling me utterly again and again. Every molecule of my body hummed with life, tingled with the draw of sensation quickly pooling at the center of my sex. Muscles pulsed around him, milked his marble-hard sex for every last stroke. I held my breath, willing the fast swell of pleasure to rise higher and higher inside me until I couldn’t breathe for it. Until I couldn’t hold back.

My release spilled over me in a hot wave of pleasure, swamping my mind, warming down my neck, my chest, relaxing muscles in my belly and legs, fluttering through my sex drawing Alex along with me a moment later. His pace turned frantic, his mouth’s grip on my neck tightening, the erotic suction there sending another roaring release through my body. He drove himself deep and hard inside me, faster and faster until we both slipped over the edge our bodies hugging and pulsing in and around the other, stretching the exquisite sensation as long as we could.

I felt him lick the wound he'd made. My breath caught with the erotic jolt it sent zapping through my muscles. He slipped to my side and drew me into his embrace.

"Mmm...I want to do that again." My breaths were still short and shallow, but the sweet hum of my orgasm made me smile. A thought occurred to me. "Oh shoot. Does that make me an addict?"

He cuddled me close. "Let's hope."

Chapter Seven

Waking up with a vampire isn't as creepy as you might think. Turns out he's a pretty decent cook. Which is good, because I am sooo not. We didn't say a word about murder, or time capsules, or rings, but my mind was all over it the whole morning. By the time I left for work and Alex left to check on his club, I was itching to check sources. I was sure his ring wasn't in that time capsule, it couldn't be.

There was no other way to explain how his mark got on the necks of four murdered women. Unless he'd put it there himself when he killed them. I couldn't accept that.

Micky, my editor, left me alone most of the day while I checked internet records and made phone calls. He thought I was working on a story. And technically I was. Except the information I was searching for wouldn't be part of the finished copy. Yeah, I like truth in journalism as much as the next girl, but claiming the murders were connected to two feuding vampires... Not ready to cash in my ticket to crazy town just yet, thank you.

According to records I found, the Edmunstons, a highly influential family at the time, did donate their family heirloom, a ring, to be placed in the time capsule. I found mention of a Mr. A. Edmunston who served on the planning and zoning board as well as owning the local butcher shop. Was that how he got his blood back then? Too weird to think about. But after about 1950 or so there was no further mention of Alex or the Edmunston name.

While I was snooping around the city hall records, I checked for any mention of an Octavius Perrotte and turned up...*nada*. Maybe Alex was right. Pittsburgh wasn't exactly a small town back in the thirties, but if Octavius was there, wouldn't there be some record of him? Alex hadn't avoided notice, but then again, he wasn't trying.

I had one more place to check. Even though the Tribune was in existence in some form or other since the 1800s, it didn't start covering metro Pittsburgh until about 1992, so checking our archives was pointless. But the Post-Gazette's been around since the late 1700s. Most of their archives are on microfilm at the library. So I spent the better part of the day in a tiny dark room staring at a monitor watching a black and white blur whirl by. And then...pay dirt.

"Alex," I said when he picked up. "I found something I think you're gonna need to see to believe." I was staring right at it and I still had trouble believing. "Meet me at the cathedral after you close up. Say around three a.m.?"

He agreed and we hung up. I clicked print and rummaged around in my backpack purse for my mirror. I checked my neck.

"Shoot." The mark was still there, right where he'd bitten me last night, just like the one on the murdered girls. The thought sent a shiver down my spine. I traced my fingers over the spot, my skin tingling, the venom stirring just below the surface. It didn't look any lighter than it had this morning, and after a day hunched over computer screens and trapping phones between my ear and shoulder, the makeup I'd used to cover it had all but worn off.

Thanks to the makeup, Alex hadn't noticed his symbol tattooed on my neck, and I didn't want him to. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was afraid if he saw the mark, he wouldn't want to indulge in a repeat of last night. Of course, with the mark as dark as it was, it probably wasn't a good idea anyway. *Crap*. I really didn't want to become a vampire. I'm not the child-of-darkness type and black seriously washes out my skin tone.

There were still eleven hours before I had to meet Alex. With any luck that's all the time my body would need to completely dilute the vamp venom swimming through system. It could happen.

"That's not possible."

I looked from the picture I'd printed out to Alex and realized he was looking at something else. He was looking at my neck. On reflex my hand went to cover his mark, like a teenager hiding a hickey from her parents.

"It's fine," I said. "It'll probably be gone by morning."

"It shouldn't be there at all." He moved my hand away and rubbed his thumb over the spot. "One feeding doesn't leave enough venom behind to raise a mark. It's Octavius. You must've ingested more than we realized. It's more his symbol than mine. The line closing the 'X' is barely there."

My hand found the spot again, nerves jittering my muscles. "How bad is it? Am I...?"

His gaze swung from my neck to my eyes. He took a moment before he puzzled out my expression and a bright smile blossomed across his lips. "No. You're not a vampire. Not yet. But the mark is darker than I'd like. You need a few days to absorb the venom before your body's blood is back to a safe level."

He dropped his hand, his smile faltering. He looked away then back, his expression turning sullen. "I'm sorry. I should've paid closer attention. I should've known you had too much venom in your system before we..."

"Oh, no. Don't start apologizing for last night. It was, uh, *worth it*. Trust me." Even knowing the risk, the sex last night was so good I was half-ready to go again right there in the moonlit shadow of the Cathedral of Learning. *Uh-oh*. Maybe I was addicted. But to the venom or the man? I wasn't sure.

A smile flickered at the corners of his mouth again, though it didn't have the push of emotion anymore. He gave a nod toward the photo I held. "Show me."

I handed it to him. "What are the odds? I mean, I was just joking about finding a picture. But that's him, right?"

Alex turned and angled the photo under the sidewalk lamppost for a better look. "What is this?"

"It's from a story the Gazette did in 1933 about the city having to destroy the steps in front of the Allegheny County Courthouse to widen the street." I leaned close and pointed around his arm at the picture. "That's a shot of the workers. That's him, isn't it? That's Octavius."

He turned back to me, his blond brows a tight wrinkle over his eyes. "It looks like him. So he was here."

"Yeah. You guys probably hung in different circles. I mean, you were a prominent businessman and look at him. He was a common laborer. It's no wonder you didn't know he was here."

"If I was wrong about this, I could be wrong about everything." His gaze angled up at the towering gothic-style structure of the cathedral. And then he was gone. In a blur of speed Alex raced to the cornerstone of the building. By the time I caught up with him, he'd already begun pounding at the cornerstone with his fist.

Each punch was like the strike of sledgehammer, muscle shifting, coiling beneath his flesh, releasing power, cracking concrete...and bone. The pops and snaps and crunches were unmistakable. After each punch he stepped back, shook his hand at his side as though shaking off the pain. A few seconds is all the time it took for his bones to heal and then he punched again.

I looked at the crumbling block he battered and the blood spattering it. More blood trickled down the wall, dotted the ground around Alex's feet like raindrops. His white shirt was ruined with blood, spray and splatter covering his rolled sleeves, his collar, his chest. The cuts and gouges on his fist healed in seconds but the blood stayed behind, drying and rewetting.

With each punch Alex grimaced against the sting of it, the mix of pain and anger making his face dark and ugly. His next punch spattered blood on his lips and he licked it away like it was water...and punched again.

"I've got a crowbar in my trunk." He didn't even glance my way. "Alex, that can't be good for your hand. If you'll stop a minute, I'll get something for you to use."

The next punch had a different sound, hollow, bone against metal. "Don't bother." He gave a hard yank to the time capsule. Stone chunks and dust showered the ground. The metal box hit the cement sidewalk with a loud clatter. At three in the morning it sounded like a siren. We were in the middle of a college campus. No matter the time, there was always someone out and about. Lucky for us, the occasional car passing by paid us no mind and if anyone was near on foot, I didn't see them.

A hard twist broke the lock and Alex jerked open the lid. I held my breath while he pushed the contents around, searching, not sure if I wanted to be right or wrong. If the ring was there, then Alex was probably a killer. There was no other way to explain his mark on the victims. If the ring was missing, Alex would blame himself for their deaths, figuring the only reason they'd died was to frame him.

He stood, staring down at the open box, his hands loose at his sides.

"It's not there, is it?" I asked.

Alex shook his head. His gaze drifted up, staring at the towering building. He exhaled deep enough to move his chest, letting his head fall back. After a moment he swung his attention to me. "Call the police. Tell them someone's vandalized the cathedral. Hopefully they'll get here before anyone actually steals something."

"Why? Wait. Where are you going to be? What about the ring? What do we do now?"

"Go home, Sophie." He leaned down and closed the lid, jamming it with a hard push so it'd be difficult for a normal person to open. He shoved it back in its hole.

"I don't think so. This is my story. I'm the one who found the photo of Octavius. I'm the one who guessed he was using your ring. He's a serial killer and I uncovered him. I can't just walk away from that."

Alex turned to me, dark sticky blood drying on his white shirt and arm. "Octavius is a vampire. Will you print that in your story?"

My thoughts shifted. "No. Of course not. I can leave that part out. Once the police arrest him—"

"You think humans can stop him?" He held up the bloodied fist he'd used to punch his way through a stone wall, bone and tissue now perfectly healed. "Can stop me?"

I blinked at that, my brain readjusting to a new set of world rules. “He’d kill them rather than answer a few questions?”

“If he has to,” Alex said. “He’ll do what he has to, to escape. He’ll run, and they’ll never find him.”

“Then what? He just gets away with it?”

“No. This is between me and him. He won’t get away with anything.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Then I’ll come with you. I’ll help you find the ring. It’s the only way to connect him to the murders. And after you, y’know, take care of him, I wanna interview him. Find out why he did it, revenge, jealousy or insanity.”

“You’ll stay out of it, and stay safe.” He walked past me, heading off the sidewalk through the damp, dewy grass and into the dark of night. “Go home, Sophie.”

I’m not stupid. I knew it’d be suicide to confront Octavius without Alex to protect me. But if he was right, once Octavius realized the jig was up, he’d take off and not surface again until I wasn’t even fresh enough for the worms to eat. I needed his confession, or the ring.

“Hey,” I yelled after Alex, with only the dim glow of his white shirt to track him. “You know why he did it?”

“I have an idea,” he said, his voice so far off I could hardly hear him.

“Well, was it revenge, jealousy or insanity?”

His voice whispered through my mind like warm silk, “*Yes.*” I gasped from the sudden caress of it. “*Now go home, Sophie.*”

Kinda cute the way he thought that was the end it.

“Right.” I didn’t argue. It’s not like I didn’t know where he was going—Sinners restaurant to confront Octavius. When the coast was clear, I’d go get what I needed, the confession or the ring. Either way it’d make my career.

Chapter Eight

“Welcome home, Sophie.”

Man. TV and movies were good for nothin’. I looked back at the three locks, the wood cross and string of garlic cloves over the door, and the line of consecrated sea salt I’d poured at the bottom. I’d done the same at all my windows. “Doesn’t anything work on you people?”

“Bad manners from our hostess can be quite deterring.”

I called my power, the rush of energy sizzled at the back of my neck, hummed through my head. “Really? Great. Get the hell out, Octavius.”

Nothing happened. He didn’t even blink. He just settled deeper on my couch, his arms stretched across the back, his suit jacket gapping wide and his leg crossed over the other knee at the ankle. He looked so...normal. “Now, now, Sophie, don’t be rude. Not when I’ve come to offer you such a wondrous gift.”

“If it doesn’t come with a receipt and a return policy, I don’t want it.”

His broadening smile pinched his cheeks. Good to know I amused him. “Where have you been, Sophie? Not out with my dear friend Alexander, I hope. You spend a great deal of time together for two people who scarcely know each other. That’s what you said, isn’t it? You hardly know him?”

“What do you want?”

He picked up the throw cushion beside him, the one that was behind Alex when he sat in that very spot, and pressed it to his face. He brought it away, smiling. “He’s spent a great deal of time here...for someone you *hardly* know.”

Fight or flight instinct itched up my spine. It’s not that Octavius was doing anything overtly threatening, but the look in those striking blue eyes, the way he smiled, the smooth psychotic tone of his voice, had my *oh-shit* reflex on overdrive.

“He told me about you, him and Elizabeth. I know most of what you told me was bull,” I said, trying to get that I’m-going-to-eat-you look off his face.

His dark brows jumped high on his forehead in an *Oh, yeah?* expression. “And you’ve chosen to believe his version rather than mine. Interesting. Why is that? What could’ve persuaded you? Hmm...perhaps it has something to do with that mark on your neck.”

My hand went to the spot despite myself. “If you hadn’t spiked my drink...”

“You know, blood is a lot like virginity. Give it away too easily and the boy will never respect you.”

“Is that how you did those girls?” I asked, ignoring his taunt, my reporter instincts bubbling to the surface. “Did you trick them into ingesting your venom and then used Alex’s ring to make it look like he did it?”

He looked at the ring on his middle finger, the design a match to Alex's mark on my neck, and then looked at me. "You know about the ring, do you? Of course. Alexander told you. Trying to weasel his way out of his responsibility. Offering up any possible excuse no matter how improbable."

Offense overcame common sense. I huffed, stepping deeper into my apartment. "He's not responsible. You are."

"But you couldn't know that for sure. As far as you knew, he was just trying to get away with murder, using every outlandish story he could think of."

I stepped closer poking a finger at my chest. "I'm the one who figured out you'd used his ring. If it weren't for me, Alex wouldn't have known you were around back then. He wouldn't know you were behind any of this now."

"Indeed." Octavius dropped his foot to the floor, leaning his forearms on his knees. He was still smiling, but his expression had darkened somehow, seemed more menacing. "You've disrupted a very tidy plan, Sophie. A plan that's been a century in the making. Bad girl."

I swallowed hard, fighting that *oh-shit* reflex again. "I'm a reporter." It was like a word puke—panic making my brain back up.

"I know."

"Don't...don't you want to tell your side? Why'd you do it? Revenge, jealousy, in...sanity?" I swallowed in the middle of the word. Probably wasn't a good idea to call the serial killer sitting on my couch insane.

"Those are my only options? Why don't I let you decide?" He leaned back again, resuming the relaxed pose, arms out, ankle crossed over his knee. "Like all acts of war and violence committed by man, this is over a woman. Bess and I were happy, and Alex ruined that. She was mine. She was all I had, all I loved, all I lived for, and he took her away."

"So...jealousy," I said, but he didn't seem to hear. He just kept talking, staring in my direction but not at me, staring at nothing.

"I found them. It didn't take long, less than a month. Bess and I had a special connection Alexander couldn't understand."

"Because she'd made you."

His piercing blue eyes swung to me. "Yes. That's right. Alexander couldn't understand that bond. His mother committed suicide to escape him, you see, so he took mine." His gaze drifted again. "I knew what he was about long before he stole her away. I'd seen them together. I'd seen the liberties he took with her, the things they did together, things that made her weep when I took those same liberties. When I found them I watched in secret for weeks, horrified to see their betrayal was far worse than I imagined. He'd twisted her mind so abhorrently that when I tried to save her from him she...attacked me. I couldn't allow such treachery to go unanswered. I promised them that much. Twenty years is nothing for an immortal, but the fool never knew it was me, never entertained the possibility. He never knew I'd returned."

"Revenge then."

His gaze met mine. “Is it? I don’t think so. I felt sorry for my Bess. Sorry she couldn’t see Alexander for what he was, sorry she couldn’t break free of his mind tricks. It was my fault. I should’ve protected her. I should’ve killed Alexander the moment he stepped into our lives.”

“Ah...I see.” Something told me we’d just hit midnight on the crazy clock. Time for all sane girls and boys to start running. “I’ll be sure to point that out in my story, but I’ve gotta get to the office now and type it up. So...” I edged backwards toward the door.

“Do you think I don’t know?” His powerful voice stopped me in my tracks. “Alexander couldn’t hide the truth from me back then and he can’t now. I’ve waited all this time, waited for him to choose another, to claim another as his. I knew he would. After you’re gone, he’ll do it again. And I’ll be there.”

“Right. Insanity it is.”

He was on me before the breath to speak left my lips. To say vamps are fast is a huge, *huge* understatement. He was just suddenly behind me, his body flush with mine, his hand clamped on my chin, his other hand twisting my arm up my back.

“Genius,” he said, “is often mistaken for insanity.”

“Yeah. By crazy people.” *Crap.* I gave myself a mental slap for not keeping my stupid mouth shut a half second before he jerked my chin back, stretching my neck, yanking my arm impossibly high behind me. I tried not to cry out, but I couldn’t help it.

“You’re probably right about that.” His lips brushed my ear, his breath washing over my cheek and neck. A shiver shook across my shoulders at the feel of it. “The insane think themselves geniuses and geniuses often question their sanity. Funny thing. I don’t care either way.”

His inhale cooled over my skin before pinpricks jabbed my neck. I’d have gasped, complained about the pinch, except it was gone too quickly and what replaced it was too delicious to interrupt with words. I don’t remember seeing fangs, just sharp canines maybe a little longer than normal but not enough to pick out of a crowd. Still I felt it when they pulled back out of my flesh, when the suction of his mouth drew my blood through the holes they’d left. But I didn’t care.

Heat rippled through my body, loosening muscle, stirring desire. My mind swam with a confusing mix of thoughts—escape, sweet sensation, death, sex...Alex. It was only a flash, the barest whisper of his name but it was enough to gather my will despite the liquid need coursing through my veins.

I called my power. The fine hairs at the back of my neck tingled, power rushing over me like a summer breeze. The drawn energy hummed through my head, shaking loose the venom’s tempting hold. I still wanted Octavius. I wanted him sucking on my neck. I wanted him touching my body. I wanted him between my legs pounding into me. But I also wanted the crazy asswipe the hell off me.

My brain gave my body a command—move, squirm, break free. Problem. My body wasn’t responding. Even as realization crystallized in my head, my knees buckled. *Shoot.* I’d already lost too much blood or had too much venom. Maybe a combo of both.

Octavius broke the vacuum seal he had on my neck, gasping. He let me go and I slid down his body to my knees. My head wobbled on my neck and I managed to let it fall forward, chin to my chest, without falling over.

Damn, I was whipped. My mind hummed with power, energy zinging along my skin, but my body felt like I'd swum a thousand miles and then been dipped in tar, clothes and all. Everything about me was tired and heavy. Even speaking took effort, but it was my only chance.

I pushed all my power into my voice, willing Octavius to obey me. "You should let me go. Leave now before someone comes and discovers you. You want to leave me here...now."

The sound of Octavius stumbling backward was the only way I knew my power had some kind of affect. I couldn't lift my head, couldn't turn to see. Not that it mattered. It didn't last.

"What is that?" he said. "Is that you? Are you trying to...trying to mind fuck me...like a human?"

I wouldn't have used those words, but they worked for me. Power still swirled through my head behind the dull throb at my temple. "Maybe you should leave before my power overcomes you, Octavius. Maybe you should get away while you still can."

"Nonsensical female." He jerked me to my feet by my shoulders, held my back against his chest and spoke close to my ear. "You tried that the other night at my restaurant, didn't you? You may have pushed the minds of a few fledglings, Sophie, but I'm more than two hundred years old. You're nothing more than a buzzing at my ear. Like a firefly I'll squash when I have a mind to."

I tried to stand on my own, to lock my knees but my legs just wouldn't obey. Maddening sensation, having the presence of mind but lacking the strength of body to enact the thought. He spun me around, his strong fingers bruising my arms, then flung me over his shoulder, fireman style.

I watched my apartment floor pass beneath us as he carried me to the kitchen, to the window that led to the fire escape, helpless. A moment later we were airborne.

"Where are you taking me?" Visions of dark alleys, and bus stops and cars parked in lonely parking lots flashed through my head. Would I be the next victim the police would find? Would he pose me in some bizarre macabre scene?

And then it hit me. I already was the next victim, the rest was just for show.

The upside to being carried across town slung over the shoulder of a crazy vampire is the blood—what's left—goes to your brain. By the time we landed on the roof of Sinners restaurant, I was perfectly clear headed. And in my clear headedness I realized Alex had been right. Octavius couldn't drain me by himself. Not that I could do anything about it. My body was still limp as a wet noodle. Well not really that bad, but close. I could walk, mostly, with Octavius's help.

Holding my arm looped around his shoulder and his other hand braced around my back, he led me through a rooftop door, down a small flight of steps through another door and into an office. He made like he'd drop me onto the leather couch next to the door, but something outside the office, in the restaurant below, caught his attention. It was past three in the morning. The place should've been closed. But when he opened his fancy wooden office door, I heard it too.

We stepped into the short hallway just as a man dressed in a white tux shirt and bowtie, black cummerbund and slacks—no jacket—stepped around the corner. I knew him, but from where—the spiky platinum blond hair, the tiny brown eyes, little head, broad shoulders, small waist.

“Master, there you are. Thank God,” the man said.

“Hey. You’re Todd.” My voice was raw, too soft. It felt like I had sandpaper caught in my throat. I swallowed. It didn’t help. “You were at Il Piccolo Morso.”

Todd glanced at me for a half second. But for the most part they both ignored me. That’s how Octavius knew what was going on at Alex’s place. That’s how he knew about me.

“What’s going on?” Octavius asked.

We rounded the end of the hall and stepped out onto a landing that overlooked the restaurant below. The place was trashed, tables overturned, broken dishes, silverware all over the place.

“He just showed up and started yellin’ about wanting to see you. He was smashing tables and slicing up some of the art. And when Jim tried to stop him, he...he cut off his head.”

Octavius snapped his gaze to Todd and Todd stared at the floor. “Jim’s...Jim’s dead,” Todd said.

My belly tightened. Who was Jim? Was he a vampire or a human servant? Or a human servant turned vampire? Did it matter? The poor guy was dead. What kind of crazy man goes around cutting off people’s heads?

“Where is he?” Octavius asked.

“In the kitchen.”

Just as he said it a loud clatter echoed through the room from the double swinging doors to the kitchen. We turned and Octavius half led, half carried me down the steps to the main floor of the restaurant. He took me to the bar and kind of leaned me against a stool.

He looked to Todd who’d followed close at our heels. “Drain her,” he said then walked away.

The speed at which Todd moved to catch me before I melted to the floor told me he was definitely a vamp. I saw the mark on his wrist and caught a glimpse of one beneath the stiff collar of his shirt. He was still a fledging. Did he know that mark on his wrist would never go away? Who cared? He was going to kill me.

Lucky for me, Todd couldn’t seem to tear himself from the distraction in the kitchen and rather than follow his *master’s* orders immediately, he turned us both to watch.

The right side door swung open with Octavius only two steps away. He flinched back a step, eyes wide as Alex stormed through the doorway toward him. I blinked, not sure I was seeing things right. Alex’s right hand clutched the hilt of a long sword and his other fisted a hairy bowling ball at his thigh. No. It wasn’t a bowling ball. It was a head. *Jim?*

Alex’s gaze met Octavius almost instantly, and he dropped the head. The wet *thunk* when it hit the floor and subsequent *thwap, thwap, thwap* as it rolled under a table nearly made me puke.

Alex double-fisted his sword, holding it at the ready. “So it is you.”

Octavius swallowed his surprise quickly. “You had doubt?”

“You killed those women, risked exposing all of us...why?”

“Why?” Octavius seemed to fight a laugh but ultimately failed, the sound of it pinged through the room. It wasn’t a happy sound. “You think I care about our kind? You think I care about those women? There was only one woman, Alexander. One woman, you and your selfish arrogance destroyed.”

He lowered his sword, affected by the anguish etched on Octavius’s face. “Elizabeth.”

“Yes.” The word slithered past his lips like a hiss. “You should’ve suffered for her death.”

“I did. I do still.”

“Not enough.” Anger raised his voice. “Never enough for taking her from me. For killing her.”

Alex blinked at that, confusion pulling his brows tight. “I didn’t kill Elizabeth, Octavius. I could never...even seeing how she suffered, how little of the vibrant woman we once knew was left filling the shell of her body... Even then I could never harm her, couldn’t bring myself to end her misery.”

“Your actions killed her. Your lies, your seductions,” Octavius said. “You set her against me. Made her...made her...mutilate me.”

Alex’s brow tightened, a darkness filling his blue eyes. “No, Octavius. What Elizabeth did to you had nothing to do with me. As much as I despised you for the damage you caused her, I wouldn’t have wished that on you, on any man. Death would’ve been punishment enough.”

“Death wasn’t near punishment enough for you. You deserved to suffer. An eternity of lonely suffering is still not enough punishment for turning her against me, for what you made me do.”

“What, Octavius?” Alex took a steady careful step forward, his grip readjusting around the hilt of his sword. “What did I make you do?”

“For making me...making me take her from this world.”

Alex flinched with a small shake of his head as though he couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “You? No. You wouldn’t. Elizabeth was staked through the heart. You—”

“He was there, Alex. He told me so. He did come find the two of you after she cut him,” I said before Todd clamped a hand over my mouth.

“I did,” Octavius said. “I saw the two of you, the life you made. The way you took comfort in her, in your pathetic fledglings. What right did you have to comfort when I suffered so?”

“Markus, Anthony and Richard weren’t fledglings. They were friends.” Alex took another measured step closer to Octavius. “They would’ve died on the battlefield if I hadn’t turned them. Instead they returned to me of their own accord fifteen years after they were weaned, as friends, only to die at the hand of an arsonist as they slept. I thought...I believed their death was the work of slayers.”

“No.” A crazed smile tugged the corner of his mouth. “You fool. I only allowed you to think that. *I* took them from you, Alexander. I took all of them from you, everything in this world that gave you comfort, joy or love. Just as you did to me.”

“You drove her to madness,” Alex said. “I didn’t take her from you. I saved her from ending her life.”

“No.” Octavius leapt backwards onto the bar, then reached for the decorative swords crisscrossed on the wall behind it. Sharp metal zinged from the sheath as he pulled. “Bess and I were perfect before you came. You confused her. Turned her head, corrupted her just as you did this one.” He swung the point of the sword toward me in gesture.

Three heavy heartbeats passed, each of us clicking through the logic to what comes next. Octavius shifted his gaze to Todd, still holding my back against his chest, his hand clamped over my mouth. He pulled the ring off his finger and tossed it to Todd.

“Drain her. Then mark her like the others,” he said, then launched himself at Alex.

Todd jerked my head back, so I could only hear the clash of metal against metal. I heard tables overturning, the crash of dishes, the rush of footsteps and grunts of effort. From the corner of my eye, I caught Todd’s rapt expression, dazed by the two powerful vampires in battle.

“You had me worried, Alexander.” Octavius’s words came unsteady and clipped between the clangs and clatter of their sword fight. “I watched you for years after I found you again in the Americas. I thought you’d truly gone mad, drinking animal blood, indulging in a meaningless poke now and again without the blood lust. You twisted masochistic fuck. What’s the point? Did you think that would work? You think I would fall for that?”

“I don’t give a damn,” Alex said before a loud clash of metal and a sharp squealing retreat from Octavius.

“I knew you couldn’t deny yourself forever. I knew you’d abandon your self-imposed punishment like it was nothing—meant nothing. You couldn’t stop yourself from seeking comfort and love from another woman eventually. You didn’t love Bess enough. And I was right.” He paused then said loudly in our direction. “Kill her damn it. Now.”

Todd flinched at Octavius’s yelled command, and stretched my head back, lowering his mouth to my neck. Before he could make contact I clamped my teeth down on the inside of his palm.

“Ouch. You bit me,” he said, shaking the sting from his hand.

“You were going to bite me.”

“Still am, bitch.” He grabbed for my head again but I called my power fast. The flood of energy gave him a jolt, like static electricity, when his hand came too close to the back of my neck. He jerked his hand away.

“Hey,” Todd whined.

“Why don’t you go stake yourself?”

Todd blinked, shook his head as though he was trying to clear his thoughts, turned and walked around to the other side of the bar. He disappeared for a second as he bent for something underneath, then came back up with an ice pick. I didn’t have time to think, let alone say anything, before he plunged the stupid thing right into his heart, all the way to the hilt.

Apparently this was yet another area where the media has gone astray in vampire lore. Doesn’t matter who you are or what it’s made of, if you jam something into your heart, destroying the organ...you’re gonna die.

I turned back to the battle still waging in the main dining floor and my foot kicked something. I glanced down and saw the ring. I grabbed it, staring at the closed “X” symbol, like a flattened infinity sign, just like the one on the dead girl’s necks. I pushed it onto my thumb and swung my gaze to Alex just in time to see the bloodied blade of his sword connect with Octavius’s neck.

I’d never seen anyone decapitated before. And with such a quick clean cut. Octavius didn’t fall right away. He stood there staring in the same direction he’d been looking when Alex cut him. He was staring at me.

He blinked twice then said, “He’ll never love you enough to kill you.”

Octavius's knees buckled and he slumped to the floor like a deflated balloon. His head rolled under a chair when it hit the floor, the eyes still open. *Eewww...creepy on toast.*

Alex was at my side before Octavius's nose stopped the roll, hooked on the chair leg. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good. I'm fine." I smiled at his worry, almost laughed, but I think it was more like one of those hysterical laughter urges than a flash of humor. This was sooo not funny.

"You're too pale." He wasn't smiling. He jerked my head to the side to see my neck. "That mark's too dark. How do you feel?"

"Uh...I'm not thirsty. That's good, right?"

Alex flicked his gaze to mine, some of his hard-edged warrior persona softening. "Yeah. That's good. I'm going to take you to the hospital though. You might need a transfusion."

"What'll we tell them?"

He shrugged. "The truth. The ER doctor is a...friend. You're going to need a few weeks rest, lots of vitamins."

"What about all this?" I nodded toward the head by the kitchen door and Octavius's body on the other side of the room. "Too bad they don't go poof like they do in the movies."

"We have means for this sort of thing. People at the coroner's office, some in the police department as well as a few politicians. Worse comes to worse, I know a grave digger."

"Oh. Well. That's not at all disturbing." I forced a smile, swallowing the creepy-crawly feeling tickling up my spine.

Alex's shoulders jumped with his quiet laugh, his smile full bloom across his lips. "C'mon. Let's get you home. You, at least, can still leave this all behind like a bad dream."

"Right." Like that would happen.

I wrote the story—about the four dead girls with the matching tattoos and macabre poses. It wasn't the story I thought I'd write. It wasn't the story I ended up with when it was all over. This one was a lot like the fluff pieces I used to write, the story people wanted to hear—the story that let them sleep at night. It was all just a bunch of crap.

Prominent local businessman commits suicide after being connected to the murder of four women. Police linked the man to the killings by a ring found in his personal safe which he used to tattoo the victims. The women died peacefully, after being drugged while their bodies were drained of blood through a small incision on their inner thigh, previously overlooked by authorities.

No one questioned the story's validity. The day after it ran some jerk-off shot five people at a mall and Micky assigned me the story. Alex's ring is now officially evidence and packed away in some basement filing system, never to see the light of day again.

I heard from him that same day. He'd read the story about Octavius. Said it sounded very believable. Funny, since no one would've believed the truth. We haven't seen each other in a few weeks, but we've become tight phone buddies. We talked about what happened and about how a person can't avoid the pitfalls of life without missing out on the good things that'll see him through it.

Like I said, my middle name's Ann, not Subtle.

The mark on my neck was finally gone this morning. I plan on showing Alex some of those good things we talked about tonight. Yeah. I'm addicted. I can admit it. But now I know I'm addicted to the man.

The Viagra venom's just a bonus.

About the Author

Writing was never a foregone conclusion for Paige Cuccaro. She once had dreams of being a psychologist, a pediatrician, a school teacher, a photojournalist, a bartender, and/or an EMT. And then she met her husband and her world came into focus. Being wife and mother are her highest priorities and greatest joy. But escaping to the fanciful, sexy worlds twirling through her mind is an absolute necessity. Putting those worlds, and the cornucopia of characters that people them, on paper is just plain fun.

Paige lives in Ohio, with her husband, three daughters, three dogs, three cats, a parakeet and a bearded dragon named Rexy, in an ever-shrinking house. When she's not writing, she can be found doing the mom thing with a book in one hand and a notepad and pen in the other. Ideas come without warning and the best way to stimulate your imagination is to enjoy the imagination of someone else.

To learn more about Paige Cuccaro, please visit www.paigecuccaro.com. Send an email to Paige Cuccaro at Paige@Cuccaronet.com.

Her survival depends on the man—and the erotic sex—of her dreams.

Blood Ties

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A *Claimed* story.

Dari Blake has spent her life sheltered from the world, believing she has a rare, genetic blood disorder that prevents her from aging. Her overprotective guardians are her only company, except for the mysterious man who enters her nightmares, soothing them into erotic dreams. Only he seems to have the power to help her shut out the cacophony of voices in her head.

Alone in his English castle, Mikel Sare has one mission in life: to protect Dari, his soul mate. Unbeknownst to her, she isn't suffering from a rare disorder, she is a rare creature herself. She, like Mikel, is a Nallie. Part human, part vampire, one of only two left in the world. Her womb, and her psychic ability, are more powerful—and more dangerous—than she could ever imagine.

Now the alien vampires who created their kind are back, killing everyone in their path as they seek to take control of her child-bearing body. To defeat them, Mikel and Dari must join together—mind, body, blood and soul—in a ritual that will exponentially increase their power.

Warning: This book contains explicit sex, graphic language, ménage a quatre, and a little bit of red-hot manlove. Reading this book without your partner, or a few toys nearby, may be hazardous to your health.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood Ties:

He'd had sex before, of course. For the sake of sex. For physical relief only. With Dari it was different. Less physical, more emotional. She was his mate. The one and only meant for him. Unfortunately, with the threat against their lives, he could only make love to her in her dream world. And if he grew careless, prolonging their psychic connection, even that could prove dangerous.

She pulled back, breathless, and licked the moisture from her plump, kiss-swollen lips. Her flushed face was full of desire, her eyes darkly seductive. "Come see what I found." She gathered his hand and tugged. Mikel's fangs receded as he fell into step beside her. She guided him across a bed of freshly cut, crisp green summer grass. The dead flowers had once again sprung to life as happy thoughts filled her mind.

"Where are you taking me, Dari?"

A smile pulled at her lips as she extended her hands and tilted her head back to look at him. "Right here." Arousal edged her voice and made his cock pulse.

He had to admit, she did have one hell of an imagination. Mikel took in the picturesque waterfall spilling over a cluster of rocks. The cool spray reached them on the grassy embankment, moistening their skin and clothes, but doing little to help ease the heat inside him.

Her provocative pout made him harder than he'd ever been before as she toyed with the top button on her dress. "Will you join me?" she murmured seductively.

He shot her a sidelong glance and cocked one brow. "Like you even had to ask." He stepped closer. Her blue floral dress had changed in color, turning crimson red, indicating her mood, reflecting the passion inside her.

He grabbed her hands and anchored them to her sides. "Allow me." His nimble fingers worked the row of buttons lining the front. Once finished he slowly pulled it open to reveal her gorgeous breasts. He quickly discarded the flimsy piece of material that had prohibited his gaze from caressing her naked flesh. He slipped it from her shoulders and let it fall to her feet. The bright red dress spilled across the grass like blood.

He stood back, drew a deep, steady breath and panned the length of the sensuous woman before him. Her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she in turn appraised him. He registered every detail of her gorgeous curvy body as his gaze shifted to her breasts, to pert nipples that beckoned his mouth.

Who was he to deny them?

In one quick stride, he closed the short distance and removed the flower from behind her ear. He brought it to his nose and sniffed.

"This doesn't smell nearly as sweet as you." Dari tilted her head back and exhaled a sexy bedroom moan as he trailed the flower over her lips, her neck and lower until he skimmed her breasts. He brushed the tulip over her nipples, scenting her ethereal, porcelain-white flesh. The enticing combination of Dari mixed with the flora became his undoing.

Unable to deny his mouth the taste of her any longer, he lowered his head. Flicking his tongue out, he circled her pale mounds, drawing the blade of his tongue closer to the engorged peaks. Dari arched and tangled her fingers through his hair. He blew a heated breath on her wet nipples and watched them tighten in bliss.

"Oh, Mikel." When he closed his mouth around one extended nipple and sucked, she exhaled a shuddery breath and quivered in delight. "You always know how to touch me just right."

He trailed the tulip down lower, curling it around her belly button, dipping it into the hollow, tickling her oversensitive flesh. As though moving of its own accord, the flower descended, whispering across her thighs. She widened her stance in silent invitation. He growled his approval. Mikel brushed the scented petals over her pussy, caressing, arousing her clit out from its pink hood. His finger skimmed her folds. Her twin lips were damp with passion.

She trembled as he paid homage to her other breast. Drawing her hard bud into his mouth, he bit down until she cried in pleasure and pain. His fingers replaced the flower between the juncture of her legs. It pleased him to find her so warm and wanting. He opened her labia and pressed a finger into her slick heat, pushing all the way inside her passion-drenched sheath. A shiver wracked her body. He reveled in her texture, her warmth, her heady aroma.

"You are so hot, Dari."

"That's because you don't visit me often enough."

“Let me make up for that right now.” He pressed another finger inside her. Her body vibrated, her chest heaved. His own muscles clenched as he fought down the primal beast itching to make its presence. Itching to plunge into her and stake his claim.

Dari threw her arms around his neck. Her head lolled to the side as her body opened for him, granting him access to her most private parts. “I love how you touch me.”

Mikel’s chest puffed up knowing how excited she was, how much she enjoyed and longed for his visits and their intimate playtime. If only their unions could be more frequent. If only he could truly have her with him. Mikel pushed that painful thought aside and turned his concentration to her beautiful body.

“Mikel,” she whispered, her aroused voice sounding suddenly impatient.

“Yes,” he mumbled around a mouthful of breast.

“You’re overdressed.” Small hands tugged at his shirt.

She stepped back, taking her heat with her. His fingers slowly slipped from her soaked pussy. The pad of his thumb nudged her marbled clitoris. Her body quivered in response to the erotic withdrawal. Lids fluttering, she let out a little gasp. Moisture dampened his flesh as he felt her shiver of pleasure as though it was his own. He immediately missed her feminine heat as his hands fell to his sides. He growled, showing his displeasure.

She smiled, a sparkle lit her dark eyes. God, how she loved to tease him. He scrubbed his hand over his chin. Her scent lingered before his nostrils.

“I want to see you naked. There are things I want to do to you.” Her raspy voice played down his spine, prompting him into action.

Mikel made short work of his clothes, hastily tearing away his shirt and his pants. He tossed them aside, leaving them to mingle with hers on the ground a few feet away. Lacking modesty, he stood before her, naked, eager, his cock jutting forward, aching to sink into her heated core. Her eyes swept over him. She smiled her approval.

Lust thickened his voice as fire burned through his veins. “Now where were we?” he inquired with a raise of his brow.

Dari turned her back to him, gifting him with a view of her perfect backside. She wiggled slightly and pointed to the waterfall. His gaze fell from the *X* branded on her back, a mark identical to his since they were given to all Nallie at birth, to her perfect heart-shaped ass. He groaned, knowing he’d have to have her right there, in her tight fissure, if she continued to provocatively shake it at him.

“I think I’ll take a swim.” She ran away and jumped into the pool of water at the foot of the falls.

A low rumble rose up from the depths of his throat. “You are such a tease. I’m going to make you pay for that.” He let out a patient sigh.

Her laugh was raspy, sexy. “That’s what I’m counting on.” He didn’t miss the note of amusement in her voice as she splashed water at him. God, he loved it when she was happy. She disappeared under the waves, encouraging him to chase her.

Mikel dove in after her. It didn’t take long for the frigid water to clear his lust-saturated mind and ease the heat inside him. Couldn’t she have at least made the waterfall warm?

With long even strides, he swam after her. They both surfaced in the shallow end and moved under the waterfall. Ribbons of water pelted against their skin, stinging his flesh but arousing his senses at the same time. Her dark eyes met his. Her long thick hair clung to her pale skin, a few strands curling around her blissfully hard nipple. Mikel brushed her bangs from her forehead and dropped a hard kiss on her mouth. His fingers traced the pattern of her curves. His gaze left her face to track a stream of water as it slipped between her breasts, over her flat stomach to bury itself in her feminine mound.

He moved his hand to the small of her back. Sexual awareness leapt between them. "I'm naked like you wanted. So what are you going to do with me?" he taunted, pushing her closer to the smooth rock wall behind the cascading stream and onto the sandy ledge. Sunlight broke through the canopy of water. The soft glow made her skin glisten.

"Anything I want to. After all, it's my dream." The pleasure in her voice excited him. Grinning, she dipped her head and feathered kisses over his chest. Her thick lashes fluttered against her skin. She took such great pleasure in tormenting him, prolonging her sexual seduction. He groaned in frustration. The coldness of the water was quickly forgotten.

Her hands snaked out. One small palm closed over his engorged cock. She stroked him once, then twice, brushing her thumb over the slit. Dipping into the liquid arousal dripping from the tip.

She brought her thumb to her mouth and licked it. "Mmmm," she moaned.

He sucked in a tight breath. "Dari." All teasing slipped from his voice.

"Soon, Mikel," she whispered. "After I taste more of you."

How to trust him...when she can't even trust herself?

Empath

© 2008 Bonnie Dee

A *Gifted* story.

Jordan Langley thought he could deal with his empathic “gift”—until a traumatic event drove him into seclusion. As a hermit, he can avoid a world that tears his own emotions to shreds. But now a friend needs his help to reach an autistic boy who witnessed a murder.

Detective Lauren Sadler specializes in blocking her emotions so she can do her job. She can't deny Jordan's ability to reach the troubled boy, but she hadn't counted on how his touch affects her.

In the midst of the investigation, Jordan and Lauren break their own rules, sharing a night of passion that shatters all their barriers. Jordan is intrigued by the vulnerability and self-doubt he senses underneath Lauren's tough exterior.

But Lauren isn't sure if she's ready to yield to the power of the most intimate exchange she has ever known. Even if it's the only way to catch a killer.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex using graphic terms. Mind sex...you'll have to read to find out what that is.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Empath:

Lauren got out of the car, rehearsing what she would say as she walked up the path to the front door. She stood on the stoop for several minutes gathering courage. Just as she raised her hand to ring the bell, the porch light turned on and the door opened.

Backlit in the doorway, Jordan's imposing height and shadowed features made him appear ominous for a moment. Then he stepped into the light and the illusion was dispelled. Once more his heavy-lidded eyes and up-tilted eyebrows reminded her of a sad hound dog. But a smile curved his mouth, creasing his cheeks and his warm brown eyes lit up at the sight of her. “You're here.”

“Hi. I just came to...” She trailed off, giving up the pretense she was here because of the case before she'd even spoken it.

“Come on in.” He stepped aside so she could enter the house.

As she passed by him, she felt his body's heat. He was wearing a T-shirt so old and thin she could see his muscles and the bump of each nipple pressing against the material. He had on a pair of gray sweats and below that bare feet—big like the rest of his gangly body. What would it be like to have those long arms and legs wrapped around her?

He closed the door behind them, and for a moment they stood in his front hall facing each other, a weighted silence between them.

“Find out anything new today?” The soft rumble of his voice made her nipples tingle and her pussy go soft as butter. The sound vibrated down her spine and through her nervous system.

“Not much. Talked to some people.”

The words they exchanged seemed superfluous to the sexual tension shimmering in the air.

“Oh.”

Another moment slipped by as their gazes remained locked, burning into one another in unspoken communication. Her heart raced. Her body yearned. The magnetic feeling grew stronger, drawing her inevitably to where she'd known she was going to end up this evening. Dropping her purse on the floor, she stepped toward him.

Jordan met her halfway, dragging her into his arms and up against his body, hard enough that she gave a soft grunt. He leaned to cover her mouth with his. His lips were soft but the kiss firm and possessive.

She sagged against him, melting into his embrace, giving herself over to him. It felt so good to relax and let down her guard. How strange that she was ready to do that with a near stranger when she'd been with Mark almost two years and had never let him in. She was letting Jordan into her mind simply by allowing him to touch her. Lauren knew he could feel her, because she could feel him too. His warmth wrapped around her, both inside and out. This was more than the coming together of two bodies hungry for sex.

God, he was tall. She wasn't a petite woman, but pressed up against the length of his body, she felt fragile. And she certainly didn't need protection; physically she could probably kick Jordan's ass because she was trained in martial arts and he wasn't. Yet she felt protected and safe in the circle of his arms.

The kiss was lingering, tongues softly exploring, lips opening and pressing together. He tasted like wine, fruity, a little dry, a woody bouquet. Lauren knew she tasted like mint because she'd popped a breath freshener on the drive over. She'd known this was going to happen and hadn't wanted to taste like leftover fast food.

Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed her hands flat against his back, feeling his shoulder blades, his muscle and bone through the T-shirt. *Male. Hot. Need.* Her mind clamored like a cavewoman. Lauren grasped the material and tugged.

Jordan broke off the kiss long enough for her to pull the shirt over his head and toss it aside. His shaggy, dark hair tufted in all directions and he pushed it impatiently back from his forehead. The gesture was unbearably sexy and boyish. Lauren slid her hands up his naked back, feeling each bump of vertebrae, and curved them around his neck, pulling him to her for another kiss. She plunged her fingers into the slippery, smooth strands of his hair, grasping and twisting them a little.

A soft groan rumbled from his chest into hers. He cupped her ass, pressing her even tighter to his groin, then slid his hands up her back to comb his fingers through her hair and cradle her skull. He progressed from soft brushes of his lips over hers to little nibbling kisses to deep exploring ones that went on and on.

Finally Lauren ended their urgent kissing, untangling her hands from Jordan's hair and stripping off her shirt. His brown eyes glowed at the sight of her barely covered breasts. She wore a sheer, peach bra and black lace panties, and wished she'd had the foresight to stop home to change into matching underwear and clean clothes.

At least she had condoms in her purse. The fact she'd stopped to buy them revealed more than she wanted to admit about her intentions in coming here.

He rested his hand on her chest, palm flat, fingers splayed, his tan skin a contrast to the pale swells of her breasts. She hated that she was always so white. *Porcelain*, her mother called it. *Chalky*, Lauren thought.

For several moments, he stood there like that, feeling her heartbeat and probably other things she'd just as soon he couldn't feel. It was unnerving that he could sense the insecurities she kept well hidden. Scary, but also oddly liberating, knowing she couldn't hide them from him.

His expressive eyes penetrated hers. A small smile played at the corners of his lips—sympathetic, not amused. Beneath his hand and under his gaze, she felt the hard knot of tension that lived deep inside her begin to ease. Then he moved his hand to cup her breast while he lowered his head to nuzzle her throat. He pressed his lips to the hollow between her collarbones, and lower, across her chest to the plump cleavage the bra gave her. Without the push-up, she didn't have a lot to offer in front.

As his soft lips and wet tongue moved over her curves, Lauren sucked in a breath. Reaching behind her, he unfastened the bra and pulled it down her arms. Her breasts bobbed free, small but still pretty perky at thirty-three. They were tender, swelling at the touch of his mouth, the nipples hardening when he swept his tongue over them.

She rested a hand at the back of his head and watched as Jordan's mouth engulfed one tight, rosy bud. The tugging sensation shot a bolt of desire straight to her crotch. She shivered and thrust her chest toward him, admiring the curve of his black eyelashes against his cheekbones, the prominent nose outlined against her breast, the shock of walnut-dark hair tumbling over his forehead.

Her other hand gripped his upper arms, feeling the sinew of his biceps, the sleekness of his skin. Her eyes half-closed when he transferred his attention to her other breast, sucking it in and rolling his tongue over the nipple. Sparkles of delight filled her. Her pussy tightened and released, begging to be filled. She moaned softly and Jordan gave an answering quiet groan.

My God, he can feel me, knows how much I need this, how good it feels. The idea was exciting, as she imagined her arousal feeding and magnifying his. She could almost feel him too—not just his suckling mouth or fondling hands, but a warm glow of desire spreading from him into her. Was it really his emotion or just her own escalating yearning? Impossible to tell. Unnecessary to know. But she enjoyed believing he was touching her deep within.

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