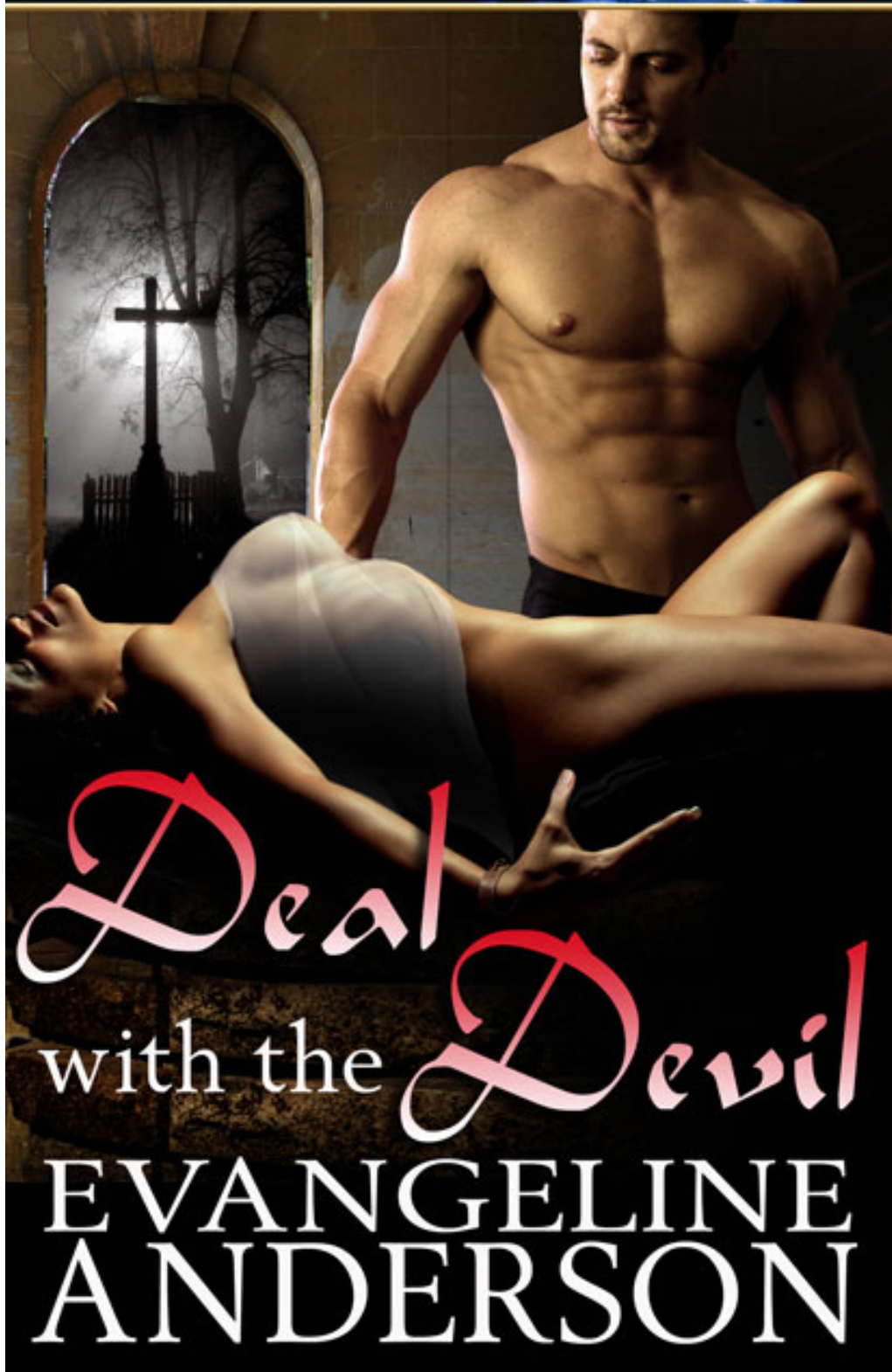


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Deal with the Devil

Evangeline Anderson

Luz Velez is a shapeshifter who can't shift. Every time she tries to summon her inner wolf, she has a massive panic attack. Worse, her anxiety extends to the rest of her life. At twenty-seven, she's still a virgin because attempting to have sex sends her into lockdown mode. She's miserable and stuck—until Jude Jacobson comes along.

Tall, blond and dangerous, Jude is the most feared vampire in town and the minute he sees her, he wants Luz. Vampires and shapeshifters don't date but he makes her an offer she can't refuse—a blood exchange that will help her control her panic attacks and give her the life she's always wanted.

Luz is desperate—she takes Jude up on his offer. But she doesn't expect to fall for the darkly seductive vampire—or to be plunged into danger when her past comes calling. When Jude's own dark secret comes to light, she begins to question her deal with the devil and wonder if she and Jude can make it...or if they'll die trying.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Deal with the Devil

ISBN 9781419927089

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Deal with the Devil Copyright © 2010 Evangeline Anderson

Edited by Shannon Combs

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication April 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

Evangeline Anderson

Author Note

While I have tried to handle Luz's past trauma sensitively, some readers, particularly those with a history of sexual abuse, may find this story disturbing.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Hell's Kitchen: Fox Broadcasting Company

Hummer: General Motors Corporation

Mack Truck: Mack Trucks, Inc.

Playgirl: Playgirl Key Club, Inc.

Salvation Army: The Salvation Army

Special K: Kellogg North America Company

Xanax: The Upjohn Company

Chapter One

A vampire walks into a bar and sees a werewolf sitting there...

I know what you're thinking but that's not the start of a bad joke. It's my life—or it was about to be if the vampire in question showed up. Which means that I'm the werewolf in this little scenario.

Not that it does me any good since I can't change at the full moon. Or any other time for that matter. Non-shifters, as the rest of the were population calls the rare were who can't summon forth his or her animal side, aren't very popular. In fact, we're about as welcome in the were world as a leper at a tea party. That's why I ended up working for a mostly human law firm instead of sticking with my own kind. Which was how I met the vampire I was waiting for at the bar in the first place.

But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning when I first met Jude Jacobson, one of the most powerful and feared vamps of the greater Tampa Bay area. And let me tell you about the deal he offered me.

A deal with the devil.

It was a hot and sultry night and not in a good way. The dog days of August were on us and you could cut the humidity with a knife. I noticed that the lighted digital display on the bank across the street read the temperature at eighty-eight degrees. Eighty-eight degrees and it was nearly nine o'clock at night. I knew if I stepped outside it would feel as if I were walking through tepid soup so I didn't step outside. Instead I waited, trying to catch a glimpse of the VIP client who was already supposed to be here. He was the reason I wasn't already home in my ratty bathrobe watching reality show reruns.

Dawson, Levine and Taber, the law firm where I worked, handled some minor celebrities from time to time, both human and supernatural, and they prided themselves on accommodating their star clients. Accordingly, instead of closing up shop at five o'clock, we had remained open for DLT's new client, Jude Jacobson.

I say "we" but it wasn't like the entire law firm was there. It was just me and Derek Banner. Derek was one of the senior attorneys at DLT, which was why he'd drawn the plum assignment of working with the new star client. I was only there for backup—I'm just a lowly paralegal.

When I say backup, I don't just mean that I was there to assist Derek—although that *was* part of my job. I was also supposed to protect him if things got a little rough. Vampires are generally polite to a fault, at least when dealing with the human world, but every once in a while one of them gets a little bloodthirsty—literally—which can be

a problem. Since Jacobson was a VIP, the powers that be at DLT had decided an armed guard would look tacky and probably piss him off. But they thought nothing of making their only supernatural employee stay unreasonably late hours without even offering me time and a half to compensate me for acting as both a bodyguard and a legal assistant.

You wouldn't think I would be a very effective bodyguard if you saw me. I'm five foot three in my stocking feet and I weigh just a little over a hundred pounds. Thank goodness I'm curvy where it counts, though—I don't have a problem attracting men although none of them wants to hang around once they find out my situation. No self-respecting were male would date or mate with a non-shifter for fear of passing on the abnormality to their offspring and not many human men are willing to go out with a woman who could beat their bench press numbers cold.

Despite the fact that I can't change, I still have the strength of a were—which is roughly three or four times human normal. Of course, I didn't know how effective I'd be against a hundred-year-old vampire if Jude Jacobson got out of line. But when I'd expressed those doubts to my supervisor he'd just patted me on the shoulder and murmured something about doing my best.

I didn't get much respect around DLT and I was getting sick of it. But the economy sucked and there weren't a lot of jobs out there for a wannabe lawyer that had failed the Bar exam twice. Okay, three times but who's counting?

It wasn't that I didn't know my stuff either—I'd been top of all my classes. It's just that I have crippling anxiety issues. When I say that I don't just mean I get a little nervous. I mean, hyperventilating, sweating-bullets, chewing-pieces-out-of-the-desk anxiety. It's bad. I can control it when there isn't too much riding on the test—I was even okay during finals at law school. But whenever the test is *really* important and life changing, watch out—I'm down for the count. I've thought about seeing a doctor for it but anti-anxiety drugs don't work on weres, meaning I could take a truckload of Xanax with no effect. And I've never been able to do that self-hypnosis shit. So I was pretty much stuck—which was how I'd wound up in such a crappy job in the first place.

When I'd first come to the firm of DLT I was fresh out of law school and they planned to make me a junior attorney as soon as I passed the Bar. I was going to be on the fast track for partner and they were glad to get me. After all, how many human firms could say they had a real live were on staff? We usually stick to our own company almost exclusively so hiring me was a real coup for them. None of the human partners gave a damn that I couldn't change, of course, and I fulfilled two other hiring requirements as well—I was a woman and a minority. Not that I think of my heritage much—my family is as white bread as they come even if our last name is Velez. But it looked great on paper.

Anyway, it was all good until I failed the Bar. And then failed again. And again. Pretty soon it became obvious I was never going to be more than a paralegal and the partners stopped nodding at me in the halls and just looked through me like they did the rest of the help. I was just the legal assistant who also happened to be a were and

mostly nobody ever remembered my other status until something like tonight's assignment came up.

I sighed and leaned my throbbing head against the cool glass. A woman in her late twenties with big dark eyes and long, curly black hair drawn back tightly into a bun looked back at me from the reflective surface. I guess I looked my Latin heritage even if the only Spanish words I knew were the dirty ones. I wished the stupid vampire would show up already. It was late and I was tired. Plus Derek Banner—or Derek Boner as most of the support staff referred to him since he was perpetually horny—was a real dick. He knew I was there to protect him in case there was trouble and he resented the hell out of me for it.

As a big, beefy guy of six-one with slab-like arms and the beginning of an impressive beer gut, Derek naturally thought he should be able to take care of himself. He thought it was ridiculous of the partners to leave a "pretty little gal" like me to get his back. Of course, that was just his pride talking and everyone knew it—including Derek. He'd made a pass at me when I first started at DLT and I had nearly broken his hand so he knew I could take care of business. But he didn't like to acknowledge it and he'd protested to management vigorously when they assigned me to him for Jude Jacobson's visit.

Derek had been overruled, so to compensate, he was being extra condescending to me that night. After his fourth or fifth sexist remark, I'd finally walked out of his office to go wait for Jacobson in the lobby. It was either walk away or put my size-four spiked heel up his stupid bloated ass and I needed my job too badly to risk losing my temper.

"Come on, come on," I muttered to myself, taking a quick glance at the cheap but reliable watch I wore on my wrist. "I have to be back here at seven in the morning, damn it."

As though my muttered words had drawn him, there was a sudden tap on the glass door right above my head. I started and jerked upright to see the tall form of the vampire on the other side of the door.

I took a deep breath and put a hand to my racing heart. Only a moment ago the street in front of the DLT building had been completely empty and now, here he was. I knew vampires were supernaturally fast and strong like weres and that they could be either born into a vampire family or converted from human, but that was about as far as my knowledge extended.

Though weres and vamps are both paranormal creatures, we tend to avoid each other like the plague. In fact, it wouldn't be too strong a statement to say that we hate each other. Think the Montagues and the Capulets on steroids and you have a pretty good idea of vamp-were relations. Given that history, I wasn't exactly feeling any warm fuzzies as I unlocked the door and let Jude Jacobson into the DLT lobby.

He was a tall drink of water—six-three or -four at least, which meant he dwarfed me even in my four-inch heels. Dark blond hair was pulled into a tight club at the back of his neck and darker brows arched over pale green eyes that reminded me of a cat. I

don't usually like blond men but I have to admit this one was hot—for a fanger. He had the whole vampire-Viking thing going on—broad shoulders, square jaw with some sexy stubble, even a little cleft in the chin and a dent on the right side of his mouth that might become a dimple when he smiled. If he ever smiled. And he was wearing a suit that would probably pay the rent on my crappy apartment for a year.

"Jude Jacobson?" I said, just to be sure as he stepped inside, bringing a gust of hot, damp air with him.

"In the flesh, dear lady." He gave me a courtly, sweeping bow that would have been appropriate a hundred years ago. Well, at least he didn't want to shake hands. I had no interest in touching a bloodsucker, no matter how good looking he was.

"This way," I said shortly, turning to lead him toward Derek's office. The sooner we got this over with the better.

"Wait, please." His voice was far behind me and when I stopped and looked back I saw that he was still standing in the same place, just inside the doorway.

"Yes?" I tried to stifle a sigh of pure annoyance. "Are there more, er, people, in your party?"

"No, I am alone this evening." He made it sound like a perpetual state, as though he was alone every evening, I thought. Then I wondered why I'd gotten such an idea.

"Well, then, if you'd come with me, Mr. Jacobson—"

"Not until I learn your name, please." His eyes flashed dangerously and he gave me a charming smile that showed just a hint of his elongated canines. Sure enough, the dent in the right side of his mouth turned into an adorable dimple. "It's not every night that I am greeted by such a beautiful woman," he continued, raising an eyebrow at me.

Oh, for God's sake, he was *flirting*. This was the last thing I needed right now—a come-on from a horny vamp. I just wanted to be home in my bathrobe with my feet up and a big bowl of strawberry Special K watching Gordon Ramsay sweat and swear and scream at the *Hell's Kitchen* contestants. And instead, I had to let this guy down easy since he was a star client.

"Look," I said stiffly. "I appreciate the compliment but you might as well know right now, I'm a were."

He nodded. "I can tell. There is an energy around you that practically shouts it to the world."

I frowned at him. "If you know I'm a were then why the interest in my name?"

"Common courtesy." His eyes flashed again—looking almost red for a moment. "I know your people and mine don't get along but I intend to conduct business here and I would prefer to know who I am conducting it with."

I felt a brief stab of shame. Vamp or not I was being rude and that wasn't the way I had been brought up. Reluctantly, I walked back to where he stood. "Well, I'm not the attorney assigned to your case—I'm just a paralegal. But I'm Luz Velez."

"Jude Jacobson, as you are already aware." He stuck out a hand the size of a catcher's mitt and I noticed that his fingers were long and artistic and his nails were short and neat. I always notice hands on a man.

There was no way I could politely refuse his offer so, though I was still reluctant to touch a vamp, I extended my hand and watched as it was swallowed up in his much larger one. His grasp was firm and dry which surprised me a little. I'd been sure it would be cold and clammy—like touching a dead fish. He didn't smell like old blood either—in fact, all I caught with my sensitive were nose was a whiff of warm skin and expensive aftershave. Nice.

I realized that I had been letting my preconceived notions of vampires color my judgment. In my defense, it was difficult not to when I'd been taught to believe that they were about one step above the devil. In fact, what we were doing was kind of like a Shiite Muslim shaking hands with an Orthodox Jew. I reminded myself firmly that my prejudices had no place here. Like it or not DLT was a human firm that just happened to cater to the supernatural crowd on occasion and I should treat Jude Jacobson with the respect I would offer any other client.

Then he ruined it.

His green eyes widened and then narrowed and he said, "You're a non-shifter."

I tried to yank my hand away but to my surprise, I couldn't break his grip. "Let me go. How do you know that?"

"No wonder you have so much energy around you," he said, not answering my question. "It's never been tapped. How extraordinary."

"Look, buddy," I said evenly. "You're about two seconds from a knee in your balls unless you let go of my hand." To hell with treating him like any other client. No other client I'd ever met had started blurting out my most personal and embarrassing secrets when I shook their hand.

"Forgive me," he said smoothly, releasing me at last. "I was just startled. Your kind is very rare."

"Tell me about it," I muttered, clenching the hand he'd released into a fist at my side. "I never heard of a vamp who could tell it just by touching someone though."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's a peculiar little talent of mine. I know things about the people I touch. Not everything, just a few minor details of their lives."

"Remind me never to touch you again, then," I growled. "And that is *not* a minor detail."

"Forgive me," he said once more and there was real regret in his deep voice. "It was rude of me to say it aloud. I suppose being in your situation would be like one of my kind being allergic to blood."

"I'd rather not talk about it," I said with as much dignity as I could manage. "Would you please follow me? Attorney Boner—I mean *Banner*—is waiting." I could feel my cheeks flaming as I turned on my heel and marched toward the elevator. It's

never fun having your weak points brought up and to have a complete and total stranger, a vampire at that, throw my non-shifter status in my face was almost intolerable.

He was quiet on the ride up to the fifth floor where Banner's office was located but he seemed to fill the entire elevator with his presence. Or maybe it was just that he was so big. I had an idea that some major muscles were lurking under his beautifully tailored charcoal gray suit and I couldn't help but remember the strength of his grip on my hand. I tended to stay away from my own kind and after living exclusively among humans for so long, it seemed strange to find someone who was physically stronger than me.

Not that I go around flaunting my physical power or anything but I was used to being careful around the fragile people who surrounded me. I'd forgotten my own strength once to disastrous circumstances—but I preferred not to think about that. And I was *really* glad Jude Jacobson hadn't seen it or heard it or whatever the hell it was he did. That particular dark secret was worse than failing the Bar exam and my status as a non-shifter put together. And I was fairly certain I would have done more than growled at Jacobson if he'd mentioned it. There was nothing worse he could have known about me except— I cut off that line of thought abruptly. No point picking at old wounds, especially ones as ancient as that one.

To my relief we got to Banner's office without any further conversation. I nodded the vampire inside politely and prepared to take a seat to the attorney's left, beside his desk. Besides acting as a bodyguard, I was supposed to be taking notes and assisting him and believe me, Banner needed the assistance. I had looked over the case thoroughly before Jacobson arrived and I knew all the particulars. Unfortunately, I didn't think the same could be said of the attorney. Banner had gotten a big head the moment he'd been given a corner office and a nod toward partnership and he'd been coasting on his reputation for a while now.

But as I was about to sit down, the attorney frowned at me and shook his head. "That's all, Velez, you can go."

"I was told to stay," I said as neutrally as I could, still hovering over the chair.

"And I'm telling you to go," Banner shot back. "I'll let you know if I need anything."

"Fine." I stood up and turned toward the door. Let the asshole fend for himself—both legally and physically. If Jude Jacobson decided he wanted a little midnight snack, that was just too damn bad.

"I would prefer it if Ms. Velez stayed," the vampire said quietly before I could even take a step.

"Well, now, we don't need to bother this little gal anymore." Banner pasted a big, fake, shit-eating grin on his face. "I mean, she's just an assistant, really. It's not like she knows anything about your case."

Asshole. I bit my tongue, fuming silently. I was willing to bet my next paycheck I knew the case better than Banner.

Jacobson gave him a level look. "She is here for your protection, not mine, Mr. Banner. I advise you to let her stay." There was a hint of danger in his voice—the barest glimmer of his predatory nature showing through the smooth outer façade.

Banner's grin slipped for a moment but he recovered quickly. "Well, whatever makes the client happy, I always say. Sit, Velez."

I did a little more silent fuming at being treated like a trained dog but somehow I managed to hold my temper and sit down.

"Now then, maybe we can get down to business. Derek Banner, at your service but you can call me DB if you want." Banner leaned across his desk and offered a hand.

Rather reluctantly, I thought, Jacobson took his hand and shook it exactly once before releasing it. "Jude Jacobson," he said.

"All right. And can I call you JJ?" Banner was big on the whole Southern hospitality, just-folks bullshit and he always spread it on thick with the VIPs. But this time it didn't work.

"I think not," Jacobson said shortly. "Mr. Jacobson will be fine."

Banner's smile slipped another notch. "Well, all right then. Let's get down to business."

"Please." The vampire made a slightly impatient gesture with one large hand as though to say that he had been waiting to do that exact thing.

Banner shuffled the papers on his desk and cleared his throat. "So. You're interested in buying a piece of property that is currently owned by another, er, non-human person—"

"You may say vampire if you wish. I won't be offended." Jacobson's composure was complete but somehow he managed to convey a subtle displeasure. Maybe it was the fact that his green eyes were glowing slightly, but whatever it was, it seemed to make Banner nervous.

"Er, yes, thank you." He cleared his throat again. "So you want to buy and develop this land, as I understand it." He waited for the vampire to nod before he moved on. "Well, I'm happy to tell you that we've checked into it thoroughly and there are no living relatives of this other, um, vampire around so we can move ahead with the deal."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Excuse me," I murmured to Banner, as discreetly as I could. "Can I talk to you outside?"

There are a lot of weird laws governing vampire acquisitions, especially property. They're so slick and powerful and downright scary the human powers that be are afraid they'll take over everything. So one of the rules is that they aren't allowed to buy property from another vamp—one who's been turned into a vampire by a bite anyway—if there are any human relatives of the seller still living. That makes sense if you think about it. Otherwise vampires could just bite anybody they wanted to and

influence them to sell their property – not so good in the grand scheme of things. For the humans, anyway.

Banner was aware of all this and he'd had a thorough check of the property done. But I guess he'd only read the preliminary report and thought it was good enough. The final report, which had come in just that afternoon, clearly stated something else entirely. Whatever the case was, he was *not* happy about my interference.

"Velez, if I want your opinion I'll ask for it," he growled out of the corner of his mouth before turning his attention back to the vampire. "Now, as I was saying, since there are no living relatives in question –"

"Mr. Banner, if you could just give me a minute out in the hallway," I said, still hoping to save face even though I was pretty sure vampire hearing was acute enough that Jacobson would be sure to hear what we were saying.

This time Banner completely ignored me and just kept talking to the vampire as though I didn't exist. "We can move ahead with the deal. Now I have some paperwork here –" He started to shove a sheaf of papers toward Jacobson but the vampire held up a hand.

"A moment please. I would like to hear what Ms. Velez has to say."

Banner's face began to turn red. "As I said before, Mr. Jacobson, she's just an assistant. She doesn't have any idea –"

"A living relative has been found," I cut in, my voice flat. "Mrs. Ida Delong. She's currently a resident at the Restful Shores nursing home up in the panhandle. She's eighty-five and has Alzheimer's but she *is* still alive."

"So it appears that the sale cannot go through at this time." Jacobson's voice was neutral but his eyes were flashing and a hint of fang was showing beneath his sensual upper lip. "I must say, Mr. Banner, I think you could have informed me of that over the phone instead of wasting my time tonight."

"You...I...you..." Banner seemed at a loss for words.

The vampire's eyes were glowing coal red now and I felt a shiver go down my spine – the night might end in a bloodbath yet. It was obvious that Jude Jacobson wasn't used to dealing with incompetence.

I was pretty sure I was no match for him but this was part of my job. Standing on shaky legs, I took a step toward the angry vamp. "Dawson, Levine and Taber regrets this error, of course, Mr. Jacobson," I said, trying to sound apologetic instead of scared to death. "If you'll give us a chance, I'm sure we can make this right for you."

To my mixed feelings of relief and terror, Jacobson focused on me instead of Banner. His eyes flickered from red to green and he seemed to relax. "The one good thing about this incident is that I was able to meet you, Ms. Velez," he said, giving me a slow, lazy smile that seemed to make something inside me clench. "For that happy accident alone I will forgive Mr. Banner his utter ineptitude."

"Hey, now! I resent –" Banner began to bluster.

"It's regrettable that we had to end like this," Jacobson cut him off. The vampire rose to his full height soundlessly. "Goodbye, Mr. Banner. I believe I'll consult a different law firm for my needs in the future."

"Wait!" The lawyer was on his feet but the vampire had already turned and walked out of his office. Banner turned to me, his face scarlet with fury. "You little cunt! How dare you contradict me in front of a client?"

I couldn't believe his ingratitude. "I just saved your ass, Banner—literally. Or did you not notice he was about to rip into your worthless hide?"

"Everything would have been fine if you had just kept your mouth shut," he snapped.

"Oh sure." I put a hand on my hip. "Fine for *now*. But what about a week from now when Jacobson found out you'd screwed up his deal? You'd be getting a midnight visit from a very pissed-off vamp. It's better he found out now before he signed the paperwork and tied up his money in useless red tape."

"I'm telling you, I had it handled. I didn't need your fucking interference—especially in front of the client!" This seemed to be his main point—as though it was all right for him to be an idiot as long as I didn't point it out to anyone.

"I tried to get you to come outside the office with me," I said, hanging on to my temper grimly. "If you'd read the final report—"

"I know my business," he snarled.

"Apparently not. Or you wouldn't have given the client erroneous information."

"He only listened to you because you're like him—a freak," Banner spat at me. "Well, let me tell you, Velez, I'd rather be normal and human any day."

Now he was getting into dangerous territory. "Being human isn't exactly a recommendation in your case, Banner. If I were you I think I'd rather be able to brag that I was a competent attorney."

He got a malevolent light in his beady little eyes. "At least I *am* an attorney, unlike you. How many times did you fail the Bar exam, Velez? Four? Five?"

"That's it, I'm leaving." I couldn't take it anymore. I could feel my temper boiling over and I knew I had to get out of there now or do something I'd regret. Turning on my heel, I started for the door only to feel Banner's pudgy fingers gripping my shoulder.

"Don't you turn your back on me when I'm talking to you, bitch," he growled.

At that point I did a little growling of my own. There was a full moon overhead outside and just because I couldn't change didn't mean I couldn't feel its pull. "Take your hand off me now," I told Banner. "Or I'm going to break your fingers."

He knew I could do it but he was either too stupid or too angry to listen. Instead of letting me go he spun me around to face him. "Now listen to me—"

"I'm done listening," I said. "I'm done with this whole fucking place including you." To hell with losing my job. I ripped his hand off my shoulder, gripped three of his fingers in my fist and squeezed.

I could feel the small bones inside his fingers grinding together as I pulverized them but I didn't let go. I'm not normally a violent person but a red rage like nothing I'd ever felt before was on me and I couldn't stop. It almost felt like I could change then and there and rip out his throat, the way a real werewolf would have.

Banner's face turned a dirty yellow shade of pale and he let out a high-pitched shriek that died off into a sick-sounding gurgle. The noise disgusted me and I let go of him abruptly. He staggered and fell to his knees, holding his useless hand out in front of him. He looked up at me. "You...you..."

"I told you I'd do it." I nodded at his hand. "Consider that my notice." Turning, I stalked out of the office and took the elevator down to the DLT lobby for the last time. I had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do for money but there was no way I was ever coming back here again.

To my surprise, Jude Jacobson was waiting for me when I stepped out of the elevator.

"Ms. Velez," he said smoothly.

"Excuse me." I brushed past him and headed for a chair. I probably should have still been afraid of him but the adrenaline high I'd experienced during the confrontation with Banner was fading and I was beginning to feel sick and shaky. It was a bad combination and I tripped over my high heels and would have fallen if the vampire hadn't intervened.

One moment I was falling and the next I was being held in his arms like a child. I looked up into his face dizzily, thinking that he had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. Then I came to my senses.

"Put me down."

"No, I don't think so," he said. "What did he do to you? Did he hurt you?" His eyes flashed dangerously.

I laughed but it came out sounding more like a sob. "I'm afraid I'm the one who did the hurting. Look, can you just let me go? I swear I had nothing to do with your deal being screwed up so please—"

"I have no intention of harming you. You don't need to fear me." His voice was soft and reassuring and the way he was looking at me made me feel flustered all over again.

"Well...thank you. And thank you for catching me. But I'm fine now."

"You don't seem fine to me." He carried me out the front door and down the steps of the building with no apparent effort. "Where is your car?"

"In the lot, in the back. But I left my keys and my purse—everything inside the building." I nearly slapped my forehead in frustration. "And Banner is probably going to be calling the police any second now. If he can still dial a phone, that is."

"No, he won't." Jacobson sounded so certain of himself that for a moment I almost believed him. Then I came to my senses.

"You don't know him like I do—he's a vindictive son of a bitch. Plus I pretty much pulverized his hand."

"No more than he deserved if he touched you in anger," the vampire said calmly. "I would have done much worse to him if he had somehow managed to harm you."

"But..." I looked at him in confusion. "You don't even know me."

"But I want to. I want to know you very much." He was giving me that look again, the one that made my insides feel tight.

"I-I don't know what to say," I said helplessly. I'd spent years hearing about how evil and manipulative and controlling vampires were. But no one had mentioned how attractive they could be. I suddenly felt like a moth flitting around a dangerous but irresistible flame.

"Then just listen," he said smoothly. "I have a proposition for you, Ms. Velez, but we can't discuss it here. I have a car waiting for me. If you'll allow the driver to take you somewhere we can meet and talk afterward, I'll be more than happy to retrieve your things and make sure Mr. Banner has nothing to say to the police."

"You're not planning on killing him, are you? I mean, not that he doesn't deserve it but I'm already in enough hot water as it is." It seemed beyond strange to be having this conversation while he was holding me in his arms on the curb outside my work—excuse me, *former* work—but what else could I do when he refused to put me down?

"Not at all. I think further bloodshed is unnecessary but I have ways of getting what I want." He smiled in a way that would have scared me senseless if it was directed at me.

I shivered. "And you'll do all this just because you want to go talk somewhere? With me?" I still didn't understand his motivation.

"Yes." His luminous eyes were steady as he looked down at me and I suddenly felt faint all over again. *It's just the heat and humidity*, I told myself with irritation. There was no way I was feeling swoony over a vamp. No way in hell.

"But...why?"

"I will tell you everything if you agree to meet me. Perhaps we could go to the Saffron Room at the Hilton? I believe it's not far from here."

"No, it's just down the road."

"Then you'll agree to let my driver take you there and wait while I settle this matter?"

I thought about it. Either I could go back into the DLT offices and rummage around to get my things while hoping I could beat the paramedics and police that were

doubtless on the way. Or I could go sit in comfort at a swanky hotel bar and let someone else handle the whole mess. Normally I clean up after myself but then again, normally I don't go around breaking people's fingers. In this case it was a no-brainer. Whatever the vamp had to say to me, surely listening to him was worth getting away from the scene of the crime. I wasn't sure if he could really keep Banner from calling the police but the longer I debated the longer the wounded attorney had to learn to dial with his left hand.

"Yes," I said at last. "I could use a drink right about now."

He smiled, showing a dangerous hint of fang. "As could I."

So that's how I came to be sitting in a bar waiting for a vampire.

I had chosen a quiet, plush leather booth in the far corner of the elegant, dimly lit bar and ordered myself a drink. I was wondering if he would really show and then decided he'd better since he was supposed to get my purse and keys. How was he going to find them, anyway? Could he have picked the location of my desk out of my head along with everything else he mysteriously knew? Then I speculated on what he was going to do with Banner to keep him from running to the police. That didn't bear thinking about so I took a drink of my piña colada with extra rum and wondered what he wanted to talk to me about, anyway. What was this "proposition"?

I didn't have very long to conjecture. He came striding into the bar not thirty minutes later carrying my purse and a cardboard box that appeared to have the entire contents of my desk in it.

"I hope you don't mind," he said, putting the box and purse down in front of me. "Your car is parked out front. I got the distinct impression that you were planning on not going back."

"You're absolutely right about that." I took another sip of my drink and looked at the silver framed picture on top of the box. It had been thoughtful of him to clean out my desk. "How is Banner doing?"

"Resting comfortably in the back of an ambulance. He's under the impression that there was some kind of accident with the elevator doors." Jacobson frowned. "Unfortunately he might get other ideas if he sees you again. It's difficult to erase a traumatic incident completely from a human brain without doing permanent damage."

I nodded. "That's okay. He's never going to see me again. I don't ever want to go back. I only took the stupid job in the first place..."

"Because you were going to be promoted to attorney?" Jacobson finished for me when I trailed off.

I frowned at him. "Don't start that again. I was just beginning to like you—even if you are a vamp."

"I apologize." He nodded at the picture in the silver frame. "Your husband or lover?"

"My brother," I said and added, "I'm single." Then I mentally kicked myself—why would I tell him a thing like that? As if he'd be interested or I'd be willing to go with him even if he was. A vamp and a were out on a date—what a laugh.

But Jacobson looked pleased. "I was hoping you were."

"You mean you didn't already know from shaking my hand?" I took another drink.

"I got brief impressions of the things you were recently thinking when we touched and only because you were thinking about them so hard." He shrugged. "Sometimes it happens but usually only when the person I am touching has a very forceful personality. Truly, I'm not much of a mind reader, Ms. Velez."

I sighed. "Call me Luz."

"Luz, then." He smiled, careful not to show fang. "And I would be honored if you'd call me Jude."

I nodded. "Fine, we're officially on a first-name basis. Now would you mind telling me what you wanted to talk about? What is this *proposition*?"

Jacobson—or Jude as I supposed I should think of him now—took a deep breath. He looked at me carefully, as though trying to gauge how I would take what he was going to say. "I want your blood," he said at last, apparently deciding that the most direct route was the best.

"What, all of it?" I asked. "Because I'm kind of using it right now."

He smiled. "Of course not. What I am saying is that I want to drink from you." His voice got deeper and his gaze was suddenly very intense. "I want to drink from you more than any other female I've ever met."

I shivered at the hot look in his eyes. I don't know much about vamps but I *do* know that when they take blood it's not just about getting nourishment. They often combine their dining practices with...other things. Things I had never considered doing with a vampire, that was for sure.

And I'm not considering them now, either, I told myself firmly. "Why me?" I said, giving him a level look to let him know I wasn't impressed.

His gaze never wavered. "As a non-shifter the supernatural power in your blood has never been tapped. It would be like drinking a fine and extraordinarily rare vintage of wine—one I might never get a chance to try again."

Well, good—at least he wasn't trying to come on to me.

"Also you're a very, very beautiful woman," he continued, dashing that idea to smithereens. "The very thought of holding you in my arms, tasting your skin while I bite you...it's intoxicating."

His eyes met mine and he held me trapped in his gaze for a long, long moment. Long enough that I felt my heart pounding crazily against my ribs and the gathering heat and dampness between my thighs. *He's a vampire,* I reminded myself sternly. *You're a were. You can't date a vamp!* But no matter what I told myself, the fact was, it had been a very long time since a man—any man—had looked at me like that.

Finally I tore my gaze away and took another hasty gulp of my melting piña colada. "And why should I let you? Bite me, I mean?"

"I can make it worth your while to submit to me," he said and I definitely got the impression he was talking about more than a quick nip on the neck. "There are many things I can offer."

"Such as?" I asked, trying not to look at the intense gaze that was still aimed at me like a spotlight.

"Well, I could help you get rid of that pesky virginity that's been bothering you."

I felt my cheeks heat with a sudden rush of blood. So he had picked that out of my brain along with everything else, the bastard. My deepest, darkest secret. My ultimate shame. Well, except for... I pushed the thought away and looked up at him.

"So you think I'm so desperate I'll have sex with a vamp?" I put every ounce of scorn I could muster into the words.

"I think you are, yes," he said, mildly. "Your virginity bothers you greatly and you wish to be rid of it by any means necessary."

"Not by *any* means," I said, but I was just trying to save face and we both knew it. The truth of his words made me wince with shame.

Since no self-respecting male were will date or mate with a non-shifter, I had been single for years. But just because there were none of my own kind available to me didn't mean I didn't want a man. I listened to other women talk about their sex lives and I burned to be touched and taken and held. I wanted it so much that finally I had stooped to dating humans. And one night I let one of them take me home. What I hadn't counted on was my panicky response to being held down. When he spread my legs and climbed on top of me it was just too much. To awful...

"I broke his pelvis in three places," I murmured, lost in the memory of that awful night.

"You didn't mean to." Jude's deep voice was curiously gentle.

I looked up at him. "How much do you really know about me? Are you reading my mind right now?"

He shook his head. "I swear I'm not. I only know what was at the top of your mind when we shook hands. You were thinking about your perceived failures. Your status as a non-shifter, the Bar exam...and buried under all that, so deep you probably didn't even know you were thinking about it yourself...the other."

"All my most embarrassing secrets," I said dully. "Must be nice to be able to pick things like that out of someone else's brain. If you ever get tired of being a rich and powerful vampire you can have a whole second career in blackmail."

Jude frowned. "Please don't imagine I would ever try to coerce you into giving yourself to me, Luz. If sex isn't your payment of choice we can certainly move on."

"Move on, then," I said, making a gesture with my hand. "No offense but I'm not having sex with a vamp, no matter how desperate you think I am."

"Very well." He nodded. "There are other, more prosaic things I can offer you. Money, for instance."

I cleared my throat. "This may sound weird but I think that would make me feel even more like a whore than if we had sex." I couldn't believe I was still discussing this with him but somehow I couldn't just get up and go. His intense gaze wouldn't let me.

"Consider this," he said, steepling his long fingers in front of him. "You saved me a considerable sum tonight. If I had signed those papers your foolish colleague was offering me I would have been legally committed to a very expensive and useless project. What if I gave you the amount you saved me tonight in return for the right to drink from you on several occasions?"

"And how much is that?" I said, taking another sip of my watery piña colada. Wow, it was almost gone. I needed to slow down.

He named a sum that made me take another drink despite my internal decision to go easy on the alcohol. What he was offering was enough to keep me going for the next two months at least. Rent, groceries, car note—that amount would pay it all. I could stay home and study night and day for the Bar exam which I had been stubborn enough to sign up for again. It was tempting but...

"That's still money," I reminded him. "And a freaking big bunch of it at that."

Jude looked frustrated. "Money that I would have lost if not for you. Also, you were kind enough to punish that idiot Banner, which saves me the trouble of paying him a visit later on tonight." His eyes gleamed and I felt a shiver go down my spine. No matter how polite he was, there was an edge of darkness in him that peeked out every once in a while and reminded me of what he was.

"I didn't exactly break his hand because I was upset that he screwed up your case," I pointed out. "But I'm sure if he'd been given a choice he would prefer what I did to anything you might dream up."

He smiled dangerously. "I am certain you're right. So...back to our deal. What if I offered you something else besides the money? Something that would help you solve your problems—or what you perceive to be problems, anyway?"

I raised an eyebrow at him. "What—you're going to give me a copy of your latest self-help book? *Solving Your Problems the Vampire Way*? Or maybe, *Men are from Mars and Vampires are from Venus*?"

He laughed softly and shook his head. "No, in exchange for your blood I will give you...my blood. Some of it, anyway."

I looked at him blankly. "So we'd do a blood exchange? Isn't that some kind of a vampire sex ritual? And what purpose would it serve?"

"It doesn't have to involve sex," he murmured but the intense look was back in his eyes again. "And as for the purpose, my blood will help you overcome the obstacles between you and the things you want."

"Explain." I pressed my thighs together tightly under the table, trying to ignore the heat that was building there as I remembered the lurid rumors I'd heard about vamp sex rituals. The thought of him biting me didn't excite me – did it?

Jude leaned forward and took my hand. I tried to pull it away but he didn't let me. After a while I relaxed and let him hold it. What the hell—he already knew so many embarrassing facts about me there didn't seem to be any point in fighting. Almost nothing else he could learn from touching me was as bad as the fact that I was a twenty-seven-year-old virgin. Almost.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Luz, that the reason you can't shift and the reason you can't pass the Bar exam are connected?" he asked, eyeing me intently. "That the panic and fear you felt when you tried to have sex were related to the anxiety you felt during those other two determining events in your life?"

"I-I..." I shook my head, at a loss for words. As a matter of fact, it *hadn't* occurred to me. But when I thought about it, when I remembered the way I'd felt every time I attempted to shift, each time I'd tried and failed the Bar exam, and the one disastrous time I'd tried to have sex, it all made sense. Test-taking anxiety? I had *life* anxiety. "My God..." I ran my free hand through my hair. "I don't know why I never thought of it like that."

At least Jude didn't say *I told you so*. "My blood can help you," he said looking at me intently. "It will give you confidence and allow you to stay calm under pressure."

"Really?" I looked up at him. It seemed too good to be true.

Jude nodded. "I swear it."

I narrowed my eyes. "Weres aren't susceptible to anti-anxiety drugs, you know."

"I know. But this is different. It's not a drug—it is the essence of me. You may have noticed that I am a very calm person. By taking my blood, you'll be taking some of my attributes as well."

"Mmm-hmm. So will I suddenly have the urge to bite people?"

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Hardly. Taking my blood will give you my attributes—not my appetites."

It was like making a deal with the devil and I knew it. But the thought of becoming the person I wanted to be—the person I always should have been if the stupid fear and anxiety hadn't gotten in the way—was too much. I found myself nodding my head almost eagerly.

"Where and when?" I asked. I was ready to do almost anything to get what he promised.

"My house would be best—if you think you'd be comfortable there?" He raised an eyebrow at me.

For a moment I balked. Was this really smart? Agreeing to go to a strange vampire's house to let him bite me? *This man is stronger than me*, I reminded myself. *He could do things to me that human men couldn't. He could...force me.* I couldn't allow myself to think

the word rape but the memory of being held down by the drunken human was very strong in my mind. And there was another memory, one that was buried even deeper and almost forgotten. If only I could forget completely... *No!* I pushed it away before it could rise to the surface of my mind like a bloated corpse floating to the top of an algae-encrusted pond.

Jude must have known what I was thinking about. "This is a business proposition, Luz. I am bargaining for your blood, not your body. I won't take anything that you don't offer me freely." His voice was dry and no-nonsense but his eyes were strangely gentle.

I could feel myself blushing again. "It's just...I've been in the human world a long time so I'm not used to being with anyone stronger than me. It's...a little scary," I forced myself to admit.

"I understand. But I would never use my strength to hurt you. I'll give you some time to think about it." Jude sat up straighter and released my hand. I realized he was about to go. "But let me be clear about the terms. You will come to my house at least three times and allow me to drink from you. In return I will give you some of my blood each time as well as the money you saved me tonight."

"That...sounds straightforward enough," I said.

"There's one more thing you should know." He looked me in the eyes, making sure I understood him. "I don't intend to drink from your neck or your wrist, beautiful one."

"Then where...?"

"Your inner thigh." He gave me a slow, hot smile that seemed to melt me from the inside out and I had a sudden flash of him kneeling between my thighs, his broad shoulders holding my legs apart as he leaned in to bite. Was I really so desperate that I was getting turned-on by a vampire? Apparently so. I could feel my pussy getting hot and wet and I suddenly wondered if he knew about my arousal. The idea was terribly embarrassing, yet somehow intriguing as well.

"I..." I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. "I understand."

"Good." He nodded and stood, fishing a card out of the inner pocket of his immaculately tailored suit. "This is my address. Please be at my door this time next week if the arrangement suits you."

"All right." I looked at the plain white card that had his name and address embossed in curving black script.

Jude smiled at me, his eyes glinting dangerously under half-closed lids. "I hope to see you there, Luz. I can't tell you how much I look forward to tasting you."

Chapter Two

This is crazy, I told myself as I stood outside the glossy black door with the polished brass knocker shaped like a bat. Somebody had a sense of humor, at least. Jude lived in a large, elegant Tudor-style house that just missed being a mansion by a few square feet. It was set in the middle of an immaculately manicured lawn and surrounded by high hedges, maybe to block the sunlight during the day? Either that or his gardener had an overdeveloped sense of privacy.

Jude's expensive gated neighborhood in West Chase was about as far from my run-down apartment building in Ybor City as you could get and it had taken me a while to find it. In fact, I was more than thirty minutes late. I wondered if Jude had given up on me. Maybe *I* should give up on me – what was I doing here?

I'd had a whole week to talk myself out of this but somehow I hadn't because I couldn't help thinking of what he'd said – that his blood could help me. I just hoped I wouldn't have to drink a gallon of it to get the good effects. Being a non-shifter I'd never acquired the taste for blood and raw meat that most weres have. Speaking of other weres, what would my family think of me now? Fraternizing with the enemy.

Like they'd care, I told myself scornfully. It wasn't like my mom and dad had disowned me but we'd drifted apart after the awful night it became clear I was never going to come into my own. And there were other things that had happened, which had put distance between us. Things I preferred not to think about and it was easier to keep them at bay when I wasn't in touch with my parents.

About the only family member I kept up with now was my little brother, Diego. We were really close and talked often. Like me, he had broken out of the mold and left our family pack. Now he was running with a tough bunch of Latino wolves called, fittingly enough, *Los Lobos*. Not very imaginative but weres tend to be more practical than creative.

I lifted my hand for maybe the fifth time to knock and put it down again. Was I doing the right thing? Would I regret my decision once I was on the other side of that glossy black door?

Before I could change my mind again, the door in question swung open and Jude looked out at me. "Luz, I'm so glad to see you. I was afraid you might have decided against coming to see me." He made it sound like a social visit – like I was just dropping in for a drink. Well, I was, in a way. At least, I was dropping in to let him drink from me. I felt my skin pebble up into goose bumps and tried to push the thought away. It was easier to pretend I was just here for a business deal and leave the idea of those sharp white fangs I could see peeking out from under his sensuous upper lip out of the equation.

"I got a little lost coming here," I said stiffly. "Sorry I'm late."

"You're here now—that's all that matters." Jude stepped to the side and made a sweeping gesture of welcome with one arm. "Please, come in."

I stepped past him into the dim interior of the house, my heart racing about a hundred miles a minute. Now I knew how human women felt when they went on blind dates. Vulnerable.

"Please be at ease," Jude murmured. Tonight he was wearing a thin black crew neck T-shirt that hugged the muscular planes of his chest and tight, faded jeans. I liked the more casual look on him and hoped I hadn't overdressed myself. I had on a short, flirty black skirt with red flowers on it and a silky bright red blouse to match. I knew the red would bring color to my cheeks and make my eyes look brighter.

There was really no excuse to dress up for a vampire but I'd bought the outfit ages ago to wear on dates and then it had just languished in my closet. Even though I knew that tonight was about a business deal, I couldn't help putting it on. Feeling pretty made me more confident and at that moment I needed all the confidence I could get just to walk into Jude's house.

He shut the door so gently I didn't even hear it close. I was too busy looking around, anyway. The large house was decorated in turn of the century antiques, at least the parts that I could see. Polished parquet floors gleamed in the dim light from the miniature chandelier overhead.

"You have a lovely home," I said, feeling stilted and awkward.

"Nothing is as lovely as you are tonight. I am so glad you wore your hair down—I had hoped you would." Jude brushed a few stray curls away from my neck and I shivered at the touch of his large hand against my sensitive skin.

"Thank you." I felt suddenly shy which made me uncomfortable enough to get irritated. "So where are we doing this?" I asked, lifting my chin.

Jude raised an eyebrow. "All business, are you?"

"Why not?" I gave him a challenging look. "This *is* a business deal, right?"

His eyes hardened. "Indeed it is. Very well then, please follow me and I'll show you where I'd planned for us to be tonight." He turned and walked away noiselessly and I had no choice but to follow him deeper into the huge house.

We passed by lots of rooms until he gestured me courteously into one at the end of a long hallway. I went in rather reluctantly and saw that it was decorated as a study. Bookshelves lined the walls and there was a desk at one end of the room with a closed laptop on it. Hmm, a vamp who kept up with modern technology—interesting. Many of them didn't, preferring to live in the past. Apparently Jude liked to look ahead—a point in his favor as far as I was concerned. Not that I would ever be interested in a vampire, but still.

At the other end of the dimly lit room was a long, low brown leather couch in front of a stone fireplace. Somewhat to my surprise, I saw there was a small fire flickering

there—it was the source of most of the light in the room. My first thought was that it was way too hot this time of year for a fire, even a small one. But then I realized that it really wasn't. Jude must have turned the AC way down because the room was a very comfortable temperature inside.

"Please." He gestured to the couch and waited until I sat down before he settled himself beside me. I could feel the heat of the fire against my knees and bare lower legs and had a moment to wish that I'd worn pants instead of a skirt. But then I would have had to take them off completely when he bit me whereas with the skirt, I could just push it up.

Just thinking about having him down between my thighs with my skirt pushed up to my waist made me nervous. I took a few deep breaths, trying to relax. *It's business. This is just business*, I reminded myself sternly. *He just wants to taste your blood. There's nothing even remotely erotic about it.*

Yeah, right. That line of thought went flying right out the window when I looked up and met Jude's eyes in the firelight. They were half lidded with lust and he was gazing at me with an intensity that made me blush and look away.

I cleared my throat nervously. "Um...now what?" I said, trying not to sound as flustered as I felt. Yeah, I'm one tough cookie but I had very little experience when it came to this kind of thing. And none of the experience I'd had was good.

"Now, this," Jude murmured. Leaning down he cupped my face in his hands and pressed a gentle, barely there kiss to my lips. It felt so good and I was so hungry for physical contact that I might have let him go on. Except this was supposed to be a business deal—not a make-out session. Or so I tried to tell myself.

"Wait a minute." I pulled back from him before he had a chance to kiss me again. "What...why are you kissing me?"

He caught my gaze with his. "Firstly because I want to. And secondly, because I'm trying to get you warmed up, so to speak. Taking blood is a great deal like sex. You wouldn't want to make love without a little foreplay first, would you?"

"I wouldn't know, remember?" I crossed my arms over my breasts protectively. "Look, I thought you said this didn't have to be sexual."

Jude's eyes flashed. "We can treat it in a clinical manner if you like but I'm afraid there will still be some elements that may remind you of sex."

"What elements? You're just going to bite me—end of story." I lifted my chin and frowned at him.

"But that's not the end of the story. Think about it, Luz." His voice was soft and deep. "You will be spreading your legs for me—opening yourself. And I...I will be penetrating you." His eyes flickered down to where I had my hands clenched together in my lap and I knew he was thinking about my thighs. My inner thighs. I had another mental image of his mouth on me there, licking, sucking...biting.

God, I was getting hot and wet all over again, thinking these forbidden thoughts and listening to his deep, soft voice describing what we were going to do. What was

wrong with me? *I can't give in to this feeling*, I told myself firmly. *I can't*. I took a deep breath.

"Look, let's just get down to it, shall we?" I said as briskly as I could. "You wanted to drink my blood – okay, so drink some. I don't have all night."

Jude shook his head. "A pity. I could spend all night, every night admiring and exploring your lovely body. Very well." He slid off the couch and suddenly he was on his knees in front of me. "Spread your legs for me, Luz."

Those words spoken in his deep, sensual voice made me shiver as I did what he said. Goose bumps jumped out all over my skin, despite the heat of the fire. But this was what I had come here for and I was determined to go through with it.

That was until Jude pushed up my skirt and asked me to remove my underwear.

They were black lacy boy shorts that covered me completely and I had thought myself very smart for wearing them. There was no way he would be able to catch even a glimpse of my pussy with those in the way, which was a very good thing since I didn't want him to know how aroused he was making me. Right now I was so hot and wet and nervous that I could barely concentrate on what he was saying. So I had to ask him to repeat himself twice before I understood his request.

"I'm sorry?" I said, looking at him blankly.

"I said I need these to come off." Jude tugged at the stretchy lace material of the shorts. "They're in the way."

"How?" I demanded, looking down at my legs in the firelight. I mean—you have plenty of thigh to work with there. How are my...my underwear in the way?"

"I prefer to bite at the inguinal crease—the place where your thigh meets your body. It's easier to find a blood vessel there."

I looked at him suspiciously. "You sure you're not just making that up so you can get me out of my underwear?"

"I promise you, Luz, that I will treat this as a business deal and not take advantage of you," he said dryly. "Unless, of course, you wish me to do more than bite you?" He raised an eyebrow at me questioning.

"No, no," I said hastily, feeling my cheeks heat. "I just...it's embarrassing, that's all. I don't...I'm not used to having a man down there."

"Of course not." He ran one large hand over my thigh slowly. "But I have promised not to take what isn't offered, remember?"

"How can I trust you?" I demanded.

He shrugged. "Have I betrayed your trust so far? Don't you think I could simply take what I wanted instead of arguing with you if I was so inclined?"

Fear sent an icy finger down my spine. "I suppose."

"But I won't." Jude's voice was suddenly softer. "I may be many things, Luz, but I am no rapist."

"All right." I don't know why but for some reason I believed him. He might be a vampire but he had behaved like a gentleman so far.

"Just keep telling yourself this is only a business deal. The sooner we exchange blood, the sooner you can go." Jude's voice was almost bored but his eyes were strangely intent.

Since it was either trust him or lose my chance at controlling my panic through his blood, I decided to do what he asked. Despite my pounding heart I nodded. "Fine, I'll take them off."

Standing from my half-reclined position, I reached under my skirt. Hooking my thumbs in the sides of the stretchy black lace, I pushed the boy shorts down to my ankles. There was a little problem getting them over the black strappy heels I'd worn with my outfit but Jude assisted me without a word and soon I was completely bare under my flirty skirt.

"Good." He looked up at me intently. "Now I can reach you."

"Yeah, just great," I mumbled. Feeling incredibly self-conscious, I sat back on the couch and slid back into position on the slippery leather. I couldn't believe I was actually doing this, couldn't believe I was going to spread my legs and let him... I couldn't think about it anymore. I closed my eyes tightly. "All right, I'm ready."

"Relax." He lifted my skirt and then his large, warm hands stroked over my knees, parting them gently. I clenched my hands into fists as I felt him move between my legs, his broad shoulders spreading my thighs much wider than I would have liked. I wondered if he could see how aroused I was, how wet I'd become and I winced in shame. He was a vampire—as a self-respecting were there was no way I should have allowed myself to get turned-on by him. And yet, the feel of his hands on my body, his soft, deep voice as he murmured to me to relax and let myself be open to him, the warm, spicy scent of his skin with its faint trace of expensive cologne—it was all adding up to be the most sensuous experience of my life.

How sad is that? Letting a vamp bite you is the best sex you've ever had, I taunted myself uneasily. I could feel my pussy opening as he pressed forward, seeking to find the inner crease of my thigh. Could he see how slippery and wet I was by the dim light of the fire? Could he scent my arousal? Scent is a big deal to weres. You can't fake it, either, so it's obvious if you're into sex or not if your partner is a were. I wasn't sure if it was the same with vampires or not. If it was, at least Jude was gentlemanly enough not to mention it. I was glad for his old-world courtliness. It was embarrassing enough to be so turned-on without him saying anything about it.

Don't think about it, I told myself. *You're fine. It's going to be fine. Just a quick bite on the thigh and then it'll all be over.* I guess I should have been concerned over whether those razor-sharp fangs I'd seen in his mouth would hurt when they pierced my skin. But somehow I didn't care about that. All I could think about was how incredibly embarrassed, hot and nervous I felt.

Then I felt his breath against my inner thigh.

Suddenly, I froze. Up until that point I had believed I could go through with this. That I could let him touch me, drink from me, even in such an intimate place, with no problem. But now that it was about to happen I felt blind panic setting in.

My desire turned to ashes—burnt away by the force of my fear. My throat seemed to close and I couldn't breathe—couldn't get a deep enough breath even though I felt my lungs pumping like bellows, pulling in the air in ragged gasps. Cold sweat broke out across my forehead and my heart felt like a sledgehammer, trying to pound itself out of my chest.

Oh God, I can't. I can't! I thought incoherently. My mind raced back to that night—to the drunken human so heavy and unyielding on top of me. To the rank stench of his sweat and his whiskey breath against my cheek as he fumbled between us, trying to get himself inside me. And then it raced even further, to another night. A time when I had been too young, too weak to defend myself... *No! Can't think about that. I can't. I can't!*

Though I tried to hold still, I began trembling uncontrollably. It was happening again and there was no way to stop it. I couldn't breathe...*couldn't breathe.*

"Luz, stop."

I opened my eyes to see that Jude was sitting beside me on the couch again. My legs were together and my skirt was smoothed primly around my knees. I stared at him uncertainly. "What...?" I asked, unable to form a more coherent question when my heart was still beating about a hundred miles a minute.

"Luz..." He cupped my cheek, his eyes dark with concern. "I think perhaps it would be better if you drink from me before I drink from you."

He raised his wrist to his mouth and bit. Then, before I could say anything, he pressed his bleeding wrist to my mouth.

I opened my mouth to protest and his blood flowed in, rich and warm and surprisingly sweet. It didn't taste like blood at all—at least no blood I'd ever tasted. In fact, the closest thing I could equate it with was *dulce de leche*—the warm, creamy caramel sauce I'd grown up eating on various Latin desserts.

I know it sounds weird but honestly, it was pretty damn delicious.

Forgetting my half-formed protests, I latched on to his wrist and sucked for all I was worth. The taste reminded me of home. Of the safety and security of childhood until that one horrible night I never allowed myself to think of. Of the love I'd felt from my parents before it became clear I would never be able to change under the full moon and claim my birthright.

I felt calm washing over me. Peace and contentment. I could breathe again and little by little my heart stopped its panicked pounding. Safe...I was safe.

Feeling sated, I stopped sucking and released his wrist. Without a word, Jude pulled me into his arms and held me close. My arms went around his waist and the top of my head fit under his chin perfectly. I snuggled closer, enjoying the feel of being held in strong, masculine arms. There was no more discomfort or nervousness at all—it was as though I'd known him for a hundred years.

"How did you do that to me?" I asked, nuzzling my cheek against his broad chest. "Why did your blood calm me down?" Somewhere in the back of my head was the thought that I was a little *too* calm but I was feeling entirely too comfortable for it to bother me just then.

"You feel what I feel when you drink from me," Jude murmured. "I was trying to project calm and relaxation. Did it work?"

"It's...amazing," I said. "That was the same way I always feel when I'm in the middle of a really important or scary situation but you...you stopped the panic in its tracks." I looked up at him. "I can't believe you did that."

"It was the blood." He stroked my cheek with one long finger, his gaze holding mine. "It will remain in your system for a while. All you need do to access its power is remember how you're feeling now."

"So I might be able to pass the Bar exam," I said, half to myself. "Finally."

"Yes." He nodded. "If you're scheduled to take it relatively soon. The effects of my blood will wear off eventually."

"Next week." I stretched and sat up, smiling at him. "I'm scheduled to sit for it again next week."

"Excellent. You should have no problems. If you start to feel panicked, just close your eyes, relax, and remember this moment with me and the taste of my blood on your tongue."

"It tastes like *dulce de leche*. Like caramel—is that normal?" I asked, frowning a little. "I mean, I know that sounds strange..."

"Not at all. My blood is whatever flavor you want it to be. Or rather, whatever flavor your brain assigns to it. Which is usually something you associate with safety and calm."

I thought of my good associations with *dulce de leche* and how the flavor always brought back my childhood. "I *do* like that taste," I admitted. "I, uh, know you wanted to taste my blood because of its flavor but I don't see how mine can taste any better to you than yours did to me."

"Trust me—it can." Jude smiled, the sharp points of his fangs gleaming in the firelight. "Although the tasting your blood isn't the only thing that would bring me pleasure."

"What else?" My heart was speeding up again but in a pleasurable way. I liked the way he was looking at me, with his eyes half lidded and filled with desire.

"Looking at you—seeing how wet and hot you are. And your scent."

"Really?" I could feel my cheeks getting warm but I wasn't upset—not really. So scent was as important to vamps as it was to weres. Interesting.

"Yes." Jude nodded and gave me a lazy smile. "The scent of an aroused woman is a beautiful thing. Almost as beautiful as her taste."

"You don't just mean the taste of my—of her—blood, do you?" I was getting hot and wet again between my thighs and I was glad we weren't touching anymore.

He shook his head. "Blood is a great pleasure. But the feel of a beautiful woman opening herself and trembling with bliss as I taste her is even greater."

I looked down at my hands. "We shouldn't be talking about this." But somehow I didn't want to stop. "I-I've never had a guy...do that to me," I admitted.

"That is a great pity. It can be very pleasurable for both parties if the chemistry is right."

"And do...do you think the chemistry is right between us?" I couldn't believe I was asking him this but the words seemed to come out on their own and there was nothing I could do to stop them.

Jude stroked a strand of hair away from the side of my face, his fingertips brushing my skin. "Can you deny it?"

"I..." I looked down at my hands, which were clasped in my lap again. "I don't know. You're a vamp and I'm—"

"A beautiful woman whose needs have gone unsatisfied for far too long," Jude finished for me. "I'll tell you what, Luz—let me drink from you, as was our original agreement. Then, if you'll allow me, I would love to taste you in another way."

"You really want to—"

"Go down on you?" Jude's eyes were luminous in the firelight and his hair shone like dark gold. "Spread open your sweet, wet pussy and kiss and lick and taste until you come for me?" He gave me a slow, hot smile that seemed to melt things inside me. "Yes, Luz, I would like that very much."

I shivered, feeling hot and cold at the same time. "I...maybe we should just stick to the plan."

"Very well." He nodded. "But if you change your mind please let me know."

"All right," I managed to say. And then he was on his knees in front of me again, pushing up my skirt slowly to reveal my thighs.

"Your skin is so soft," he murmured, pulling me closer to the edge of the couch. "Will you open yourself for me, Luz?"

I found myself doing as he asked with no resistance. This time as my thighs parted I didn't clench my hands into fists or squeeze my eyes shut. I was still a little embarrassed at the idea of him seeing my naked pussy but it was a tingling, almost enjoyable feeling—I didn't feel panicky in the least.

I could feel the lips of my sex spreading as he opened my legs but I didn't hyperventilate or have a panic attack. Instead I watched, wondering what Jude would think of how aroused he'd made me. I was glad I'd just had a Brazilian wax a few days before. I like to keep things neat down there, even if the area never sees any action.

He took a moment to admire me in the firelight, his large hands warm on the insides of my thighs, his eyes drinking me in greedily. "So wet," he murmured at last. "So beautiful and open."

"I can't help it," I said. "You...when you talk to me that way I get..." I trailed off, embarrassed. But Jude finished for me.

"Aroused."

"Yes," I admitted, feeling my cheeks heat with a blush. "I know I shouldn't but —"

"Why shouldn't you?" He smiled at me, that lazy smile that made me feel like a thousand butterflies were taking flight in my stomach. "From the moment I saw you I wanted you, Luz, and I don't mean only your blood. I'm glad my emotions are not entirely one sided."

"You said it was only a business deal," I accused breathlessly.

His eyes flashed. "I lied."

Then he bent his head and nuzzled his face against my inner thigh. This time when I felt his hot breath on me, I spread my legs wider, opening myself for him completely. Offering myself in a way I never had to any other man.

I don't know what I expected but his bite wasn't painful at all. There were two sharp, tiny pricks right where my thigh met my torso and then my body was flooded with pleasure as he sucked.

I gasped at the sudden sensation. My nipples were tight and hard as bullets and my pussy suddenly went from damp to drenched. I could feel my juices sliding down my inner thighs and my clit throbbed like a second heartbeat. I can't explain it very well but it felt like Jude was stroking me from inside, like he'd somehow gotten one of his big, warm hands under my skin and was giving me pleasure in the most direct way.

But though I writhed under him and bit my lips to keep from moaning as the pleasure built and built, I never came. After a while it seemed impossible that I shouldn't. The sensations I experienced as he drank from me were so strong I felt like I was going to explode and yet the explosion never came. Soon the need to come became an almost physical pain but there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing but lie there beneath his mouth with his broad shoulders spreading my legs and try to endure it.

At last Jude lifted his head and looked at me. His eyes were as red as the burning coals of the fire. I felt as if I could fall into those eyes and lose myself completely — it was a scary thought but a compelling one too.

"Please..." I whispered, looking at him.

"Tell me what you need." He wasn't asking, he was ordering. And yet I couldn't help obeying.

"I need..." I couldn't believe I was saying this. "I-I need to come," I admitted at last. "But I still don't know about letting you..."

"About letting me taste you." He leaned down and pressed his lips to the mound of my pussy, his eyes never leaving mine. "Perhaps you would allow me the trial of a single kiss. If you don't like it, we can stop."

I felt my breath catch in my throat. "Just...just one kiss?"

"Just the one," he assured me, stroking my bare thighs as he spoke. His hands felt warm and soothing.

"And if I don't like it you'll stop?"

He laid a hand over his heart. "You have my word as a gentleman."

I felt lost. "All right," I whispered.

Jude nodded and leaned toward me again. I watched, helpless to look away, as he spread the outer lips of my sex with his thumbs and pressed his mouth to my inner pussy.

It was a hot, sweet, open-mouthed kiss and he took his time tasting me, letting me know he really wanted this. I jerked and moaned as I felt the barest flicker of his tongue over my swollen clit, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through me. It seemed to go on and on but finally Jude looked up at me, his mouth wet with my juices.

Deliberately, he licked his lips, his eyes never leaving mine. "Delicious."

I opened my mouth, not sure what was going to come out, and spoke only one word. "More," I breathed.

Jude didn't need a second invitation. He pressed back between my legs, splitting my thighs wide with his broad shoulders, and began tasting me again.

I expected him to be more forceful this time but he took his time with long, slow, lazy licks from top to bottom as though I was his favorite flavor of ice cream. Sometimes he would simply press his tongue flat against me and hold it there for endless seconds so that I felt him everywhere. In those moments it was as though my entire pussy was enveloped by the heat of his mouth, as though I could feel every part of him touching every part of me and the connection was almost more than I could bear. But I had to bear it because Jude was obviously in no hurry to finish—in fact, he seemed to draw out the experience as much as possible for his own pleasure as well as for mine.

I began to feel a sense of urgency, to wish that he would pay more direct attention to the throbbing button of my clit. As though sensing my need, he began to flicker the end of his tongue around it, dancing and darting but never quite making contact where I needed him the most. I felt my inner muscles tighten as I raised my hips in a vain effort to get his tongue where I needed it so badly.

"Jude...Jude, please!" I gasped, aware that I was begging but not caring anymore.

"Are you feeling the need, Luz?" He looked up and locked eyes with me, his thumbs spreading me wide, opening me totally for him.

"Yes...yes, please."

"Very well." Jude's eyes burned red with desire as he licked his lips again. Then he lowered his head and went back to tasting me.

This time he was much more aggressive. I moaned as I felt him circle my clit with light, teasing licks and then press lower, entering me as deeply as he could with his tongue. I had never had anyone do anything so intimate to me and I felt opened in a way I never had been before. Jude was passionate, kissing and sucking and licking my cunt as though there was nothing else in the universe as important as pleasuring me. His burning intensity and the sight of him kneeling between my legs, lapping my sensitive pussy, worked to push me higher and faster toward the edge of orgasm than I would have believed possible.

Before I knew it I was coming—coming harder than I ever had before. I had a number of sex toys and knew how to use them but none of them remotely compared with Jude's passionate kisses.

As the orgasm washed over me, he pressed two long, strong fingers deep inside my cunt and fucked me with them. I moaned and bucked against him shamelessly, pushed into a second, even deeper orgasm by his actions.

"That's right, Luz." His deep voice was hoarse with desire. "Let yourself go. Let yourself come for me."

I did. I was helpless not to. As wave after wave of pleasure washed over me, I wondered if this was why vamps and weres hated each other so much and feared getting together. Vampires and shifters can only procreate with their own kind and a relationship between the two species, which is so rare it's almost unheard of, almost never results in any children. So it stood to reason that if our people didn't think of each other as being sexually off-limits, both our races could die out just from pleasure. Or maybe Jude was just really, *really* good at this. I had no experience but I certainly know what I like and this was a ride I couldn't wait to get on again. That is, if Jude wanted to.

By the way he was cleaning me industriously with his tongue, licking and sucking the honey from my pussy and inner thighs, he wouldn't mind too much. He looked up at me, his eyes blazing, when the last tremor had gone through my body.

"That was...extraordinary. Thank you for allowing me to taste you." He rose and sat beside me in one, smooth motion that was pure grace and power. It took my breath away and for a moment all I could do was smile.

Did I mention that smile? I felt like it was plastered on my face, like I was high on something and couldn't stop grinning about it. But the truth was, I just didn't care. For a few minutes all my worries and cares, my lost job, my crappy life, just melted away and all I could feel was good.

Damn, a girl could get addicted to this feeling!

It was that thought that snapped me out of my happy place and back to reality. I felt my smile slip as Jude took my hand once more. He looked at me with obvious concern in his eyes.

"Is there something wrong, Luz?"

"No, nothing." I fumbled to pull my skirt down, smoothing it neatly around my thighs. "I...I'm fine. But I'm sure you're not."

He frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you're still..." I motioned to the hard ridge that was prominent in his jeans. "I mean, if you want I can...I can..." I couldn't finish the sentence so I took matters into my own hands, so to speak, and reached over to cup his hard length through his jeans.

For a moment I felt his heat throbbing against the palm of my hand and I had a split second of curiosity that cut through my fear. What would it be like to touch him...to explore him up close? I'd seen male genitalia before—growing up in a houseful of brothers who liked to have peeing contests it was pretty much a given. But never up close and intimate the way he'd seen me. So for just a second I wondered...what would it feel like? What would it *taste* like?

And then Jude's hand covered my own. "Is this what you want? What you truly want, Luz?" His eyes searched mine and I felt my fear returning.

"I..." I couldn't quite lie to him. "I *should* want it," I said at last, unable to look away. "After the way you touched me...tasted me..."

He moved my hand to his thigh. "That was for my own pleasure as much as for yours. You don't need to do anything in return."

"I...but, I..."

"You're not ready. And neither am I." He lifted my chin. "I want to savor this process, to enjoy every moment I have with you."

"I could help you enjoy it more," I said stubbornly, wondering why I was arguing with him like this. He'd just given me two mind-blowing orgasms and didn't want anything in return—I ought to be feeling like the cat that got the cream. Instead I was wondering if there was something wrong with me, some reason he didn't want me.

"You think because none of your own kind want you, no one else could either," Jude said, answering my thoughts rather than my words. Was he reading me again? Or just making a lucky guess? I couldn't tell.

"The guys aren't exactly knocking down the door," I admitted. "But what does that have to do with me...reciprocating for what you did for me?" It was the most roundabout way to ask why he wouldn't let me go down on him that I could think of. See? Law school does have its good points—it taught me to talk my way around corners if nothing else.

"You're afraid I don't want you because you have been slighted and overlooked by your own kind. Nothing could be farther from the truth." Jude leaned forward, his lips barely brushing my ear, his breath hot against the side of my neck. "I ache for you, Luz," he breathed. "I want to taste you again and let you taste me. I want to feel you against me. To fill you with myself and come deep inside you. I want to know your body as I know my own."

I felt the breath catch in my throat at the sincerity in his voice and the heat of his words. "You-you do?" I managed to squeak, wishing I could still the pounding of my heart.

Jude pulled back and looked me in the eyes. "I do. But none of those things will happen tonight. There will be time enough later."

"You act like it's inevitable that we'll be together. I barely know you," I pointed out. But the words sounded wrong to me. I *did* know him, in some deep part of me that I couldn't access with my conscious mind. I knew him and wanted to know him more.

"We can fix that." Jude smiled, showing just a hint of fang. "But it will take time."

I thought of saying that we only had two more "business meetings" before our agreement was over but somehow the words wouldn't come out. What was wrong with me? I was usually tough as nails. Apparently one or two incredible orgasms were all it took to soften me up. Not that I minded too terribly much at the moment.

"All right," I said, feeling my smile return. "I guess...that's all right."

"Good. I'm glad we can agree." Jude nodded. "So tell me, Luz—those of my kind know so little about yours. What is it like being were? Do you feel the call of the moon all the time or only on nights it is full?"

Somehow I didn't feel defensive about his question although if anyone else had asked me the same thing I would have assumed they were alluding to my non-shifter status. I answered and then asked something about vampires—remember I said we really don't know much in the way of details about each other—and before I knew it, we had almost talked the night away.

"I need to go," I said in surprise, glancing down at my watch and seeing it was four a.m. already. "I don't know how it got so late."

"I do." Jude traced my cheekbone with one long finger. "Good company always speeds the clock along."

By now I was getting used to his somewhat antiquated way of speaking and was actually getting to like it so I smiled. "I guess you're right. But I don't need to be getting my days and nights mixed up when I'm going to be cramming for the Bar all this week."

"You already have the knowledge." Jude tapped my forehead lightly. "And now you have the composure to apply it to paper."

"Actually, we take most of the test on computer now. But I know what you mean and I hope you're right."

"I'm right." He nodded at me with complete confidence. "Simply remember the taste of my blood and how you felt when you drank from me. All else will follow naturally."

I nodded back. "Well...I should go." I was strangely reluctant but it wasn't like I could just stay there with him. Even I knew he would need to rest once dawn broke and in summer when the days were long, it came early.

Jude walked me to the door. "Would you like to meet after you take your exam?"

I felt a surge of gratitude that he understood how I needed every spare minute to study. At the same time, I couldn't help feeling a twinge of regret that we wouldn't see

each other sooner. It was strange, considering how hostile I'd been when I first showed up at his door—even stranger when you considered our overwhelming differences. But that was how I felt—like I would miss him. Like I couldn't wait to see him again.

"Yeah. That would be great." I smiled up at him and he leaned down to brush my lips with his—a goodbye.

"Until then, Luz."

"Um, see you later." It seemed terribly prosaic after his lovely parting but I couldn't say what I really wanted to—which was that I would be counting the minutes until our next "business meeting".

Chapter Three

I spent the next week cramming for the Bar—or trying to anyway. Every time I tried to concentrate on torts and precedents, I kept seeing Jude's face or hearing his deep voice in my ear. The look in his eyes when he'd looked up after giving me that first, soft kiss and the way he'd murmured, "Delicious."

It was silly, really, and I told myself so over and over again. A were couldn't love a vamp any more than a dog could love a cat. What I was feeling was a mild infatuation because I wasn't used to dating and having any kind of intimate contact with men. So there was no way I was in love with him after such a short acquaintance. If anything I might be a little bit in lust but that was all—absolutely all, I told myself.

I'd forgotten all about the money aspect of our deal but apparently Jude hadn't. The next time I went to check my bank balance online my jaw dropped at the sizable chunk he'd deposited in my account. I was tempted to be offended but it was the exact amount he'd mentioned when we'd first talked so I decided to let it go. After all, if anybody was paying for sexual favors, even in a roundabout way, *I* ought to be paying *him*. In the meantime, I was grateful that the money kept me from worrying about finding a new job, at least for a while, and I concentrated on studying.

I took the Bar about a week after my first encounter with Jude and couldn't believe how easy it was. Not that the test itself was easy—the material was very difficult but I knew it all cold. And without the panic buzzing in my brain and jangling my nerves, I was able to concentrate.

At first I was worried. As soon as the test began, I felt the familiar tightness in my chest. My palms started to sweat and my breath began to catch in my throat. Before things could get too far, though, I closed my eyes and thought of Jude. Thought of his pale green eyes that turned to burning red when he wanted me, the feel of his hands and mouth on me, and most of all, the delicious *dulce de leche* taste of his blood. A warm feeling of safety and comfort enveloped me and the panic floated away, like a rain cloud going to find someone else to bother.

It was wonderful.

After the test ended I felt elated. Of course, I didn't know for sure that I'd passed—I wouldn't know for certain until the test results came in—but I was ninety-nine percent certain that I had. I wanted to celebrate, wanted to spread the good news that I was finally moving forward with my career. Crappy economy or not, there were plenty of law offices that would like to have a genuine were attorney on staff. Soon I'd be able to move out of my apartment in the dangerous part of Ybor City and find myself a neat little condo in Hyde Park or anyplace, really, where you didn't have to worry about your car getting stolen and your house broken into every night. That would be nice.

I had Jude to thank and I wished I could get him on the phone but it was still daylight outside so he was probably asleep. We hadn't talked much in the week preceding our first appointment but he'd left several thoughtful little messages on my phone, letting me know he was thinking of me and looking forward to seeing me again. It was nice the way he was interested but unobtrusive while I was busy. I was beginning to think that if he wasn't a vampire I would have felt like I'd stumbled onto the perfect man. But of course he *was* a vampire, which meant there was no use in thinking like that.

Since Jude wasn't available for at least another hour, I decided to call home. Stupid, I know, but I just felt so high, so incredibly invincible that I grabbed my phone and started dialing the moment I got out into the sunlight.

The heat of the late August afternoon actually felt good after the chilly air-conditioned courthouse where I'd taken the Bar. I felt good—confident and happy for the first time in a long time. Then my mom picked up the phone.

"Luz, how are you? We don't hear from you too often anymore," she said, after I identified myself.

"I know, Mom. I've been busy with work." It was my standard excuse and she accepted it as always—nobody really wants a non-shifter around no matter what they say. "Listen, I've got some great news," I told her. "*Wonderful* news."

"Really, you do?" There was a spark of excitement in her voice that had been lacking for years—ever since I hit puberty and failed to change with the full moon. "Did you finally make the change, sweetheart? Did you finally shift?"

Abruptly, I felt deflated. Of course I shouldn't be surprised. Where else would her mind go when I told her I had wonderful news?

"Uh, not exactly, Mom," I said, still trying to sound upbeat. "But I passed my test—the Bar exam. You know, the one I've been trying to pass for so long?"

"Oh, really? Well, that's...that's great, honey. Really great. So you got the news in the mail that you passed?"

"Well, no..." I could feel myself getting lower and lower as I spoke. Suddenly the heat from the sun, which sat on the edge of the horizon like a ball of fire, seemed oppressive again. "I just... I took it again and this time I didn't get upset. I was able to finish with no problems," I said, realizing as I did how weak the words sounded.

"Well, that's great. I'm sure you passed and you'll find out for sure real soon." Her voice was flat again, my wonderful surprise nothing more than wishful thinking.

My joy was almost gone as I trudged along the sidewalk, trying to find the lot where I'd parked my car. "Is Diego there?" I asked desperately. My little brother was the only one in my family who still treated me the same. When we were kids he'd idolized me and somehow, despite my non-shifter status, he'd never stopped. He was in his early twenties now but I was still his wonderful big sister and I knew he would be excited about my news even if nobody else at my parents' house was.

"Sure." My mom sounded relieved to get off the phone. "I'll get him."

In a moment my little brother's voice filled my ear. "Hey, *hermana*! Haven't heard from you in a wolf's age. How's it going?"

"Hey, *hermano*," I returned. Though the rest of my immediate family had somehow lost their Hispanic heritage in the ever-increasing quest to climb the social ladder, Diego had stubbornly clung to his. He'd taken Spanish all through high school and had even spent a semester abroad in Spain. Of course, the Castilian Spanish spoken there was a far cry from the fast-paced Cuban-influenced dialect more common in Tampa but Diego was fairly fluent and every time we talked he tried to teach me new words.

I decided to get right to the point. "I took the Bar exam again today," I told him, finally finding my car and slipping my key in the lock. It was like an oven inside and I winced as I jammed the key in the ignition and twisted it before turning the AC on full blast.

"Hey, cool. So how'd you do?" Diego's words were casual but I knew he was just trying to be careful of my feelings. He, more than anyone else in my family, understood my struggle during important tests.

"It went well this time." I felt my joy bubbling back to the surface. "*Really* well, in fact. I'm sure I passed."

"You did? Awesome! That's great, Luz—I knew you could do it." His immediate affirmation was like a balm to my wounded soul. I had to blink tears out of my eyes before I could back out of the parking lot.

"Thanks, little brother. That means a lot."

"Aw, don't get all mushy on me." Like most males, Diego was uncomfortable around emotional females so I made an effort to butch up.

"Sorry. It's just...nobody else understands. I've been working for this for so long."

"You sure as hell have. So what was different this time? You didn't feel nervous?"

Nervous was an understatement as anyone who's ever had a full-fledged panic attack can attest to, but I was willing to let it slide. "No, I wasn't," I told my brother. "I met someone who helped me."

"What—like a therapist?"

"Not exactly..." I hesitated. No one in my family would approve of what I had done—what I was in the process of doing, really, since I still had to see Jude again at least twice more. But I wanted so badly to share my joy that I decided to take a chance. "He's a vampire," I said and waited for a minute to let it sink in.

"A what?" Diego's voice sounded as horrified as though I'd told him I had found a friendly talking rattlesnake to help me pass the Bar.

"A vampire," I said, determined not to let his reaction throw me. "His name is Jude Jacobson. You'd like him." I said this with a little less conviction. But then again, who could help liking Jude? He was so kind and gentle and polite—well, to me anyway. Even my brother, alpha wolf that he was, would like a vampire like Jude.

But Diego was making sputtering sounds at the other end of the phone. At last I realized he was so upset he could barely get the words out. "Jude Jacobson?" he managed to spit out at last. "*The* Jude Jacobson?"

"What do you mean, *the* Jude Jacobson? How many can there be?" I demanded.

"Jude Jacobson who runs half the Tampa Bay area and has the other half in his pocket? Jude Jacobson even other vampires are afraid of because he's such a ruthless bastard?"

"That's crazy," I said dismissively, honking my horn at the guy in front of me who was stopped at a green light fumbling with his cell phone. "That must be someone else. My Jude isn't like that."

"Listen to you — *your* Jude," Diego sneered.

"Well, he's *not*." I felt put on the defensive and wished I hadn't said anything at all. "There must be two different vampire Judes because what you're describing isn't anything like him." Well, *not when he's with me, anyway*, I thought, remembering the menacing darkness I'd seen peeking out from his polite outer façade when he'd been pissed off at Banner that first night.

"Trust me, there's only one of this guy. If there were two we'd all be fucked." My little brother took a deep breath that sounded like static on my end of the line. "Big guy — six four or five? Blond hair, shoulders like a linebacker?"

"Well...yes," I said slowly. "But listen, Diego, he's a nice guy and he really helped me out."

"What — by helping you study? Showing you flashcards — that kind of shit?"

"Not exactly," I hedged.

"Then how?"

I didn't really want to say at this point but I knew Diego would never let it drop until I confessed. "I-I drank some of his blood. It helped me concentrate — kept me from getting all panicky and blowing the test. Okay?"

"No — not okay. Not okay at all. You actually drank his *blood*?" The disgust in my little brother's voice was the same as if I'd said I drank a bottle of the vampire's sweat or some other, even more unmentionable substance.

"Not a lot of it," I protested, angry at having to defend myself. "A little taste and like I said, it helped me. I'd do it again."

Diego's response was immediate. "Don't you dare! He's dangerous, Luz — you need to stay away from him. *Far* away."

"How do you know so much about him, anyway?" I snapped.

"My pack master, Julio Sanchez. He told us that this Jude Jacobson of yours got angry at the pack master over in Clear Water. He wouldn't do business with Jacobson or maybe he just looked at him wrong, I don't know. So —"

"So he doesn't get along with weres — he's a vampire, what do you expect?"

"That wasn't what I was going to say." Diego's voice dropped. "I was going to say, so they found the pack master the next night in the woods outside their hunting grounds. He'd been skinned alive and his hide was nailed to a tree."

"My God." I would have put a hand to my mouth but since I was still driving with one hand and holding my cell phone with the other, I didn't have one to spare. "Did he live?" I asked. A human wouldn't have survived such a horrible fate but shifters are tough.

"Yeah, he made it. But he might never be able to change again. He was skinned while he was in his wolf form and the hide was nailed up with pure silver—completely ruined."

I was shocked at this last twist. Weres and vampires alike can be hurt and weakened by silver—the purer the metal, the more lasting and painful the damage. Luckily for us, a lot of the more common silver around doesn't have a high enough content to do a lot of harm and only weakens us a little. But if someone—and I was sure it couldn't have been Jude—had used pure silver on the pack master's wolf hide, well... The hide is the essence of a were's other self—his or her passageway from human to wolf form. Contaminating it with silver would make it pure poison to its owner and render him unable to change.

"That's really awful," I said at last, signaling to get off I-4 onto the Ybor City exit. "But just because Jude had a disagreement with the pack master doesn't mean he's culpable for what happened afterward."

"Listen to yourself—defending a vamp. You can't trust them, Luz."

"I have good reason to trust this one," I said stubbornly.

"He's not your kind."

"And my kind has treated me so well," I said bitterly. "Look around you, Diego—there's more to life than howling at the moon once a month. You and that pack you run with—those *Los Lobos*—you're so into being super weres that you think anybody who's not like you is wrong."

"That's not true! We believe in purity of spirit and form—there's nothing wrong with that."

"There is too! I heard your pack wouldn't let people in if they weren't full-blooded weres for three generations. That if somebody so much as had a drop of non-were blood they couldn't get it."

"The membership standards are strict for a reason—" Diego began but I didn't let him finish.

"Spare me the bullshit. That pack you're in is no better than a were version of the KKK."

"Will you stop turning this around on me?" He sounded both hurt and angry. "This is about *you*, Luz. I'm telling you, stay away from that Jacobson guy. He's one dangerous *hijo de puta*. You don't want to tangle with him."

“Look, I’m home now. I have to go.” I pulled into the darkness of the parking garage that cost me an arm and a leg every month but kept my car from being stolen or stripped. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Luz—” he began again but I slapped my cell phone closed and turned it on silent. I didn’t want to hear it ring if Diego called me back. I didn’t want to listen to what he had to say. The idea of Jude, who had been so incredibly tender and gentle with me, skinning someone alive was both repulsive and ridiculous. I refused to hear any more about it, refused to hear any more nonsense about a man I was genuinely beginning to like, even if he was a vampire.

As I got out of my car and set the alarm I realized that twilight had fallen and night was rapidly approaching. The patches of sky I could see outside the concrete barricades of the parking garage were the dusky purple color of a fresh bruise.

Diego and I almost never fought and the way our conversation had ended really bothered me. Well, I would have to make it up to him later. Maybe I could take him out to lunch. I sighed and started to trudge to the nearest exit. The air was heavy and unmoving in the mostly enclosed space and the scent of exhaust and old oil pervaded it and stung my sensitive nose. Which is possibly why I didn’t smell the man who was sneaking up behind me. In fact, I wouldn’t have known anything was amiss if he hadn’t spoken at the last moment.

“Hello, Luz,” he said and then something that glimmered and burned fell over my head and shoulders and I was too busy screaming to hear anything else.

Chapter Four

“Get her! Don’t let her get away!”

Several pairs of hands grabbed me and none of them were trying to be gentle. I thrashed around, trying to break free but the silver net that covered my head and shoulders not only stung like fire but weakened me considerably. My arms felt too heavy to move but I got in a few good kicks, hoping to break some ribs, before one of my attackers wrapped a silver chain around my legs as well, rendering me immobile. My jeans protected me from the sting of the metal but not the lassitude it caused—I suddenly felt as if someone had dipped my feet in lead.

“Who are you and what do you want with me?” I demanded in a voice that was more shaky than I would have liked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” sneered one of the men. I could see him in the dim light of the parking garage—he was wearing tattered jeans and a stained T-shirt and my nose told me he hadn’t bathed in a good long time.

“Yes, I would so why don’t you tell me?” I tried to sound calm—tried to *be* calm as much as possible. If ever a situation called for a panic attack this was it but if I let the fear carry me away I might not get out of this alive.

“We don’t have to tell you shit, lady.” The other attacker came into view. He wasn’t in much better shape than his friend except he’d added to the stained and tattered clothing theme with a ball cap that said *No Fat Chicks*. *Classy*.

My nose was telling me that both of them were human, which explained their need to use silver to capture me. But where had two guys who looked like they did their shopping at the Salvation Army gotten the money for such high-silver-content items? My T-shirt and long hair mostly protected my arms and neck but even now I could feel the mesh of the net burning one of my cheeks.

“Let me go now or you’re going to be sorry. My brother is in *Los Lobos*.” Even in the human world my little brother’s pack had a reputation. Though I had been fighting with him about it earlier, now I was more than willing to use it to my advantage.

One of my attackers—the one without a hat who needed a bath—looked pale. “Oh man, they didn’t say nothing about that. That’s some bad shit, man,” he said to the *No Fat Chicks* guy.

“Only if they find out. And ain’t nobody gonna find out what happened to this little lady where we’re taking her. But first I think we oughta have some fun.”

“I dunno, man,” the really smelly one said. “I thought we weren’t s’posed to mess with her. Didn’t he say she had to be a virgin?”

"Yeah, he did. But there's more than one garage to park your car in. He wants her pussy—fine. He didn't say nothing about that tight little ass, though." No Fat Chicks leered at me and I felt my calm slipping.

God, this was so not good. I was in trouble if I couldn't get free. But the idea of them killing me didn't upset me nearly as much as the veiled threat in his voice and the leer on his face. Who had sent them? And why would whoever it was know or care that I was still a virgin?

No Fat Chicks and his unwashed friend, who I was beginning to think of as Needs a Bath, carried me around to one end of the garage and placed me between a concrete barrier and someone's ridiculously large Hummer. I tried to wiggle away but the silver made me too weak. I wondered if I was getting silver poisoning—which is similar to mercury poisoning for humans—from the part of the net that was still brushing against my cheek. The burning had almost stopped and all I felt was a numb kind of ache and the beginnings of a throbbing headache.

"Now we got some privacy." No Fat Chicks was already working on the button of my jeans. Panic was clawing at my throat but I made a desperate effort to keep my voice calm.

"You'll have to unchain my legs to do that. And I guarantee the minute you do you're losing your balls."

"Oh, don't worry about that, girly. We can do it doggie style." He flipped me over on my stomach and stripped down my jeans and panties, baring my ass.

"Doggie style—that's a good one. Fuck the werewolf cunt doggie style," chortled Needs a Bath.

Rough fingers grabbed at my thighs, seeking to pry them apart and now I could feel the panic taking me. It was so much like before—the feeling of helplessness, of inevitability. Knowing that no matter what I did I couldn't save myself from this horror...

I opened my mouth to scream but suddenly the hands on my body disappeared. I looked up at Needs a Bath and saw that his face had gone as pale as a dirty sheet. "What the hell?" he muttered and then there was a choked gurgling sound behind me and his face was suddenly spattered with crimson. The coppery smell that permeated the air around me let me know what it was—blood. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to have any more problems with No Fat Chicks but I needed to be certain.

Rolling over while I was draped in silver was a considerable effort but the adrenaline that still flooded my system helped me. What I saw when I finally managed the effort both surprised and frightened me.

Jude was standing there, wearing jeans and a black leather jacket that emphasized the width of his shoulders. But it wasn't his wardrobe I was concerned with. His fangs were out and his mouth was covered in blood. His eyes pulsed red rage in the darkness.

Hanging limply from his hand was what was left of No Fat Chicks. His head seemed to be at a very strange angle to his body and at first I couldn't understand what

my eyes were seeing. Then everything came together and I saw that it was barely attached and only hanging on by a thin strip of bloody flesh. His body was still shaking spasmodically like a chicken that has just been to the butcher's block but the blood that had spattered my other attacker—and probably me too although I was too numb to feel it—was flowing more weakly now, trickling over Jude's hand to patter on the dirty concrete like red raindrops.

"Holy shit!" Needs a Bath had finally found his voice. "Look, man, I swear, I didn't touch her."

"I know. That's why you're still alive." Jude's deep voice was ice cold and if he was feeling anything at all about what he'd done, you certainly couldn't see it in his face. Well, except for the glowing red eyes. For the first time I wondered if that was normal for vampires. I had never heard that their eyes changed colors according to their emotions but what did I know?

"Please...please don't do me like you done Bill," Needs a Bath whimpered. "Please, I swear to God—I won't never come near her again. We didn't know when they paid us to take her that she belonged to somebody like you."

I wanted to ask who had hired them but I was too frightened to open my mouth.

Jude looked at the other attacker. "Leave. Tell the ones who hired you that Luz Velez is *mine*. Anyone who threatens her risks the same fate as this one." He shook the body and the No Fat Chicks ball cap, which had somehow managed to stay on even though the owner's head had come off, finally flopped to the floor in the growing puddle of blood.

Needs a Bath scrambled to his feet and my nose told me he had a new reason to pay better attention to his personal hygiene. Sure enough, when he stumbled past me I saw a dark patch on his already stained pants. The sharp reek of urine competed with the heavy tang of blood in the air, making my stomach roll. I leaned to one side, retching. I never eat before a test so there was nothing to come up but my body was determined to try anyway and I was helpless to stop it.

"Luz. Wait a moment." There was a blur where Jude had been and he disappeared for probably five seconds while I did my best to cough up a lung. Then he was back, sans body, and kneeling in front of me.

As my nausea finally subsided, he pulled the silver net off me and threw it to one side. Then he unwound the silver chain from around my legs, wincing as he did so like a man touching a hot skillet. When I was free, he held out a hand to help me up.

It was covered in blood.

I'd been numb when I first saw Jude standing there with a bloody body in his hands but now the panic came back full force. I felt my lungs tightening up, my airway constricting as I struggled to get a deep breath. I was dizzy and sweating bullets, my palms clammy and my heart racing so fast it felt as if it were trying to pound its way out of my chest with a sledgehammer.

"No-no, don't touch me!" I scrambled to my feet, yanking up my jeans, which were still somewhere down around my thighs. All I could think was that Diego had been right—Jude was a monster, capable of anything. Don't get me wrong, weres aren't exactly the most peaceful types and sometimes pack justice can be enough to turn your hair white. But I had never seen anything so brutal, so *final* as the dead body dangling from Jude's hand.

"Luz, please." His eyes had stopped glowing. They were back to their normal pale green and they were filled with concern.

"You...I..." I couldn't get the words out. "You killed him."

"He was hurting you." He said the words simply, as though they explained everything.

"Can't breathe." I sank down beside the back bumper of the Hummer. My head was spinning and black spots were dancing before my eyes.

"Luz..."

But I didn't hear whatever else it was he said because at that point I fainted.

I had a strange dream while I was out. Someone was telling me I had to invite them in. I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to see my crappy apartment but they seemed very insistent about it and kept asking. Finally I slurred, "Come in," and blacked out again.

When I woke up the second time I was lying on my own bed, covered by the fuzzy pink and blue afghan my grandmother had knitted for me when I was eight. I still felt dizzy and shaky but the panic had passed and I took a deep breath, gratefully filling my lungs with air.

What happened? I sat up slowly, noting that my cheek hurt as though I'd burned myself with a curling iron. I started to get out of bed and go look at myself in the mirror when I saw that the bathroom door was closed and there were puffs of steam coming out from under it. Someone was in my apartment taking a shower in my bathroom.

Jude. When I thought his name, it all came rushing back. The attack, the intended rape and the very final way the vampire had resolved the situation. The panic wanted to come back too but I took a deep breath and held it off grimly. I can't always do that—not in the heat of the moment. But this time I did. Closing my eyes, I counted backward from a hundred, thinking of absolutely nothing but the numbers until I stopped feeling so shaky. *Over now. It's over now,* I told myself. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

Just as the panicky feeling was passing, the bathroom door opened and Jude stepped out. He was shirtless, wearing only a pair of faded jeans that had a few dark red spots around the knees, now drying to brown. His blond hair was slicked back from his forehead and there were water droplets clinging to his broad shoulders and muscular chest. He looked like a fantasy straight out of *Playgirl* and in any other

circumstances my mouth would have been watering. But now my eyes kept returning to those drying reddish-brown spots on his jeans.

"I hope you don't mind. My shirt and jacket will have to be cleaned before they're wearable again." He lifted the low armchair I had in the corner of my bedroom and placed it beside the bed before sitting down. "Are you all right?"

"I...don't know." I looked at him uncertainly. "I don't...exactly know how to feel about you now."

"The same way you felt before, I hope." He was sitting relaxed in the chair, one long leg crossed over the other at the ankle as though we were talking about the weather.

"But..." I shook my head, trying to get my thoughts in order. "But you *killed* him."

"And I would do it again." His tone was absolutely calm. "I am sorry you had to see it, though," he added. "Maybe I should have taken him elsewhere first. But when I saw him touching you..." His eyes glinted red for a split second and then he shook his head and they went back to normal. "Anyway, I am sorry if it upset you."

"But not sorry you did it," I said flatly.

He shrugged, his broad, bare shoulders moving gracefully. "Why should I be?"

"My brother warned me about you," I said, pulling the afghan up to my chin. "He said you were ruthless. That even other vampires are afraid of you."

He arched one blond eyebrow. "Luz, *all* vampires are ruthless. The reason my own kind avoid me is something else entirely."

"Why then?" I asked, not even sure I wanted to know.

He shrugged again. "It's not important. I have...a disability. Something like your own condition."

He didn't seem inclined to say any more about it and I supposed I couldn't blame him. I wouldn't have wanted to explain ad nauseam to someone who didn't know about my inability to shift with the moon, either.

I thought of something else. "Diego—my brother—he said you skinned someone—a were—alive. That's not true, is it?" I really, *really* didn't want it to be true.

Jude's face was suddenly closed. "I always have a reason for everything I do."

"So you actually *did* that?" I couldn't believe it, even after what I'd seen him do. I had seen the darkness in him before but then it was just winking at me—now it was out in the open. Killing my attacker had been a spur of the moment kind of thing. But to skin someone alive...that took a cold heart and a steady hand. That took a monster.

"I did it, yes. But I will not discuss it with you now."

I closed my eyes, willing myself not to imagine what he was admitting. "You don't seem like someone who could do something like that. Or you didn't...before tonight."

Jude was silent and I realized he really wasn't going to talk to me about it.

"Well, who were those men? What did they want with me?" I asked, changing the subject because I couldn't bear to think about it anymore. "They seemed to have been hired. Who would hire them to come after me like that?"

Jude shook his head, a thoughtful look on his face.

I took a deep breath. "I think whoever hired them must have been a were."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because..." I bit my lip, looking down. "They, when they were talking one of them said something about me being a...being a virgin. Only another were—one I knew—would know that."

Jude frowned. "How would they know?"

"There's a chemical shift—a change that occurs in a were female's scent the first time she has sex. It's caused by...by the male's seed when he..."

"When he comes in her?" Jude finished for me.

I nodded, blushing. Despite the things we'd done together the last time I had seen him, I was still embarrassed talking about sex. I guess that's what twenty-seven years of virginity will do for you.

"So someone who knows you're a virgin—someone you know because they know your scent—"

"Yes—they hired those two guys to come after me. But why?"

He looked grim. "I don't know but I am going to find out. In the meantime, I don't want you to worry about it anymore. This is all going to be taken care of."

"How will you take care of it?" I demanded. "By hunting them down and killing them?"

"If I have to."

"Jude..." I shook my head. It was no use. He would do what he wanted and I didn't want to think about it. "Why were you here, anyway?" I asked. "I mean, you...you haven't been following me, have you?"

He laughed. "You seem to think I have unlimited personal time to do whatever I want. Actually I have a business to attend to. But tonight I wanted to see you—to hear if you had good news. Did you pass?"

I knew he was changing the subject, knew I should hold on to my fear and frustration and not give in to the easy way he had of drawing me into conversation. But somehow I just couldn't help myself.

"I'm pretty sure I did." I sat up straighter on the bed, letting the afghan drop a little. "At first I could feel myself getting panicky but I did what you said—closed my eyes and remembered how I felt when I took your blood. And it worked."

"I'm very happy for you. I was a little concerned that maybe the blood would have worn off early if you were too anxious. In fact, I almost called and offered to give you more last night."

"I was pretty busy cramming," I said, trying not to remember what our last blood exchange had entailed. I wouldn't have gotten a lick of studying done if he had come over—I could guarantee that.

Jude nodded. "I thought as much. Which is why I decided not to bother you."

"Well...I'm glad you were here tonight," I said, feeling suddenly ungrateful after the way I had accused and interrogated him. "You saved me. They were going to...going to..." It all came rushing back and I had to look down at my clenched hands and concentrate on breathing.

"I know what they were going to do." Jude was suddenly sitting beside me on the bed though I hadn't even seen him get up. Shifters are fast but vamps can practically move at the speed of light.

"Jude..." I looked at him fearfully but he only stroked a strand of hair away from my face and didn't try to touch me any more than that.

"No one will take you against your will. I promise you that, Luz."

"Including you?"

"Including me." His thumb brushed over the sore spot on my cheek and I winced. "You should let me tend that for you."

I put my hand to my face. "I was going to look at it before you came out of the bathroom. Is it bad?"

"As silver burns go I have seen worse. But it looks painful."

I got off the bed and went over to the mirror that hung above my dresser. The burn looked more than painful—it was disfiguring. My right cheek was crisscrossed with a hatch mark of thin red lines that were tender to touch—it looked like I had fallen asleep on a waffle iron.

I bit my lower lip, trying not to cry. "Shit. That's going to leave a scar." Shifters can heal most any wound but one inflicted with silver.

"It doesn't have to." Jude was suddenly behind me. In the mirror we looked as different as night and day—I with my big dark eyes and cloud of curly dark hair and him so tall and blond and brooding.

"How do you mean?" I examined my cheek again. "You can't heal silver burns. At least, weres can't. I don't know about you vamps."

"My blood can heal almost any harm. Even silver burns."

I looked down at the dresser, tracing the shapes of my jewelry box and hairbrush with my eyes. "I don't know about that, Jude. I know we had a deal but...but I don't know how I feel about taking your blood again. Or giving you mine."

He was quiet for a minute. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

"It's just..." I looked up, meeting his eyes in the mirror. "It's such a...such an intimate experience. And...I don't feel like you're who I thought you were when we first agreed to all this."

"Did I deny my nature to you? Did I tell you I was perfect?" He kept his tone light but his eyes were shadowed.

"No, never," I said. "But you...you were so understanding. So gentle. When you touched me, I mean. And I thought..."

"You thought hands that touched you so tenderly could never do violence." He turned me to face him and his fingertips trailed lightly over my unburned cheek. "I am a creature of violence, Luz—that is what it means to be a vampire. But that doesn't mean I have no gentleness in me."

"I'm a were," I countered. "You don't see me killing people—although I *am* grateful that you saved me. But still."

"You don't need blood to survive. It's different for us."

"I guess so." I sighed painfully. "What I'm trying to say is that, well, maybe you should leave. I need time alone. Time to think."

Jude frowned. "If you were anyone else I would remind you that we made a deal."

My temper flared. "We didn't sign any contracts, Jude. And if you want your money back I'll be more than happy to give you a refund. Or you could just take what you want by force."

His eyes flashed. "You know I won't do that."

"Then you'll have to wait and give me some space. What I saw tonight...what I learned about you... I'm not going to say it was a deal breaker. But it was close. I'm sorry."

"I am sorry, too." He ran a hand through his hair—a very human gesture of frustration, I thought. "Will you at least consider another blood exchange? It would mean a great deal to me."

"I'll think about it."

"Think about it, then." He lifted my chin, looking into my eyes. "Think about the pleasure it brings us both. It's not always like that you know, Luz. What we felt when you fed from me and I from you was special—unique."

"I wouldn't know about that." I could feel heated blood rushing to my face and I tried to look away.

Jude searched my eyes a moment more before dropping his hand and releasing my chin. "I know you wouldn't," he murmured.

Released from the spell of his eyes, I walked out of the bedroom, heading for the small living area of my apartment. Jude followed me. Good, that was the idea. I knew why I wanted him to leave so badly—it was because the longer he was with me, the more inclined I felt to just forget all the horrible things I'd learned about him and drag him to bed. I kept thinking of how good his mouth and hands had felt on me last time. How he'd tasted me and touched me until I came and came.

My body longed for his touch again like it was a drug and I didn't like feeling that way—dependent, needy, helpless.

Jude put his hand on the doorknob, looking as though he was about to leave. Instead, he turned to me and put his hands on my shoulders. “*There is another way.*”

Chapter Five

I looked at him blankly. "Another way to do what?"

"To heal you."

I frowned. "Without giving me your blood?"

"Yes. The same healing chemicals that are abundant in my blood are also in my other body fluids—my saliva," he said, obviously seeing my incredulous look.

"So you want to what—lick my face?"

"You're beautiful, Luz, but this scar will mark you for life. Please, let me heal you." His fingertips brushed featherlight over my wounded cheek.

I bit my lip to keep a moan from escaping me. The way he was looking at me made me feel like melting, made me feel like giving him anything he asked for. And really, where was the harm? After all, I didn't *want* to go around with an ugly scar the rest of my life and if Jude could heal me without doing anything more...intimate than licking my face a few times, then maybe I should let him.

"All right," I whispered at last. "But just...please, be careful."

"Of course," he breathed. "I'll never hurt you, Luz." And then his mouth was on my cheek, warm and wet and incredibly gentle.

I closed my eyes and this time I couldn't stop the moan that rose to my lips. The way he was kissing my cheek, licking carefully, tracing each separate line of the silver burn scar, reminded me of how he'd tasted my pussy. My fingers rose to his broad, bare shoulders—his skin was like warm satin under my finger tips and his scent filled my senses like an exotic spice.

My cheek tingled but that wasn't the part of my body that consumed my attention now. I was liquid from the waist down, my legs trembling and my heart drumming against my ribs and all because he was close to me, touching me, tasting me. God, I wanted him!

"You're so beautiful," he murmured and somehow his mouth found its way from my cheek to my lips and he was kissing me.

I'm ashamed to admit I kissed him back. Everything I'd seen, everything I'd learned about him, was burned away like trash thrown into a fire. All I could see, all I could feel, was his big, hard body pressed against mine, his skin under my fingertips, his hands stroking up and down my sides, almost but not quite touching my breasts. The tips of his fangs grazed my tongue but despite the intensity of the kiss he didn't draw blood. Not that I would have minded much at that point.

At last he pulled away. "You're healed," he murmured, tracing my cheek, which still tingled faintly. "Not a mark on you."

"Th-thank you." I could barely get the words out.

"You're welcome." Jude pushed me against the wall and locked his gaze with mine, not letting me look away. "I want to taste you." His voice was a low growl. "I want to lick you and suck you until you come for me."

I felt my breath catch in my throat. "I-I don't know if that's a good idea."

"*Fuck* good ideas. I want you."

It was the first time I'd heard him really curse and for some reason the dirty word turned me on even more. I could barely breathe I wanted him so much.

"All right but...but no biting."

"No biting," he agreed. Then he knelt in front of me and started stripping away my jeans and underwear. It was the second time that night a man had done that and somewhere in my frazzled mind it occurred to me that this should make me upset—should cause some kind of a flashback. But the circumstances were so different—I wasn't lying facedown on dirty concrete for one and for another, despite his urgency, Jude was being gentle.

He got my jeans and panties pulled all the way down and I kicked them off along with the little white tennis shoes I'd been wearing all this time. Then, naked from the waist down, I watched as he nuzzled his face against my stomach.

"So good...you smell so good, Luz." The words were almost a groan. "You have no idea how much I want you. Spread yourself for me."

Trembling, I tried to do as he asked but Jude wasn't satisfied with the results. He repositioned me with one leg over his broad shoulder, my back still flat against the wall for support. His big hands were under my buttocks, holding me in place as he pressed his face between my legs.

I gasped out loud when his tongue parted the swollen folds of my pussy with one long, slow stroke from top to bottom.

Jude looked up, his mouth already shiny with my juices. "Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head. "No, I just...it feels so good."

His eyes were hooded. "I love to make you feel good." He lowered his head and licked me again and then again. "You're so wet and hot. I could come just from tasting you."

"God, oh, *God!*" I moaned as he covered my pussy with his mouth, sucking and licking and pressing his tongue inside me with hard, rhythmic thrusts. I had no idea how he kept from cutting me with his fangs—I could feel them pressing against the sensitive flesh on either side of my clit—but somehow he avoided bloodshed. But the two little sharp points of pain seemed to magnify my pleasure and suddenly, though it seemed he had barely begun, I was right on the edge.

Jude seemed to sense it because he lifted my other leg and put it over his other shoulder. Then he pressed me into the wall, his hands cradling and supporting me as he

sucked my clit into his mouth and swirled it with his tongue, over and over teasing and tasting until I couldn't stand it anymore.

"God, Jude...please!" I buried my hands in his thick blond hair and pushed forward, grinding against his face shamelessly. It felt so good, so *right*. I couldn't get enough of him, of the feel of his mouth on me. And then I was coming, shattering into a million pieces as he took me where I needed so badly to go.

For the moment I was too sensitive to stand much more. Jude took the hint and pulled back when I twitched away from his seeking tongue. He lowered my legs from his shoulders and locked them around his waist instead. Then, lifting me easily, he carried me over to my worn green couch and settled onto it with me in his lap.

"You're all out of breath, Luz," he murmured, smiling at me. "And I thought I was doing the hard work."

"Hard work, huh?" I grinned at him. "Are you saying I'm too heavy to lift?"

He laughed. "You are as light as feather. And it's work I would be happy to do every day."

"I don't know about that. You'd wear me out."

Jude looked thoughtful. "I doubt it. But I would certainly have a long, pleasurable time trying to." He stroked my hair and drew my face closer to his. "I would like to kiss you again. Do you mind?"

I understood that he was asking if I minded him kissing me when his mouth was still wet with my juices. For some reason, the idea turned me on all over again and I shook my head, trying not to seem too eager. "No, it's okay. I don't mind."

"Good." Jude cupped my cheek and leaned closer, pressing his lips lightly to mine. It was much the same way he'd kissed me earlier with one difference.

"God." I pulled back, looking at him. "I can taste myself on you."

He smiled. "Didn't I tell you? You're delicious."

This time when he leaned forward and took my mouth again, I pressed into the kiss, seeking my taste on his lips and tongue. It was sweet and salty and good and I couldn't believe how deliciously erotic the flavor of my own juices were on his sensual mouth.

By the time I had cleaned his lips and jaw thoroughly with my tongue, I could feel my desire building again. "More," I whispered hungrily. "I want more."

"I'll give you more." One of his large hands disappeared between my legs and I looked down to see him stroking along the heated surface of my inner pussy, spreading my lips and diving deep to gather my juices. I moaned and Jude thrust into me briefly with two long, strong fingers before raising them to my face and painting my lips with my own honey.

I moaned at the strangely erotic act and then he was kissing me once more, sharing the taste of me all over again, making me so hot I could barely breathe. God, could you come from kissing? I was beginning to wonder. And then Jude clamped down on my

hips and pulled me lower until I felt the hard ridge of his cock under the faded jeans he wore. The thick length of him spread me, opening my pussy lips and grinding against my sensitive clit in just the right way.

I was already right on the edge again and the gentle but urgent rocking rhythm he quickly established pushed me closer and closer. I moaned into his mouth, feeling myself build to a peak for second time that night.

Jude never stopped kissing me. He just kept pressing up, rolling his hips in that wonderful rhythm and I knew if the worn jeans hadn't been between us he would have been inside me, filling me completely.

"Jude...Jude." I couldn't stop moaning his name and he swallowed my cries eagerly as he pumped against me. Then he stopped kissing me and pulled me close so that my forehead rested against his own.

"Just like this," he murmured hoarsely. "Look into my eyes when you come. I want to watch you come apart completely, Luz."

I looked into his eyes, which were pale green one minute and burning red the next. But I was too far gone to worry about that. I was falling over the brink of orgasm again, feeling a warm wave of pleasure envelop me as Jude held me close and pushed me over the edge at the same time until at last, I collapsed, panting in his arms.

It took a while to catch my breath but when I did, I looked up to see Jude watching me with an unreadable expression on his face. When he saw me looking at him, he smiled.

"What are you thinking?"

"That you're too damn tempting," I told him. "I should have kicked you out earlier."

"But then I would have missed the pleasure of making you come."

"And I would have missed the pleasure of coming." I blushed when I said it. "Sorry, I guess I'm not used to, um, talking about it yet."

"But that's half the fun—dirty talk, I mean. Like this." Jude pulled me forward and whispered in my ear. "I loved tasting your sweet pussy, Luz. If you'd let me, I could go down on you for hours."

"You seem to be pretty good at it." I pulled back from him, still blushing. "The dirty talk, I mean. But the other thing, too," I added hastily as my cheeks got even hotter. "The, uh...oh, hell. I guess I should put my pants back on."

Jude arched an eyebrow. "Or take your shirt off. Either way you'd match."

"Ha-ha." I started to slide off his lap and then realized that I had left a large, damp spot on his jeans. I was instantly mortified. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

Jude's gaze followed my own. "Don't be. That isn't all yours."

"Oh, you mean..."

"Mm-hmm." He nodded. "I'm afraid it wasn't very restrained of me but when you were writhing all over my lap..."

"I wasn't writhing," I objected. "I was just...rocking a little. *You* were the one pressing up against *me*."

"And it was my very great pleasure to do so. As you can see." He nodded at his jeans again and I laughed. God, we'd just rubbed off against each other like a pair of horny teenagers! It was ridiculous and hot and ridiculously hot all at the same time.

Jude laughed with me, a low rumble that came from deep in his chest and shook me as I sat in his lap. The shared laughter made me feel closer to him, even closer than the orgasms he'd given me. At that moment I knew he wasn't a monster—he couldn't be. No one with a laugh that warm and a touch that gentle could be anything but good.

At last our laughter tapered off and I went looking for my jeans. I pulled them on self-consciously with my back to Jude. When I turned to face him, I saw that he was standing, apparently ready to go.

"You're leaving now?" I was surprised.

He nodded. "Business to attend to. And I thought you needed space?"

"I do...did, I guess. That was before. But I guess I thought..." I shrugged. "I guess I thought you'd want to do the blood exchange after all. I mean, after what we just did."

Jude looked at me seriously. "One intimacy doesn't necessarily mean another is inevitable. You said you needed time to think before we exchanged blood again—I want to give you that time, Luz."

"That's...very nice of you." I crossed my arms over my chest. "You're being very patient with me. I don't have much experience but most guys wouldn't want to wait."

"Most 'guys', as you put it, are impatient fools. But don't be deceived by my apparent goodness. Everything I do is done with a selfish reason."

I frowned. "Selfish how?"

"I want you, Luz. All of you." His voice dropped into a lower register. "And I'm selfish and patient enough not to do anything to jeopardize my chances of having you."

My breath caught in my throat. "Jude, I don't know if we should talk about anything long term. I mean, you're still a vamp and I'm still a were and I'm pretty sure my family—"

"Your family is important to you," he said and it wasn't a question.

"Well, yes and no. I don't see them a whole lot because as a non-shifter I'm pretty much excluded from pack life. But still, my little brother..."

He raised an eyebrow. "The one who warned you about me?"

"Yes. But he only warned me because he worries about me. And because he doesn't know you like I do."

Jude smiled and tilted my chin up for a soft, slow kiss that took my breath away. "No one knows me as you do, Luz," he murmured. "And now I need to go. I must finish the business I started earlier."

With a start, I realized he was talking about the dead body in the parking garage. It kind of put a damper on our goodbye but I reminded myself that he had done it for me. As for the other things, the things Diego had warned me about, well, I would worry about them later.

"All right." I crossed my arms over my breasts protectively as a new thought occurred to me. "Do...do you think that whoever sent those two will send anyone else?" The thought made me cold to the bone but Jude only shook his head.

"Don't worry about that. I promise you that everything will be taken care of."

I didn't like to think what his version of "taking care" of things might be. "You...you're not *really* going to kill anyone or anything like that, are you?"

His eyes glowed red briefly. "I will do whatever is necessary to assure your safety."

"Jude, please, I don't want you doing any more violence for me—I don't want it on my conscience."

"Then don't ask me about it." He sighed. "I promise I will try to spare life instead of taking it as much as possible. Does that make you happy?"

"I guess so." It seemed like the best deal I was going to get from him but I still felt like I was dating a hit man. But wait, were we even dating? I didn't know what we were doing anymore, only that our business arrangement had somehow turned into the best (and only) sex of my life.

"Goodbye, beautiful one. Call me when you're ready to let me drink from you again. Or to drink from me." Jude gave me one last smile that showed more than a hint of fang and then he was gone, moving too fast for me to see.

Chapter Six

"So I figure a week is long enough to stay mad at each other," Diego began the minute I picked up the phone.

"Hey, *hermano*," I said, smiling. I was glad to hear from him but I have to confess, I'd been hoping it was Jude on the other end of the line. He'd been giving me space in the last week, just as he had promised. Only I found that the longer I stayed away from him the more I missed him. Still, I was determined not to rush into anything so I'd kept myself from calling even though my fingers itched to dial his number and set up another business meeting or date, whichever you wanted to call it.

"I don't like fighting with you and I'm worried about you, Luz." Diego is always pretty direct—I guess you could call it a family trait since most weres don't waste time beating around the bush.

"You don't have to be worried about me. I'm fine. Actually, I'm bored stiff," I said, not quite truthfully. To be honest, I had been pretty damn jumpy since the attempted abduction the night after the Bar exam. The only thing that kept me from leaving town was that I trusted Jude to take care of things as he had promised—I just didn't like to think how he was doing it.

"Bored, huh?" Diego said, breaking my train of thought.

"Yeah. I didn't get a chance to tell you last time but I, ah, quit my job. To study, you know? So now that the Bar exam is over, I have nothing to do." Nothing to do but think about Jude, that was, but I wasn't going to go into that with Diego.

"Hasn't your bloodsucking boyfriend been keeping you busy?" He was half teasing, half angry, I could tell.

"Nope. Haven't seen him in a really long time," I said, stretching the truth a little. "But I'd love to see *you*. How about lunch at JoTo?"

"Oh man, that sounds *great*. Uh..." His voice dropped a little, letting me know he was probably hanging out with some of his tough pack mates from *Los Lobos*. "Can we get a hazelnut mocha gelato for dessert?"

"Absolutely. On me."

"No way, Luz—you just told me you don't have a job right now."

"I'm okay though. I saved up some money." I felt guilty saying it—Diego and I had always been really truthful with each other in the past. But I just couldn't face the argument we'd have if he learned the money I had "saved" was originally from Jude.

"I'll meet you at one then." Diego sounded like he was looking forward to it.

"See you then. Hey, little brother—I love you." When he hesitated I said, "Come on—say it."

"Aw, Luz—I'm with the guys here." His voice dropped again. "I love you, okay? You happy now I look like a *maricón* in front of my boys?"

"Very happy." I laughed and blew a kiss into the phone. "See you at one. And you can tell the guys we're going for a big, manly steak if it makes you feel better. Better not mention the gelato, though."

"Yeah, yeah." He hung up laughing and I smiled, happy to be on good terms with him again, even if I'd had to lie a little to do it.

JoTo is a swanky little sushi spot in South Tampa that I'd gotten hooked on in college. Since Diego always liked to tag along with me, I had gotten him hooked too and now his favorite food in the world was the JoTo geisha roll with extra pickled ginger and eel sauce—not that he would ever tell his über-masculine pack mates that.

When I got there, he was already seated at a table but he hopped up to give me a big bear hug as soon as he saw me. Diego is short as guys go, only about five seven or so, but he makes up for it by being very muscular. When he hugged me, I made choking noises, pretending I couldn't breathe.

"Ugh," I gasped, when he let me go. "For a minute there I felt like I was being smothered by a muscle blanket."

He laughed and flexed a biceps. "Yeah, get your tickets to the gun show here, baby."

I rolled my eyes and sat down beside him at the spindly little table. There was a delicate pink ornamental orchid growing in a little pot right beside the stack of tiny soy sauce bowls by his elbow. I couldn't help reflecting that Diego, with his muscles and pack tattoos, looked completely out of place in the dainty setting. But he seemed oblivious and was already happily perusing the sushi menu, looking for a new roll to try along with his usual geisha.

"So how's it going with the pack lately?" I asked, after the waitress came and took our orders and sushi menus, giving Diego doubtful looks the whole time. I was hoping to get the conversation started on his business and keep him out of my own.

"Oh, you mean the were version of the KKK?"

"Come on, Diego—I was angry when I said that. Let it go and I'll let the things you said go. What do you say?"

He sighed. "All right. But only because you're my favorite sister."

"Gee thanks. I'll be sure to tell Essie she comes in second place." Essie, short for Esperanza, was my perfect older sister and the only other girl besides me in a family full of boys. Why our parents chose such Hispanic-sounding names for all of us when they didn't seem to give a crap for the culture otherwise was a mystery, but I was glad I'd gotten a relatively short and easy one.

"I'll tell her myself." Diego frowned. "You should see her. Now that Frank is up for pack master she thinks she's the Queen of Sheba or some shit. Them and their perfect kids – makes me sick, ya know?"

Now here was news I was genuinely interested in. "The pack mastership is up for grabs?" I meant my family's home pack, not *Los Lobos*, the pack Diego ran with.

He nodded and took a sip of his pink lady, another favorite he'd picked up from me. "Uh-huh. And about time. They've had the same leader for...how long now?"

"Fourteen years," I said automatically. That was exactly how long it had been since I had last visited the hunting grounds of my family's home pack. Exactly how long it had been since that fateful night when James Engle had ascended as pack master and I'd first failed to change. It was burned into my brain like a brand. *Don't think about it!* I pushed the bad memory aside quickly. "So, uh, what happened to what's-his-name? The current pack master?" I said, trying to sound casual.

"Who, Engle? He's still around but not for long. Decided to step down voluntarily and retire to Miami. Of course, everybody thinks it's 'cause he's too much of a pussy to fight if another wolf challenges him. Fucking *mariposa*."

"Keep your voice down," I murmured. Two well-dressed South Tampa ladies who lunch were sitting at the table beside us, scarfing down sushi they would probably purge later. They were already eyeing Diego with distaste and his colorful language wasn't helping any.

"Sorry." Diego gave them a little wave, displaying the LOVE and HATE tattoos on his fingers, which nearly made them choke on their volcano roll. "Anyway," he continued, turning back to me. "Engle is all 'I want to choose my successor for the good of the pack'. But first, of course, he's taking this all-expenses-paid trip to Hawaii. Said he needs time to consider the candidates in a clean environment. Like Hawaii is so much cleaner than Tampa."

"It might be, you don't know," I pointed out, but I was running on autopilot. An idea had popped into my brain—one that held a scary kind of appeal. And if the pack master really was going to be gone it just might work.

"Hell, Luz, that's not the point," Diego complained. "The point is, it's the other pack members, like Mom and Dad, who are funding his little vacation. Of course Frank and Essie are all supportive because they think Engle is gonna pick Frank hands down, but a lot of people are pissed."

"I'm sure they are," I said absently. "So you're sure he'll be gone this coming full moon? He'll be in Hawaii?" There was no way in hell I would go anywhere near James Engle for the rest of my life. But if he was really going to be gone then maybe I could reclaim part of my heritage. A part that I had thought I'd lost forever fourteen years before.

"He'll be in a five-star hotel in Honolulu," Diego said. "That's why they're having a scaled-down hunt this month. Essie wants me to run with them instead of the *Lobos* since Frank is acting as temporary pack master while Engle's gone."

"Are you going to?" I asked, toying with the iced tea the waitress brought me along with Diego's second pink lady.

He shrugged, making his tattooed arms ripple. "I might. Dad is putting on the pressure, saying how important it is to show Frank support and how great it would be to have a pack master in the family. Mom and Dad always did care more about pack status than anything else – you know?"

"I know." I swallowed a lump that wanted to rise in my throat. God, how I knew. My parents would do anything for pack status. Anything at all. Even... I pushed it away. If Engle really was stepping down and moving on, then I had a unique opportunity. I cleared my throat. "Maybe I'll come out to the hunting grounds this full moon, too."

"You will?" Diego gave me a blank look. "Uh, no offense, Luz, but what are you gonna do there if you do?"

I took a sip of tea. "It's been a long time. Maybe I should try again."

He frowned. "You think that's a good idea? I mean, it's kinda public, Luz. Maybe you should just try in private this time and if it doesn't work..." He trailed off, shrugging.

"No." I shook my head. "I think I should come to the hunting grounds. I think I can do it this time – I think I'll be able to shift."

Diego covered my hand with his. "C'mon, Luz – you know how you get when you try. You can't breathe and you get all shaky. It scares the *shit* out of me." Diego had gone with me several times during the full moon when I'd attempted to shift and needed some moral support. We always picked a private spot, which was a good thing because the result was always a massive panic attack on my part.

"It won't be like that this time," I said stubbornly, trying to convince him as much as myself. "I'll be able to control it. I'll be calm."

"And how are you going to manage that?" He gave me a suspicious look.

"The same way I passed the Bar exam." I tried to sound nonchalant.

"What – by taking blood from that goddamn vampire? Hell no!" Diego was practically yelling and the ladies who lunch both shot him looks that could kill before getting up and taking their half-eaten sushi to another table that was across the restaurant.

"Keep your voice down!" I said again. "And stop judging. Jude is a really nice guy. And let me tell you something – he saved me from being kidnapped and you don't want to know what else last week."

"He what? Who almost kidnapped you? What happened?"

I sighed. I hadn't meant to let that particular cat out of the bag, especially knowing how protective my little brother could be. Running with *Los Lobos* had enhanced his alpha-male tendencies to truly annoying levels.

"Okay, I'll tell you but only if you *swear* not to tell Mom and Dad." Taking a deep breath, I gave Diego a highly edited version of my near abduction in which Jude frightened away my attackers instead of ripping one of their heads off and, of course, leaving out the incredibly sexual "healing" he'd done for me afterward.

I also failed to mention the fact that my would-be kidnappers had talked about the value of my virginity to whoever had hired them. Diego, being a were, knew I was still a virgin just by the fact that my scent had never changed. But my lack of a sex life wasn't exactly a standard topic of conversation between us. I mean, we're close but you have to draw the line *somewhere*.

Despite the way I'd downplayed what had happened, my little brother was highly pissed. First he wanted to know why I hadn't called him immediately. Then, why hadn't I gone to the police—which is always a second choice for shifters after pack justice. However, if humans are involved in an altercation it's standard policy to call the boys in blue rather than just shredding the human in question to bits. Hey, they may be weaker than us but they outnumber us about a thousand to one so we have to live by their rules—mostly, anyway.

I fielded Diego's questions as well as I could but when he started saying I should move out of my apartment and come back home to my parents' house, I put my foot down.

"No, no, and *hell* no," I said, taking a bite of my spider roll the waitress had deposited quietly on the table while we fought. "I couldn't wait to get out of there and I'm not going back under any circumstances." I'd had some damn good reasons for wanting to get out of the house as a kid and I was in no hurry to go back now as an adult.

Diego glared at me. "Pack law says Dad could have you declared a female in danger and *make* you come back. Hell, as a male in your family, *I* could do it."

"Don't you dare." I leaned forward, pointing my chopsticks in his face. "You do that to me and I swear to God, Diego, I will *never* forgive you."

"What's the big deal? It's a safe place and it's family. I bet Mom and Dad would be glad to have you—Mom even kept your old room the same."

"I'm not going back. Ever. And I don't want to hear anything else about it."

"But you could still be in danger! You don't even know who hired those *cabrónes* in the first place."

"No, but Jude is taking care of it so I'll be *fine*. You don't need to worry about me."

"It always comes back to that fucking vampire." Diego was so upset he put down his chopsticks and pushed away his geisha roll. "*Dios*, Luz! What did he do, brainwash you?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "No, he loved me," but I held back at the last minute. For one thing, I wasn't sure Jude's stated intention to "have" me really constituted love and I was still mixed up about what we were doing. And for another, I

didn't think admitting to my pissed-off and overprotective little brother that I was falling for a vamp was really going to help anything.

I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself and cool down. "Look, let's not talk about this anymore. Obviously we're never going to see eye to eye on it so let's just agree to disagree."

"No, Luz—I can't do that." Diego picked up his chopsticks again and stabbed at a piece of sushi—it was a piece of *my* sushi in fact, but I decided to let it slide. "Agreeing to disagree—that's like, let's not talk politics or religion. But you dating a vampire, that goes way deeper than all that other shit."

"We're not dating," I protested. "Well, not exactly. I told you, he gives me some of his blood and I give him some of mine. And it calms me down when I need to be calm. You don't know how much that means to me, Diego. Maybe if you'd stop and think about it a minute you wouldn't be so quick to condemn."

He shook his head. "So his blood calms you down. What does your blood do for him—speed him up? Is your blood like crack for him or something?"

"Of course not." I was indignant. "He just likes...likes the taste of it, that's all." I remembered Jude's deep voice murmuring about how good I tasted, though he hadn't been talking about my blood at the time.

Diego looked at me skeptically. "So that's it? He likes the taste of it? The most powerful vamp in the city—hell, in the whole damn state as far as I can tell—and he just wants to hang out and take a little sip of your blood once in a while 'cause it's tasty?"

"He says it's powerful," I said defensively. "Because I've never shifted—I have a lot of untapped energy."

"Energy, huh? So it *is* like a drug!" Diego said triumphantly.

"My blood is *not* a drug!" Now I was the one getting dirty looks from other customers, but I was too upset to care.

"Yeah it is—for *him* it is. He's probably getting high every time he bites you. Luz, do you have any idea how strong bloodsuckers are? Do you know how much damage a cracked-out vamp could do? You need to stay away from him!"

"Save it." I was so angry at that point that I was past talking to him rationally. "I know what I'm doing, Diego, so you can shut your mouth about it or leave."

"Fine, I'll leave." He stood up so quickly he knocked over the spindly chair he'd been sitting in. Reaching for his wallet, he threw some bills on the table. "You better watch yourself, Luz. If Mom and Dad find out what you're up to, you could find yourself yanked back home whether you want to come or not. You going out with a fucking vamp brings shame on the whole family."

"Listen to yourself." I stood up too. "You sound just like them. All they care about is status and their standing in the pack. I never thought you'd be like that, little brother. Never thought you could be that shallow."

He sighed and ran both hands through his hair. "Damn it, Luz—it's not shallow to be worried about you after what you've been telling me. Think about it—not only is Jacobson dangerous in his own right, but you got fucking attacked and almost kidnapped after you started hanging out with him."

"I told you—Jude protected me. He *saved* me."

Diego grabbed my arm and started walking me toward the nearest exit. "Did it occur to you that you might have been attacked *because* you were hanging around with Jacobson? That maybe they wanted to hurt *him* by grabbing *you*?"

Actually, it hadn't and I suddenly felt really stupid for not thinking of that possibility. But my brother didn't give me a chance to say anything about it.

"I told you about what he did to the Clear Water pack master," he continued, pulling me out of the restaurant, much to the apparent relief of everyone else inside. "You don't think they want some justice for that shit? I mean, he fucking *skinned* the guy, Luz. I know you probably don't believe me—"

"Oh, I believe you." I shook his hand off my arm and turned to face him, the hot August sunshine beating down on my head like a golden hammer. "I know he did it but I don't care. Do you understand me? *I don't care.*"

Diego looked at me, a shocked expression in his dark eyes, so much like my own. "I can't believe you. How can you say that? How can you turn your back on your own kind for a fucking vamp?"

I could feel myself trembling all over—the overwhelming heat and humidity of the August day was making me nauseous and bad memories were pressing on my brain like a fist behind my eyes. "Do you know what my own kind did to me?" I asked him. "Do you have any clue? I know you were too young to understand at the time—"

"C'mon, Sis. We don't have to talk about that." Diego looked extremely uncomfortable. "They don't even do that shit anymore. Can't you just let it go?"

I wanted to shove it in his face, to make him *see*. But the memory was too bad, too disgusting to say out loud. In fact it was so bad I spent most of my time pretending it hadn't happened at all. Instead I took a step toward him to make him meet my eyes. "Fine, we won't talk about it. But you should know that this *vampire* you hate so much has shown me consideration and respect I never got from my own family *or* the pack. So excuse me if I don't give a damn what you say about him."

Diego tried one more time. "But he's not *right*, Luz. I'm telling you, even the other vamps avoid him. I don't know why but you know it can't be good."

I frowned. "You know what? I don't care what other vampires think and I don't care what our kind thinks either. And I wish to God I hadn't told you anything since you're acting like such a macho jackass."

"*Dios*, Luz, come on—I'm just *worried* about you!"

"Let me worry about myself." I dug in my purse for my keys and started toward my car. "I'll be fine."

I heard him swearing in fluent Spanish as I walked away but I refused to go back and say anything else.

It was the second time I'd fought with my little brother in a week and this was a bad fight—maybe one that couldn't be healed. Not unless I was willing to give up Jude, that was, and increasingly, I found myself completely unwilling to do that. He had come into my life when I was stuck in a rut and dragged me out of it. And he'd treated me the way I'd always wanted to be treated—like a fully functional adult female with a brain in my head. Not to mention the way he touched me with such gentleness and care and the things his blood made possible for me.

It wasn't like I didn't still have some reservations about him and his business methods but hell, everyone has their little faults. *Skinning people alive and ripping their heads off is more than a little fault*, whispered a voice in my head but I shut it up savagely. The point was, I had decided to give Jude the benefit of the doubt. He might come off as violent and frightening to some people—okay, to practically everyone—but he had always been gentle and kind to me. And damn it, I *liked* him.

As I threw myself in my car and stared out the windshield through a haze of angry tears, I decided then and there to go through with my plan. I would see Jude later this week and do another blood exchange. And then I would show up at my family pack's hunting ground next weekend on the night of the full moon and show everyone that they couldn't hurt me anymore. That they would never be able to hurt me again.

I just hoped Diego was there to see me shift for the first time. Because once I did, even he wouldn't be able to deny the power of Jude's blood or the fact that I was doing the right thing.

Chapter Seven

"Why hello there. You must be Miss Luz."

"Uh, yes. Yes, I am." I stared blankly at the little old black lady wearing a pink and purple flower-print housedress who was standing in Jude's front doorway, staring at me.

"I'm Rosie, the maid." She gave me a smile that lit up her whole face and showed teeth that were too even and white to be anything but false. "I think I was having the day off last time you came."

"I guess so." I still felt rather at a loss. Jude had never told me he had a maid though I supposed it wasn't that surprising. After all, it was a hell of a big house and he surely had better things to do with his time than spend it cleaning. But what really shocked me wasn't that he had domestic help. It was the fact that, under the sweet scent of a generous application of baby powder, my nose was telling me that Rosie was a were—and a full-blooded were at that.

I was sure she could tell the same thing about me but she didn't say anything about it. Instead she looked me up and down, still smiling. "My, don't you look nice? Let me just admire you for a minute."

I fought the urge to blush as she stepped back and took in my appearance. I had dressed to impress tonight in a deep red dress that was cut low in the front and even lower in the back. In fact, it was impossible to wear a bra with it so I was being extra careful of the way I moved so that silky fabric that covered my breasts didn't slip off my shoulders and reveal more than just my neck and back. The dress ended around mid-thigh and I had on a pair of black open-toed heels that made me several inches taller to go with it. Since I was already so short and Jude was so tall, I felt like I needed something to level the playing field. Besides, the heels made my legs look long and slender and sexy and gave my walk a confident strut that I liked. My hair was down, the curly ends brushing against my bare back and my makeup, while minimal, was absolutely perfect.

I had taken hours to get ready but it felt like longer than that while Jude's maid stared at me. At last, after a long moment of scrutiny, she nodded at me in a friendly way. "Yep, real nice. Well, come right this way, Miss Luz. Mr. Jude said to take you straight in to the study." She turned and headed down the hallway, leaving me to follow her in bewilderment.

"Uh, you keep the house beautifully," I said, feeling that I needed to make some conversation.

"Oh, it ain't hard, child. Not like there's much to do 'sides sweeping and dusting. And I don't have to cook like I did at my last job on account of vamps don't eat." She grinned over her shoulder at me.

"I guess that *would* simplify things a lot," I said helplessly, wishing I could think of more to say. We walked the rest of the way in silence and stopped in front of the same carved wooden door that I remembered from last time.

"Well, here you go. Hope you enjoy your visit, Miss Luz." She nodded at me and was turning to go when my curiosity got the best of me.

"Wait." I put a hand on her arm, waiting until she faced me. "I'm sorry," I said, feeling awkward. "I know it's none of my business but I guess I'm just surprised to see a were working for a vamp."

Her bright eyes flashed. "You're a were too, missy – my nose tells me so. So I could just as well ask what *you're* doing visiting a vamp same as you can ask what I'm doing working for one."

"I'm sorry I offended you – forget I asked." I dropped my hand but she grabbed it in both of hers. Her grip was warm and dry, her skin worn smooth as a baby's with age.

"Now, I didn't mean it like that, child, so don't go gettin' your back up."

"I'm not," I said, surprised.

"Well, all right then." She smiled. "I like you – mostly because Mr. Jude likes you. And he's been powerful lonely an awful long time so seeing him find a lady friend does my old heart good."

"I'm, uh, glad to hear it," I said, not sure how to take her revelation. At least now I knew that Jude didn't invite women over to his home to party all the time. It was nice to know that we were exclusive – at least as far as Rosie knew. I found myself smiling back at her.

"As for why I work for him – I have my reasons. Mr. Jude has been powerful good to me and my family. He got us justice when no one else could. You know?"

Of course I didn't know – I had no idea what she was talking about. But I nodded at her anyway and that seemed to be good enough for Rosie.

"Well, now, I best be getting on. Tell Mr. Jude if he needs anything he can call me but to make it quick. I'm about to go for the night. All right?"

I nodded again. "All right."

"Good." She pressed my hand briefly before letting it go. "You have a blessed day, Miss Luz, and it was mighty fine to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," I said, actually meaning it. She might be a little strange but it was clear that Rosie was devoted to Jude. And it was a relief to meet another living soul who saw him as a decent person instead of as an evil, bloodthirsty vampire who was ready to kill and maim at the drop of a hat.

Rosie grinned at me with a mouthful of false teeth and shuffled off down the hallway, humming quietly to herself. Shaking my head, I turned toward the door and let myself into the study.

Jude was sitting on the low leather couch as still as a statue, staring into the fire that was crackling quietly to itself on the hearth. In the firelight his marble pale skin was painted with gold and crimson. I caught my breath at the beauty of his profile.

My small intake of breath seemed to rouse him from whatever reverie he'd been lost in because he looked up at me, smiling. "Luz. It's good to see you again." He rose in one fluid motion and was standing in front of me almost before I could blink. Taking my hands in his, he stared into my eyes. "You've outdone yourself tonight. I've never seen you looking more beautiful."

I felt my cheeks getting hot at his compliment. But I needed to keep my mind on the subject at hand instead of thinking how deep his green eyes looked and how good he smelled. I took a deep breath. "I came to talk, Jude. I need to ask you..."

"Of course you can have some of my blood. I'm so glad you've decided to do another exchange with me."

I pulled my hands away. "Don't read me like that—I don't like it."

"Forgive me. It was just one of my flashes—you were thinking about it so strongly it came through before I thought about it."

"Are you sure that's all you see? Just the surface of someone's mind?"

He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling under the black T-shirt he wore. "Just their most recent thoughts, yes. And it doesn't even happen very often. In fact, this is only the second or third time I have caught flashes of your thoughts and you know if it happened every time I touched you I would know much more about you than I do."

I blushed again, thinking of how much and how intimately he had touched me. But I needed to get something out of the way before I let myself be carried away in the moment. "I *do* want to do another blood exchange," I said, looking up at him seriously. "But after I tell you why, you might not want to."

"Why would I not want to?" As he spoke, he led me over to the couch and seated me on it. "Would you like some wine?"

"Um...sure." I was determined not to get off track. "You might not want to because I want to try again to shift—to change this next full moon."

He shook his head as he poured me wine that was so dark it looked black in the firelight. "And why would that bother me?"

"Because," I said patiently. "The whole reason you wanted my blood in the first place was because I've never shifted. You said there was more power in it that way so after I shift..." I shrugged. "It won't be as...as potent, I guess."

Jude sat beside me and offered me a delicate long-stemmed crystal glass half filled with the dark wine. It smelled fruity and rich. I took a small sip and made an appreciative noise.

He nodded at my glass. "Do you like it? I was still young when it was made."

"It's delicious," I said truthfully. "But you still haven't said how you feel about me shifting."

"I think you should do what makes you happy. I suppose the only thing that concerns me is the fact that you'll be more interesting to your own kind when you can change and you might forget about me."

His response surprised me. "How could I forget you? You've helped me so much."

"I hope that isn't the only reason you'd try to keep me in mind." He took the wine glass from me and held both my hands in his much larger ones.

"So...you won't mind if my blood changes flavor or potency or whatever?"

"Luz, I have a small confession to make. It isn't your blood I am as interested in as you. It's true that having never changed your blood has an energy about it that is rare and delicious but I would have been just as eager to spend time with you even if you had been shifting every month for years."

I frowned. "They why didn't you say so? Why make such a big deal about the energy in my blood and how you wanted to taste it like fine wine?"

"Because we are what we are. Think about it." He squeezed my hands gently. "If I had let you know that I, a vampire, wanted to get to know you, a were, you would have turned me away without a thought. I had to find a way to make you come to me."

"So that you could put me under your spell?" I was only half kidding and more than a little angry about his deception.

"So that I could make you feel for me what I immediately felt for you."

"And what...what was that?" I asked breathlessly. He was very close now, still holding my hands and looking down into my eyes and I could smell his warm skin and see the firelight glinting against the razor-sharp tips of his fangs as he spoke.

"Desire. Lust. Need. Call it whatever you care too—I only knew that I wanted you so badly I could barely breathe. As I want you still." He leaned down and captured my mouth in a long, intense kiss that sent shivers all the way down to my toes.

I could feel my nipples peaking under the silky material of my dress and my pussy getting wet beneath my small satin panties. But I still hadn't said everything I needed to say. Reluctantly, I broke the kiss and looked up at him. "So my blood *isn't* like a drug for you?"

He laughed softly, a low rumble from deep in his chest. "No more than the rest of you, which I find completely intoxicating. The way you look, your scent...your taste." He kissed my ear, flicking his tongue over the sensitive lobe until I shivered. Then he pulled back and looked at me. "Why do you ask? Has someone been filling your head with nonsense?"

"It was my brother's idea, actually." I sighed. "He's just...he's really not happy about me, uh, dating a vampire. If that's what we're doing, I mean," I added hurriedly.

Jude looked thoughtful. "I suppose that is as good a word for it as any. Though in my day we would have called it courting."

"Well, he's not happy with our arrangement. I wouldn't have told him but I'm closer to him than the rest of my family and...and I guess I just hoped he would understand."

He gave me a serious look. "You cannot really expect your family to understand or accept the bond between us, Luz. If my own family was still alive they would feel much the same as yours does. My parents were vampires of a very ancient bloodline—the idea of me desiring to spend time with a were would have been repugnant to them."

"It's pretty much the same in my family," I admitted. "At least I think it would be. I don't think Diego has told anyone else yet—but he might after the fight we had." I told him briefly about the accusations my little brother had flung at me, including the idea that the attack on me was an attempt by the Clear Water pack to get to Jude in retaliation for his treatment of their pack master.

Jude frowned and shook his head when I told him. "I thought of that myself—it was the first thing in my mind, in fact. But careful checking reveals that the Clear Water pack had nothing to do with your near abduction."

"But then who—"

"I don't know but I am still working to find out—still trying to find the other man who attacked you. I should never have let him go in the first place but I was so sure he had been hired by the Clear Water wolves I thought I had no reason to hold him." His eyes flashed. "In the meantime, I want you to know that you are well protected both day and night."

"Thank you." I assumed that meant he was employing other people to watch me since he couldn't be around to assure my safety himself during the day. Still, it was nice to know my trust in him wasn't misplaced.

"Is that all you wanted to speak about?" Jude buried his fingers in the hair at the nape of my neck and stroked my throat with his thumb in a slow, rhythmic motion that made my pulse race.

"I-I guess so." Suddenly I was having trouble thinking straight. "Why?" I asked breathlessly. "Did you have something else in mind?"

"What I have in mind is tasting you and not just your blood." Jude gave me a slow, hot smile that seemed to melt everything inside me.

"Are-you going to want to do that every time we meet?" I asked hesitantly. "I mean, you really like it that much?"

"I love it." He leaned forward and murmured in my ear. "Love the way you look when you open for me, love the way you taste when you writhe under my tongue. But most of all I love the way you give yourself to me so completely and the soft little sounds you make when I'm licking your pussy."

"I...do I?" I hadn't been aware of making any sounds the two times he'd gone down on me but I wasn't really surprised. Jude was right—I sort of lost control of myself when he did that but in a *good* way.

"Mmm-hmm." He kissed my throat, his breath hot against my sensitive skin. "But tonight I don't want to do it here."

I pulled away, looking at him in confusion. "What—you want to go to a motel or something?"

He laughed. "No, nothing like that. I meant I don't want to taste you or drink your blood sitting here on the couch." His voice dropped. "I want to take you to my bed."

"Oh." I bit my lower lip, not sure if I was ready for this. But Jude's next words calmed me considerably.

"Not to make love to you—although that would be a great pleasure indeed. But simply because I want us to take our time someplace more comfortable. Of course if the idea bothers you—"

"No," I said quickly. "No, I-I don't mind. In fact it sounds nice. More than nice." I looked at him shyly, feeling the blood burning under my skin again. The idea of lying down with him, of feeling that long, hard body pressed against mine, was making me incredibly hot. So hot I was afraid he would be able to tell. Casually I crossed my legs, trying to ignore the throbbing below my waist.

"No, Luz, don't do that." Jude put a hand on my knee, urging me to uncross my legs.

"Don't do what?" I asked, wishing my voice didn't sound so shaky.

"Don't hide your desire from me. I love the scent of your lust." He stroked my knee as he spoke, sliding his large hand up my thigh, under the hem of my dress. "Don't pretend not to feel for me the way I feel for you," he whispered, his fingertips stroking lightly over my inner thigh.

"How *do* you feel?" I asked, trying not to moan as his seeking fingers found my panties and he cupped the mound of my sex in his hand.

Jude gave me that slow, dangerous smile. "As I told you before—I want you. *All* of you, Luz. And I can't wait any longer to have you." Without warning he picked me up and walked out the door with me in his arms.

The long hallway was a blur. I didn't bother to see where we were going because I didn't care. I just buried my face in the side of his neck and breathed in his warm, spicy scent. Some people say vampires are cold blooded but I had never found that to be true of Jude. He was always warm to my touch and I ought to know because there seemed to be no way I could get enough of touching him.

When I looked up again we were in a bedroom with a high, arching ceiling and no windows. The room was dominated by a huge four-poster bed. It looked as though it had been specially built to accommodate Jude's height and it was draped with cream-colored satin sheets that looked incredibly soft and decadently inviting. A little way

from the foot of the bed was another fireplace with a small fire flickering to light the room. As with the study, the room was cool enough to make the fire seem like a pleasant necessity despite the heat of the August night outside.

"You must spend a hell of a lot on air-conditioning," I murmured as Jude sat me on the end of the bed. "Do you have a fireplace in every room of the house?"

He shrugged. "Only a few, actually. I like the light a fire gives—it's warm and natural. I am fully integrated into this century but I still dislike the glare of artificial lights. Does the fire bother you?"

"Not at all." I snuggled against him, my face pressed against the side of his chest. "I think it's very romantic."

"I'm glad you think so." He kissed the top of my head and then ran one long finger down my shoulder. I leaned my head to one side, giving him greater access and to my embarrassment, the red fabric of my dress slid down my arm, baring my right breast.

"Sorry!" I was about to pull the dress back up but Jude stopped me.

"I've never seen your breasts," he murmured, kissing the side of my neck. "So beautiful—may I?"

"I-I guess." I sat still with my heart pounding as he slid the other side of my dress down, baring me from the waist up. My nipples tightened at the sudden chill and the embarrassed excitement of having his gaze on me.

"Beautiful," he murmured again and then slid to his knees in front of me. He was so tall that, though I was sitting on the edge of the bed and he was kneeling on the floor, we were still eye to eye.

Jude bent his head and laid a light kiss on the slope of one breast before tracing a wet, warm trail to my nipple. I moaned breathlessly as he sucked it into his mouth and teased it into a tight peak with his tongue. The twin points of his fangs pressed delicately on either side against the soft skin of my breast—a promise of things to come later. He spent a long time tasting and teasing both breasts, licking and sucking my nipples alternately, which seemed to send sparks of pleasure directly to my pussy. I was getting so wet and hot I didn't think I could stand it much more and when Jude looked up, I could see the lust flaring in his eyes, which flickered from pale green to burning red over and over.

"I want to see all of you," he said, tugging gently at the fabric of my dress pooled around my waist. "Will you let me undress you completely, Luz?"

I nibbled my bottom lip nervously. He'd seen a lot of me but never like this. Never in bed with nothing between us at all. A sudden memory of the last time I had been naked before a man flashed across my brain. I had been so helpless, so frightened...

Jude must have seen the uncertainty in my face because he leaned forward and kissed me gently. "It's all right. You can stay as you are if the idea upsets you."

I pushed the bad memory away with an effort. "No. No...I want to. Want to be naked with you." I blushed as I said it but made myself continue doggedly. "It's just...I think I'd feel better if you were naked too. Could we do that?"

He gave me that slow, lazy grin, his eyes hooded with lust. "I would love to do that with you. Would you like to undress me first?"

The idea made my pulse jump with sudden heat. "Yes, I think I'd like that. Here..." I got him to switch positions with me so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed and I was standing between his legs.

I started by pulling off his black T-shirt, tugging it over his head and enjoying the sight of his muscles rippling in the firelight as it came off. Next I attacked his belt buckle and jeans. Jude didn't help me at all, even when I had a little difficulty with the zipper. He just sat there, regarding me with half-closed eyes with what I could best describe as a look of patient lust.

I was glad he was letting me lead. As I pushed his jeans down his narrow hips and long legs, I felt my fear receding and my desire returning. I was in control of the situation—not threatened in any way—and it made all the difference in the world.

Jude kicked off his shoes as the jeans came off and at last I had him down to nothing but a pair of dark blue silk boxers. There was a hard ridge where he was pressed against the soft fabric. Even to my inexperienced estimation it looked extremely large.

I hesitated, my hand on the waistband of the boxers, and looked into his eyes. He smiled at me, not saying a word, and showed just a hint of fang under his sensuous upper lip—a dare. It was a dare I wanted to take him up on.

I pushed the boxers down and watched as he kicked them away before I raised my eyes to the area I was most curious about. His cock was long and thick, rising from a small thatch of dark blond curls like an exclamation point. It was darker than the rest of his marble pale skin, capped with a broad, mushroom-shaped head that was shiny in the firelight with a clear fluid I supposed must be precum.

I looked up at Jude. "Can I...do you mind if I touch it?"

"Do you want to?" His question surprised me a little. But then I realized he was trying not to rush me or make me do anything I didn't want to.

I nodded. "Yes, I do. As long as...if you could just stay like you are and don't move?"

He nodded, a little smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "I'll do my best." Then he leaned back a little, giving me better access to his body. "Do what you want with me, Luz. I'm yours."

The way he opened himself to my exploration seemed to give my desire wings. I had never felt more powerful, more in control, than I did as I reached down to circle him with my hand. I couldn't quite get my fingers all the way around him and Jude groaned softly while I tried, gripping his heated length carefully as I learned him the way he had already learned me.

"So soft," I said, marveling at the silky texture of his skin. Touching his shaft was like having a bar of heated steel covered in velvet in my hands. "Like rose petals," I murmured, looking up at him.

"Your hands are so warm." He shifted his hips a fraction, thrusting up into my circled fingers. "You are driving me wild, Luz."

"I want to taste you," I told him, looking into his eyes while I stroked him up and down. I was beginning to find a rhythm and I was enjoying the feel of his hot, silky length in my hand. "I want to taste you the way you tasted me."

"You're in control," he murmured, his deep voice hoarse with need. "Do what you like with me, Luz."

His words gave me a hot little thrill of pleasure. But there was something else I wanted to do before I started. Stepping back from him a little, I pushed my dress the rest of the way down my hips and kicked it to one side. Then, taking a deep breath, I hooked my thumbs into the thin elastic straps on either side of my panties.

Jude shook his head. "You don't have to—you know that."

I smiled at him. "But I want to." Slowly I pushed my panties down until I could step out of them and stand in front of him completely nude.

Jude took a deep breath as he looked me over from top to bottom. "So lovely," he said hoarsely. "You take my breath away with your beauty, Luz."

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to me and even nicer was the fact that I suddenly knew he was right. I looked down at myself, at the slopes of my breasts and the soft curve of my abdomen and I was able to see myself as he saw me. I didn't see breasts that were too small or a stomach that wasn't flat enough or legs that were too short. I saw smooth skin, bathed in the flickering glow of the firelight, the tightness of my nipples, the wetness of my slit and I liked what I saw because Jude liked what he saw.

I came to him again and put my hands on his legs. I drew my nails lightly up his thighs, making him growl softly, until I reached his shaft. Then I took him in one hand and bent to drag my tongue over the flaring, plum-shaped head. He was salty and slippery and utterly delicious. From the corner of my eye I saw his big hands fist at his sides as I licked him but to his credit, he never touched me. He simply sat there as I teased and tasted him, letting my tongue explore up and down his shaft and even dip quickly into the shallow slit at the tip of his cock before moving on once more.

As I licked and sucked and teased, I experimented with my hands. Cupping beneath his shaft, I cradled his balls in one palm, stroking them carefully with my fingertips until his big body trembled with suppressed need.

"Luz, please..." His deep voice was ragged with lust.

"Yes?" I looked up, meeting his eyes, which were glowing a steady red now.

"I need you." He dipped his head and captured my mouth in a hot kiss for a long moment before going on. "I want you to drink from me," he said. "From my neck."

I stepped up to him and nuzzled my face against the warm skin of his throat, breathing in his spicy fragrance. "How?" I whispered, kissing his neck. "Do you have something to cut yourself with?"

"You're a were—your teeth are sharp. Bite me." His voice was a low, lustful growl and I had the sudden realization that giving blood was almost as pleasurable for him as taking it. I wondered briefly if it was the same for all vampires and then decided I didn't care. I only wanted Jude and no one else mattered.

I was a little reluctant to sink my teeth into him, though, until I felt his large, warm hand against the back of my head, urging me gently forward. I looked up at him. "You really want me to?"

"Yes. Do it." He inclined his neck toward me with more urgency.

At the sight of the strong column of his throat bared for me—only for me—a feeling of almost savage lust rushed through me. Leaning forward, I sank my teeth into him just at the place where his neck met his broad shoulder.

Jude groaned and pulled me close, crushing my breasts to the flat planes of his chest and branding my stomach with his thick, hot length. The warm taste of *dulce de leche* filled my mouth and I lost myself in the pleasure of drinking from him until I didn't know what was happening anymore.

He dragged me up on the bed with him and we lay on our sides on the cool satin sheets, facing each other and still pressed tightly together. I had my legs wrapped around Jude's and I didn't even care that I was riding his thigh, pressing my bare pussy hard against him as I licked and sucked his neck.

At last, the small bite wound healed and Jude pulled away from me a little.

"Your turn?" I asked, my voice breathless with need.

"My turn," he confirmed, stroking my back and shoulder blades. "I want to drink from your neck as well."

I wondered if it was some kind of vampire ritual but frankly I didn't care—I just knew I wanted him close to me, wanted the press of his big body against mine and the warm, silky feel of his bare skin rubbing against me.

We had been lying on our sides but I sat up now and leaned over him. "Do it," I said, giving his words back to him. I turned my head to one side, offering my throat.

He bared his fangs with a low growl and struck, sinking them deep into the tender flesh of my neck. The sharp sting was accompanied by an intense burst of passion and I moaned aloud and grabbed him, digging my fingernails into his broad shoulders as I gave pain for pain and pleasure for pleasure.

Jude sucked at my neck, his big hands exploring me as he did—stroking my breasts, tugging at my nipples, sliding down the curve of my hips until he came to rest with one hand cupping the heated mound of my cunt.

I gasped and bucked against him as he pressed two thick fingers into my wet depths and fucked me with them. God, it felt so good, so *right*. I couldn't seem to get enough of him, of the feel of him filling me, and yet I wanted more.

"Jude." I moaned his name as he lapped and sucked at my neck. "Jude, please, I want you...want you inside me."

He pulled back reluctantly, his lips crimson with my blood. "I don't know if you're ready for that, Luz."

"No, I am, I really am," I insisted even though a tiny voice at the back of my brain whispered that it wasn't so sure. But I refused to listen to it, refused to hear the warning it tried to give. *I've been waiting for this moment for years*, I argued with myself. *I don't want to wait anymore.*

Jude stroked my cheek. "Why don't you let me taste you first? Let me make you come once or twice before we try anything else."

I looked into his eyes. "You know I love that but it isn't what I want right now – isn't what I need." I lowered myself to the bed and reached for him. "Please, Jude...fuck me."

His breath caught in his throat in a ragged gasp and then he was on top of me, spreading my legs with his and covering my smaller, slighter form with his big, hard body.

At first everything was all right. I was eager for him, anxious to have him inside me, to finally get rid of my hated virginity once and for all. But then the present began to melt into the past and the memories came flooding back. Like sharp fragments of a shipwreck just below the surface of my mind they came – flashes of a trauma I desperately didn't want to remember. *His hands on me, forcing my legs apart. His laughter in my ear. His weight on me – pressing me down until I can't breathe...*

"Luz?" Jude looked at me in concern.

I shook my head. "I'm fine – don't stop." *Not real*, I told myself. *It's not real. It's just a bad memory. I can get through this – I have Jude's blood in me – I'll be all right.*

Jude went back to kissing me and I closed my eyes and concentrated, trying to remember the warm feeling of safety and the delicious, sweet *dulce de leche* flavor of his blood. For a moment it seemed like it was working. But then I felt him opening me, spreading the sensitive lips of my pussy with the head of his cock, positioning himself at my entrance to thrust inside me, to fill me with himself.

"Such a sweet little cunt – so damn tight. Can't wait to ride you tonight, little girl," an ugly voice rasped in my memory. *"There's nothing like virgin pussy to make a man feel like fucking. And you're going to love every minute of it, Luz, I promise you that."*

"No!" I gasped, pressing against the broad chest that rose above me, trying to get away from the hard, masculine body that was smothering me. "No, God – please don't! Please don't do it to me!"

Panic had me by the throat. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think. I fought for freedom like a wild thing, desperate to get away. Beneath me the stones of the ancient altar bit into my back, bruising and bloodying my bare skin and overhead the full moon hung, shining and indifferent to what was happening so far away below it. But I didn't care about that—all I cared about was getting away.

I pushed at the man on top of me and wriggled desperately, gasping and begging as I did. But he was too strong, too big. There was no one to protect me, no one who cared if this happened to me. No one to stop him and soon it would be too late...

Suddenly I was free—the hateful weight lifted off me, the threat removed. I jumped off the altar—*No, it's a bed, not an altar. Don't care, have to get the hell away from here!*—and ran.

But instead of finding myself in the middle of the woods, I hit a wall—literally. I looked up frantically, expecting to see a full moon overhead, but the wall was attached to a ceiling. There was no moon, no altar, no sharp twigs and grass beneath my feet. And no man waiting to harm me.

There was only Jude, standing there naked, one hand held out to me and a look of pain on his face.

"Luz, it's all right. It's all right now, it's over." He whispered, as though he was afraid any loud sound might spook me and set me off again.

"Jude?" I looked at him uncertainly. I hadn't had a flashback that intense in years. It had seemed so *real*. So horribly vivid and true—like the past was coming forward to eat me, to swallow the woman I had become and change me back to the scared, thirteen-year-old girl who had been irrevocably changed that awful full moon night.

"Luz, I am sorry. So very, very sorry. I should have known...should have seen you weren't ready." His voice was raw.

"I-I thought I could do it." I crouched down where I was, wrapping my arms around my knees, covering and protecting myself at the same time. "Why couldn't I do it, Jude? I have your blood in me but it didn't help. It didn't help." I wanted to cry but I couldn't. The tears wouldn't come.

"Luz...beloved..." He took a step toward me but I shrank away and he stopped. Instead he sat on the floor facing me.

"Why?" I whispered again and I wasn't just talking about the flashback. I was talking about the whole evil mess, the night that had started all of this pain and trauma for me. Why had it had to happen? And when would I ever be able to forget it so completely that it could never bother me again? Inside my brain a familiar mantra began. *Have to forget. Have to forget. It never happened. Have to forget.*

"Because." Jude sounded tired. "My blood has a calming effect—to a certain extent. It can help you deal with the symptoms of your panic, but not the underlying cause."

Have to forget. Have to forget. It never happened. I put a hand to my throat. "I-I don't know what you mean. Who can tell what causes panic attacks? They just...they just happen."

"Oh, Luz." He shook his head and inched closer to me. "Please..." He held out a hand and I realized he wanted me to take it. With an enormous effort, I forced myself to do just that. Jude closed his fingers lightly around mine, clearly letting me know I could withdraw my hand at any time.

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head. "I don't know what came over me. I just got so...so upset."

"You were upset for a reason." Jude ducked his head to look intently into my eyes. "Who was he, Luz, and what did he do to you?"

"What are you talking about?" I felt a cold sweat starting along the ridge of my spine.

"You need to talk about it if you are ever going to get over it." Jude squeezed my hand lightly. "I know something happened but you have it buried too deep for me to see. Please, let me in."

"This is ridiculous." I snatched my hand away and stood up quickly, taking a step away from him. "I just...I just get upset sometimes, that's all. It's not a big deal." *Have to forget. Have to forget.*

"It is a big deal. Luz, please."

But I refused to stick around and hear any more of his nonsense. Keeping myself covered as well as I could, I grabbed my crumpled dress from the floor and pulled it on. Jude watched me gather my things in silence, still sitting on the floor with an unreadable expression on his face.

"I have to go," I said, turning to him with my hand on the knob. "I'm sorry things didn't...didn't work out."

He nodded his head gravely. "I'm sorry I triggered your panic response. I let my lust for you overcome my better judgment."

I waved his apology away. "It's my fault. I don't know why I get so upset. I..." But I couldn't go on so I just shook my head.

"Luz..." Jude got to his feet and approached me very slowly. He was still naked but not hard anymore which made it a little less scary. "It's *not* your fault," he said, when he'd closed the gap between us. "None of this is. So don't apologize."

"I have to go," I said again. A worried thought crept into my brain. "I...do you think I'll be able to change at the full moon?"

"I don't know," he said tiredly. "If I had to guess I'd suppose it would depend on how closely what happened to you is related to your ability to shift."

Have to forget! "Stop talking like that—*nothing* happened to me," I said sharply. And already, it was like nothing had. I could feel my shattered and tattered brain coming back together and sweeping the whole ugly memory under the rug of my subconscious. In a minute I would be completely fine again—if Jude would just shut up about past trauma and panic responses, that was.

“Luz—” he started again but I wasn’t going to stick around and hear anything he had to say.

“Goodbye, Jude. Maybe I’ll talk to you later.” I stalked out of his bedroom and hurried down the long hallway, finding my way out of the huge house by blind instinct. All I knew was that I had to get away, had to get anywhere but here. Once I was back safe at my own apartment I could splinter into a million jagged pieces if I wanted to but I couldn’t do it here, not where Jude could see me, not again.

Never again.

Chapter Eight

A fat orange moon was already riding high in the sky when I stepped into the woods that made up the hunting grounds of the Armenia Garden Estates wolf pack, otherwise known as the Arm Gard wolves. This had been my family's pack for generations—even back before weres had made their presence known to the human world.

The pack was made up of around twenty-five to thirty families who lived in the Tampa Bay area, most of them middle to upper-middle class and it had a very definite hierarchy that was pretty much set in stone.

Above all the wolves was the pack master who could do just about anything he wanted and get away with it. Then there were the pack alphas—always males—who led the hunt each full moon and gave direction to the younger wolves. Under the alphas were the betas—males who didn't have quite enough testosterone to make it into the upper echelon and under them were the females, who were always considered inferior to the males. And then there were the children and immature pack members who had yet to make their first change.

The ability to shift comes around the same time as puberty so it sometimes happened later for males and earlier for females but no matter what their age, no one was allowed out to join the hunt under the full moon until they could make a complete shift. It goes without saying that yours truly had never been on a hunt although I desperately longed to go.

My own family was mid-level status and always trying to move up the ladder. At one time I knew my parents had hoped for a lot more from their children but all my brothers, with the exception of Diego, had been too easygoing to be alphas. Diego, alpha through and through, had joined another pack entirely—a decision that had caused my father not to talk to him for months.

Of course, worse than having a child who defected to another pack was having a child who couldn't shift at all—me. Sometimes I thought my parents would never live down the shame. Luckily, my older sister, Esperanza, had done better than all the rest of us toward raising the family status by marrying Frank—who was about as alpha as they come. And now that Frank might be next in line for pack master, my parents could look forward to a huge leap forward in the social pecking order.

It was something they desperately wanted, I knew. In the past the Velez family had produced pack masters and alphas like crazy. It was only in the past few generations that we'd become so middle of the road. My dad had been groomed to be an alpha and my mom had been raised with one goal in mind—to marry an alpha and produce more alpha children. In that, they had disappointed each other but they stuck together

grimly, mainly because, like a strict Catholic congregation, there isn't much divorce going on in a wolf pack. You mate for life and you deal with what comes.

Being stuck like that is probably why my parents felt the need to scrape and claw their way to the top. In their view, if you saw a chance to advance up the totem pole, you grabbed it in your teeth and ran with it because that chance might not come again. And any chance would do.

But enough about my family—the moon was calling me and for the first time I felt like I might be able to answer it. I was completely nude, my clothes folded neatly on a large rock nearby. You can't shift with clothes on, unless you don't mind ruining them. Tonight I had been wearing an oversized T-shirt and baggy jeans. I wanted to blend in later, after the hunt when everything is very casual. But first I had to prove I was fit to be in the hunt at all. I had to shift—had to let my inner wolf come out, but I wasn't sure I could do it. My breathing was already getting labored and I hadn't even tried yet.

Just like the Bar exam, I told myself. There's nothing sexual about shifting so you should have no problem. Concentrate...concentrate...

Closing my eyes, I remembered the taste of Jude's blood and the calm sense of safety and security I had when he held me and let me drink from him. Of course it was impossible to think about his blood without thinking about *him*. He'd called me several times after our little incident, as I was beginning to think of my abortive attempt to have sex, but every time I put him off. I was sure he knew I didn't have other calls coming in or company coming over or any of the other lame excuses I used on him. But he didn't complain when I said I had to go—he wasn't angry or accusatory. In fact, all I could sense from him was patience.

I had the feeling that Jude thought he would wear me down eventually. He thought if he was patient and understanding enough I would come back to him and tell him all about the big bad thing that had happened to me and we would work through it together and live happily ever after.

Yeah, right.

What had I been thinking, getting involved with a vamp in the first place? Diego had been right—I should have stuck with my own kind, even if my own kind didn't want me. Of course, if I could shift successfully tonight, that might change but I still didn't think I was going to be able to find a man who wanted to live a life of passionate celibacy. Because no matter what else happened—whether I was able to shift or not—I had decided to give up having sex—excuse me, *trying* to have sex—for good.

Oh, there were some things I would miss—the feeling of a man's body pressed against my own for one. *Jude's body*, a little voice whispered in my head but I pushed it away. And the sweet release of orgasm when he touched me and tasted me. But I had a vibrator that could make me come just as effectively and I was going to stick with that. Of course a vibrator can't hold you and kiss you and whisper sweet nothings in your ear but that was just something I would have to learn to live without.

To me, no more sex equaled no more painful flashbacks and fewer panic attacks. No more reliving that night I'd tried so hard to forget and push to the back of my mind. It was worth it, worth it, a thousand times worth it as far as I was concerned.

But of course that meant no more Jude.

There was another thought to push away. The back of my mind was getting crowded.

"Stop it and concentrate," I told myself in a low voice. I had to do this. If I could do it just once, I knew I would *always* be able to do it. Once you let the wolf come out the first time, it's always close to the surface for the rest of your life. In time, shifting becomes as natural as breathing. So once was all I needed to live a normal life and reclaim my status in the pack—for me, anyway.

I took a deep breath. It was now or never. The moon was high and the pack was in full cry. I could hear them howling in the woods, running through the dense undergrowth, and I wanted with all my heart to be one of them. I wanted what had been denied me and tonight I intended to stretch out my hand and take my birthright.

Closing my eyes, I let my mind fill with the howls of the pack and the sweet memory of Jude's blood. *I can do this. I passed the Bar and I can do this too*, I told myself fiercely. I remembered Jude's eyes, his calming words spoken in that deep voice and then...

Then I felt myself changing. My bones shifted in their sockets, my hands and feet became paws. All at once I was on all fours. My face lengthened to a muzzle and my nose was suddenly a thousand times more sensitive. Fur flowed over me, erupting from my human skin and covering me like a protective coat.

Finally!

The human thought was swallowed by my expanded senses. I could see in the dark and the scents of the forest were all around me, green and rich and growing. Every little rustle in the underbrush meant something to me—it was like I had been deaf and blind all my life and suddenly I could hear and see. I was finally *alive*.

I lifted my nose to the moon and howled, long and loud, announcing my presence to the pack. I was finally my true self—my wolf self—and I couldn't wait to let them know.

Far in the distance I heard an answering howl that ended in a question. The pack was wondering if it was really me. If after all these years I had finally managed to become one of them. Joy rushed through me as I ran to meet them, to become a part of them as I had longed to do for so long.

I was coming home.

My first hunt passed in a blur. After the pack had met and accepted me we ran together under the full moon. Despite my age I was new and still unsure so I ran at the very back of the pack with the other new wolves and stayed away from the alphas.

Once or twice I thought I caught a scent from the front of the pack that bothered me—something that shouldn't have been there. But my unease was quickly swallowed up in the excitement of the chase and the kill. We pulled down a deer and several rabbits and feasted—well, the alphas did anyway. I barely managed to snatch a mouthful of the warm, bloody meat but it was still the best thing I had ever eaten. It was the taste of success after years of failure.

After the run and the hunt, the pack broke apart and went back to their respective clothes. Before I went to shift back to my human form and get dressed, I made sure to touch noses with my parents and my older sister, Essie. I felt a definite sense of approval and excitement from them that made me feel warm all over. I could smell that Diego was around somewhere—or maybe one of them had just talked to him recently—but I didn't see him. It hurt me that my little brother hadn't come to congratulate me on my first shift but I had already decided I would call him later and apologize. And maybe during the next full moon he and I could run together alone, as I'd always wanted to do.

I found my clothes and reversed the process with ease. Fur flowed inward, my paws became hands and feet and my face flattened out to human-normal. My long, curly black hair grew from the top of my head down to the small of my back in an instant and I stood up from the crouched position I found myself in. I was me again but so much more. I could feel the wolf inside me like a second self and I knew I would always be able to call her when I needed her. I was finally a real werewolf and nothing had ever made me happier.

Grabbing my clothes, I began to dress. I wanted to catch up with my family and spend some time basking in the company of the other pack members. It was like I had been looking in through the gates of an exclusive club my entire life and someone had finally given me a key—I couldn't wait to get in.

I was still topless and pulling on my baggy jeans when I heard voices behind me.

"There she is. Little Luz Velez, all grown up."

My breath caught in my throat and all the joy inside me died an instant and painful death. *Can't be him. Diego said he'd be gone. Please, God, please...* Holding my T-shirt to my bare chest, I turned to see who was standing behind me.

"Hello, Luz. Long time no see." James Engle, the Arm Gard pack master, was standing there. He was nude and though he must be in his late forties by now, his body was still hard and toned. He was flanked by two of the pack's alphas—one of them was my brother-in-law, Frank. But I didn't care about that—I had eyes only for Engle.

My heart was beating in my throat and my stomach was rolling but I forced myself to nod at him. "Hello, pack master."

He took a step forward, looming over me in a way that made my stomach lurch. "So I see you've finally come into your own. Or have you been shifting someplace else all these years?"

"No." I swallowed and shook my head. "No, this...this was my first shift."

"Well, don't worry about it. From now on it'll be like riding a bike—you never forget how."

"Th-thank you," I muttered through numb lips.

"You know, you look just the same. Still so petite...so pretty." Engle came closer and bent to sniff me. I wanted in the worst way to run away but I couldn't—I was rooted to the spot. I could feel my breathing begin to accelerate and my chest was getting tight as the panic tried to take hold but I fought it grimly.

Don't lose control! So he's here – so what? It was years ago – he's probably forgotten and just wants to congratulate you on your shift. It's okay – it'll be okay.

"I see there's something else that hasn't changed." Engle's voice broke into my frantic mantra, shattering the small amount of calm I'd managed to gather to me like a rock tossed carelessly into a still pond.

"I...what do you mean, pack master?" I looked up at him, thinking he looked the same too. Same bristly crew cut, same cold gray eyes that were just a shade too close together to be handsome.

Engle grinned at me, looking for a moment more like a snake than a wolf. "You're still a virgin."

I clutched my shirt tighter to my chest, wishing I dared to put it on. But I was afraid I would flash Engle and his crew if I did and I didn't want to give him any ideas. From the look of those cold, gray eyes, though, he already had some ideas—none that I would like.

The pack master laughed at my attempt at modesty. "And here I thought it was too good to be true. But you're still untouched. What's the matter, Luz—didn't anyone measure up after me?" He cupped a hand under my chin and raised my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. "Have you been saving yourself for me for all these years, waiting for your first shift to finish what you started?"

"You started it, not me." My paralysis broke and I took a step away from him. Engle pursued.

"It's my right as pack master. You know the law of ascension."

"It's a sick law," I spat. I was still backing away but Engle was coming after me, a gleam of lust in his gray eyes.

"It's my right. *You're* my right, Luz—your virginity is still mine to claim. I've been thinking about that a lot lately, now that I'm about to step down."

"Leave me alone." Panic was about to choke me but I knew I had to keep it together. I looked hopefully at my brother-in-law but Frank's face was like stone—no help there. Well, I'd never liked him much anyway. But what the hell was I going to do? I knew instinctively I couldn't outrun them—they were alphas and used to taking what they wanted. Any other female in the pack would just submit but I couldn't make myself do that. Couldn't let Engle finish what he'd started so many years before.

"Now, Luz, just stay right where you are." Engle held out a hand to me, grinning. His teeth were long and yellow in the moonlight. "Just think about this. You've had your first shift so you're officially part of the pack now. And since I'm your pack master, you have no choice. Just submit like a good girl and I promise I'll make it good for you."

I couldn't believe this nightmare was happening all over again. I could feel a cold sweat breaking out all over my skin and my breath was already coming short but I knew if I let the panic take me, Engle would get me for sure. He wouldn't care if I was having a panic attack while he fucked me as long as he got what he thought of as his due—the virginity I'd denied him fourteen years before by not shifting.

"No," I gasped, stumbling backward, praying I didn't fall. "No, please..."

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Engle?"

The new voice came from behind me and it was blessedly familiar. I turned to see Diego standing there, shirtless in the moonlight. He had an ugly expression on his face and his pack tattoos made him look like he was part of the shadows.

"This is none of your concern, cub," Engle said sharply. "I'm claiming what's mine—get out of the way."

"That's my sister you're talking about—not some bone you want to gnaw on, Engle." Diego crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the pack master.

Engle returned the glare with interest. "Speak with respect to your pack master, boy, or I'll have your tongue ripped out."

"You're not my pack master, you fucking asshole." Alpha-male aggression whipped through the air with a smell like ozone and musk. There was going to be a fight if someone didn't back down and since Diego was outnumbered three to one, it was probably going to be ugly.

"Diego," I whispered urgently, stepping closer to him. "No—I don't want you getting hurt for me."

He didn't even look at me—he was too busy locking eyes with Engle. "Just get out of here, Luz. I've got this."

I desperately wanted to do just that—to run away while Diego had Engle and his alpha goons distracted. But I couldn't. Couldn't leave my little brother to be torn to bits for my sake.

Just as I was deciding I would have to fight by his side and hope for the best, two large shadows detached themselves from the trees and came to stand on either side of Diego.

"Yo, Diego, *que tal?*" one of them growled.

"Yeah, you having trouble with this fucking *cabrón?*" the other asked.

Diego glared at Engle. "Nothing I can't handle, *hermanos*. But I'll let you have a piece of the action if you ask real nice."

The two weres on either side of him erupted in guttural laughter and I felt relief rush through me. Diego must have risen higher in the ranks of *Los Lobos* than I'd thought if his two alpha pack mates were willing to help challenge the leader of another pack for him. They didn't look like they were backing down anytime soon and I felt sure they could beat Engle and his alphas in a fair fight. The *Lobos* aren't known as the toughest pack in the Eastern U.S. for nothing.

Engle must have been thinking the same thing I was, because he finally stopped advancing. "This is Arm Gard territory," he said angrily. "You can't do this."

"Looks like we're fucking doing it though," Diego said, making his alpha pals laugh again.

"She's mine." Engle pointed at me. "Now that she's finally shifted, her virginity is mine to claim."

Diego growled low in his throat. "Bitch, you better back down if you don't want *me* claiming *your* virginity. Let's see how well you fuck with my foot up your ass."

Engle looked angry enough to explode. Even in the moonlight I could see how red his face was. But there was nothing he could do—Diego and his crew were younger and obviously tougher. In a fair fight, they would rip out Engle's throat.

"Listen up, cub," he said to Diego. "I don't care if she *is* your sister—Luz is mine by pack law. And I *will* have her virginity before I step down as pack master."

"The fuck you will!" Diego lunged forward and I had the satisfaction of seeing Engle flinch back. Apparently he wasn't so tough when his victim wasn't ten inches shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than he.

"This isn't the end of this matter—just wait until I talk to your pack master." He pointed at Diego and his voice became more formal. "The burden for this night's shame falls on you and you alone, Diego Velez. As pack master of the Arm Gard wolves, I name you culpable."

"Bite me, *pendejo*," Diego growled but I could see that he was shaken. Engle had invoked the Rite of Blame and pointed the finger directly at my little brother. Now, until their conflict was resolved, if any other pain or shame befell Engle—no matter who did it—by pack law Diego was the one who would be punished for it. And the punishment for harming a pack master was not light—death or banishment was the best he could hope for.

It was an old law, even older than the law Engle was using to claim my virginity, and it had been put in place to protect pack masters from being harmed or assassinated by underlings without a formal challenge. Of course Diego *could* challenge Engle but I prayed he wouldn't. A formal challenge would mean my little brother would have to fight every alpha in the Arm Gard pack before he could get to Engle. As tough as he was, even Diego couldn't win a fight like that.

Apparently satisfied that he'd made his point, Engle turned, flanked by his own alphas, and walked back into the forest.

Diego frowned. "Go after them and make sure they don't get any cute ideas," he told the two alphas who stood on either side of him. Without a word they did as he said, melting back into the darkness as if they were part of it.

I sagged in relief as I saw them disappear into the dense foliage. God, I was in so much trouble and I knew in a minute it would hit me. But for right now all I could feel was a massive wave of relief that Engle had been stopped from finishing what he had started so many years before.

I didn't get to enjoy my relief for long though. Before I knew it, Diego had me by the shoulders and was shaking me. "What the hell is wrong with you, coming here tonight? Didn't you get my message?"

"What message?" I asked stupidly.

Diego frowned. "The one I left on your phone telling you not to fucking come – that it wasn't safe."

The truth was I had stopped checking my messages a while ago because most of them were from Jude and it made me feel guilty to hear his voice. So it was entirely possible that I'd missed the call from Diego, but I wasn't about to let him make this all my fault.

"You told me it *was* safe. You said Engle would be gone," I accused him.

Diego shook his head in frustration. "He changed his plans – said he has too many loose ends to tie up to leave right now."

I felt myself go cold. I was a loose end – no doubt about it. "I don't know what his problem is," I said in a choked voice. "I just...I just wanted to shift like a normal were. I just wanted to run with the pack."

"Yeah, and I can see how you did it, too." Diego pulled my hair out of the way, baring the healing bite marks on my neck. "You swapped more blood with that fucking vamp, didn't you?" He spat on the ground in disgust. "I can't believe you – It'd be better to let Engle have you than to see you wind up with that bloodsucker, Jacobson."

I felt sick inside. "You don't mean that."

Diego sighed and ran both hands through his hair until it stood up in wild black spikes. "Oh hell, Sis, you know I don't. But you're messing in shit you don't understand. I mean, Jacobson – you don't even want to know what I found out about him – or what I had to do to get the information. Fucking vamps." He made a face.

He was right – I didn't want to know. Hearing more bad things about Jude on top of the mess I was already in was more than I could take.

"I'm not seeing him anymore," I said shortly. "That ought to make you happy."

My brother looked slightly mollified. "As happy as I can be under the circumstances. Look, you're going to have to do something to protect yourself – move away or something."

"I can't do that," I protested. "I've never lived anyplace else but Tampa in my life. Besides, I shouldn't *have* to."

"Yeah, but Engle isn't going to take this lying down—he'll stir the shit with my pack master and then who knows what'll happen? I might not be able to keep him off you next time. You know he's the one who hired those two humans to kidnap you the first time?"

"He did?" A cold chill climbed up my spine like an icy finger. "But-but why? I hadn't even seen him in fourteen years before tonight."

Diego sighed. "Yeah, but I guess he's been thinking about you that whole time. Don't you get it, Luz? You're the one that got away. You ruined his ascension ceremony back when he was first stepping up as pack master and he doesn't want to step down without making that right—in his mind, at least."

The shock of what Diego was telling me made me feel numb. "Why can't he just leave me alone?"

My little brother shook his head. "I don't know, Sis. Maybe because you're still a...you know." He blushed.

"A virgin," I said numbly. "And as long as I am, I'll never get rid of Engle." A plan was beginning to form in my brain. A horrible plan that I hated. But I could see no other way out of my troubles—no other way out from what Engle had planned for me.

"Look, don't blame yourself." Diego patted my arm awkwardly. "It's not your fault he's a sick fuck."

"Thanks, little brother." I started to give him a hug and then realized I was still topless. Diego looked away, red-faced, as I turned and quickly pulled on my T-shirt.

"Luz," he said, when I turned back to him. "You have to go someplace safe. Maybe back home. I know you don't want to but if you're under Dad's protection, not even Engle can touch you."

"Diego," I said gently. "Who do you think volunteered me to be the ascension sacrifice in the first place? I can't go back there—it's not any safer for me than just walking up to Engle and handing myself over."

His face went pale. "Aw, come on, Luz—there must have been some kind of misunderstanding. I'm sure Mom and Dad wouldn't do that to you on purpose."

I shrugged. "You said it yourself—they'll do anything for pack status."

"Yeah, but that was then and this is now. They've changed," he insisted.

I looked down at my bare feet in the dark grass. "I wish I could believe that. I hope you're right but I can't take that chance."

"Luz, they love you."

There was a lump in my throat I couldn't swallow. "And God help me, I love them too. Even though they did what they did. I love them and hate them both—does that make any sense?"

He sighed. "No. But I don't think this kind of thing ever does."

"You're right about that." I straightened my shoulders. "I have to go."

"Go where? Look, Luz—come stay with me."

"In a house with a bunch of unmated alpha males? I might as well move into a frat house." The *Lobos* generally stuck together, ten or fifteen of them in one house, and I was pretty sure Diego didn't even have a room all to himself. In an environment like that, the scent of my virginity would be like a putting a steak in front of a starving man and expecting him not to take a bite. "You'd spend all your time defending me," I pointed out.

"At least I'd know where you were and that you were safe. Well, as long as you were with me," Diego amended.

"Thanks, little brother, but that won't work and we both know it. Look, don't worry about me. I'll find someplace to go. Maybe I'll rent a hotel room for a couple of days until things die down. Engle will forget about me again if he doesn't see me for a while."

"I don't think so. He didn't see you for fourteen years and he still wants you."

"Well, he's not going to get me." I leaned forward and kissed Diego on the cheek. I would have hugged him but I didn't think I could stand to be that close to anyone male after my run-in with Engle—not even my brother. "Thanks for defending me tonight," I said. "I know it sounds melodramatic but you saved me from a fate worse than death."

"Aw, Luz..." He blushed again.

"I mean it—you're my hero. I just hope you don't get in trouble for it. I can't believe Engle invoked the Rite of Blame on you."

"Yeah—now I have to hope that stupid *hijo de puta* doesn't even stub his toe or he'll be howling to my pack master for reparations."

"I'm so sorry, Diego. I feel horrible about that."

"Fuck it." He frowned. "Stupid outdated pack laws. When I get to be pack master of the *Lobos* I'm going to do something about them."

"You do that." I gave him another quick kiss and turned to go. "I'll see you later."

"At least let me walk you to your car."

Since we were still on Arm Gard territory, I was glad to accept. We were almost to the small dirt road that served as a parking lot when Diego spoke again.

"Hey, you're not going to go back to Jacobson, are you?" His voice was suspicious.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the door. "I told you—I'm not seeing him anymore."

"Good." He saw me safely into the car. "Because you don't want to know—"

"No, I don't," I interrupted him hastily. "Look, Diego, I need to go if I'm going to find a hotel room before it gets too late. It's already close to two."

"Yeah, okay. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

Diego nodded and shut the car door behind me. I blew him a kiss and started the engine, amazed at my own powers of deception. Of course I was going back to Jude—he was the only one who could help me.

The only one who could get Engle off my back once and for all.

Chapter Nine

Jude opened the door before I even knocked. "Hello, Luz," he said, giving me a long look. "I take it you're ready to talk."

Great, my life was falling down around my ears and he wanted to do a therapy session. But the look in his pale green eyes was nonnegotiable so I nodded reluctantly.

"Yes, I'll talk." I had a sudden burst of inspiration. "But if I do, you have to promise to help me."

Jude nodded gravely. "I will do everything in my power to aid you."

"Really? Do you give your word?" Vamps and weres are bound by their word and find it extremely hard to break. Besides, I knew Jude well enough to know he wouldn't go back on a promise he'd given me.

He frowned at me. "Give me your hand."

"No—none of that." I stepped back, afraid if he touched me he'd see what I was thinking and refuse to help me. "I just have two little favors to ask. Promise me you'll help me and then we'll talk."

To my great relief, Jude sighed and finally nodded. "I have a feeling I will regret this but...fine. I give you my word that I will help you in any way I can. So tell me favor number one."

I took a deep breath. "I need a safe place to stay for a little while."

He shook his head. "Luz, how can you doubt that I would say yes to that? My home is yours for as long as you need it." He stepped aside so I could come in the house and I entered gratefully.

"Thanks, Jude. I really appreciate it."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "And favor number two?"

"I...uh..." I hesitated uncertainly. All the way over to his house I'd been psyching myself up to do this. But now that he was standing in front of me, so tall and imposing, I just *couldn't* ask him for what I needed. Not yet, anyway.

"Luz?" he prompted me gently.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. "Look, do you mind if I take a shower before we talk about anything else? I've had a long night running through the woods and howling at the moon. That takes a lot out of a girl."

His eyes glowed with excitement. "So you were able to shift? You changed?"

"I did. I finally did." I tried to smile back. I could still feel an echo of the joy I'd had after my first—and what looked to be my last—run with the pack. But just look what that joy had cost me. Revealing my true nature and claiming my birthright had only

unwrapped a whole new pack of problems for me. On the whole, I wished I was still a non-shifter. But I couldn't tell Jude that. Instead I just asked for the shower again.

He gave me a penetrating look but only nodded. "This way." He led me to what appeared to be a guestroom for non-vamps. At least I assumed it was for non-vamps because it had windows that looked out onto his well-manicured back lawn.

"There's a bathroom through there," he said, gesturing to a door to one side of the queen-sized bed. "Towels and soap in the linen closet."

"Thanks." I was heading for the door when Jude called me back.

"Do you need something to wear afterward?" He was looking at my scruffy clothes, which were dirty and sap stained from pushing my way through the woods.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Why – do you have something my size?"

He laughed. "Hardly. But you could wear one of my shirts. It would probably be long enough."

As tall as he was, I was sure it would be. At the moment he was wearing a dark red T-shirt that looked soft and cuddly and probably smelled like him – warm and spicy. I thought of how comforting his scent was. Of how good his arms had felt around me until I'd freaked out and run away the last time. How I longed for that feeling to return – even an echo of it would be nice.

"Actually," I said. Then I stopped myself. "No, never mind."

"What?" Jude asked gently.

"I..." I looked down at my hands. "It might sound crazy but...could I wear the one you have on now?"

Without a word he took it off and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I whispered, clutching the warm fabric to my breasts. His bare chest was mouthwatering but at the moment I was too dispirited to get very excited. The events of the evening were beginning to catch up with me and I wanted to be alone when they did.

"You're welcome," Jude said. "I'll be waiting in the study when you're finished. Can you find your way?"

I nodded.

"All right." Then he left me alone and I had no other company but my worries and fears.

Trying to push the thought of what I was going to do out of my head, I headed for Jude's guest bathroom. It turned out to be as big as my living room and better furnished, with marble walls, imported tile and sparkling taps so bright I wondered if Jude employed someone just to spend all day polishing them. Leaving my dirty clothes in a heap in the corner, I climbed into the large, echoing shower and turned the hot water on full blast.

Then and only then, when I was sure the sound of running water would drown me out, did I give in and let the tears come. I cried for my miserable past and my doubtful

future. For what had almost happened to me, and what was about to happen – what *had* to happen if I was ever going to be free. But most of all I wept because I was sure that after tonight, I was never going to be able to see Jude again. I wouldn't be able to stand it – not if things went according to plan.

After a while my sobs turned into hiccups and I realized that the night wasn't getting any younger. If I wanted to get this over with tonight, I had to get a move on. I got out of the shower and rubbed myself dry with an Egyptian-cotton towel that was nicer than my bedspread at home. Then I twisted my damp hair into a loose knot at the nape of my neck and pulled on Jude's red T-shirt.

The shirt smelled like his skin, just as I had hoped, and I did indeed find myself comforted. I didn't have any panties to wear with it since I hadn't bothered to bring any in my shifting outfit, but it didn't matter because the shirt came down to mid-thigh on me. If I'd had a belt I could have worn it out as a dress, albeit a slightly short one.

I made my way to the study where Jude was sitting on the couch, staring into the fire. He hadn't bothered to put on another shirt so the broad marble planes of his chest and the sharp lines of his face were alternately bathed in a reddish-golden glow and hidden in the flickering shadows.

I stood watching him for a long time before I could make myself go sit beside him. The way I was feeling and what I was planning to say made me take the far opposite end of the couch, as far away from him as I could get.

If Jude wondered about the distance I'd put between us, it didn't show in his expression. Instead he turned to look at me, his face calm in the firelight. "Tell me," he said and I knew I had to, even though it was going to hurt like hell. In fact, dredging up the past and actually putting it into words was going to be one of the hardest things I'd ever done in my life.

Might as well get started.

I took a deep breath. "When I was thirteen and ready to make my first shift, our pack – the Armenia Garden Estates wolf pack – was celebrating the ascension of a new pack master. It doesn't happen that often – maybe every fifteen to twenty years if the pack master steps down voluntarily – longer if he decides to stay and fight any challengers to his position. The pack master isn't just a figurehead, either – he rules the roost. He can make or break a family's status in the pack so there's a lot of ass kissing that goes on – everybody wants to make him happy."

Okay, now I was just rambling. I made myself get to the point.

"Anyway, the ascension ceremony is a big deal and part of it..." I cleared my throat. "Part of it is the deflowering of a virgin – but it has to be a new wolf, one who has never shifted before the night of the ceremony." I looked down at my hands. "There were several girls who fit the bill but my parents were the only ones who volunteered their daughter – who volunteered me, I mean." I looked up at him.

Jude's face was like stone. "That is barbaric."

I laughed but it didn't come out sounding very happy. "That's rich—coming from a vampire."

He shook his head. "There is a difference between punishing and killing enemies and raping innocent children. Forgive me if I say I don't think much of were culture right now."

"That's all right, I don't think much of it either." I looked down at my fingers, which were twisted together tightly in my lap. "Nobody really told me what was going to happen—only that being involved in the ceremony was a great honor and I was going to be helping my family by doing whatever it was the new pack master wanted me to do." I shrugged. "I wasn't stupid but I was...I guess I was naïve. My parents were pretty strict—sent us to private school, didn't let us watch much television, restricted our reading materials. So I didn't really know a whole lot about sex. Almost nothing, actually."

"The night of the full moon came and some of the older female pack members came to get me. They gave me a special bath with lots of herbs—I remember thinking I smelled like a florist shop when they were finished. Then they dressed me in a long, white robe and nothing else and took me to the altar in the woods."

Jude's eyes widened. "They have an *altar*?"

I nodded. "It's like a ritual sacrifice—the sacrifice of the girl's virginity. Of course, the actual deflowering can't take place until after she's shifted and run with the pack on her first hunt. That's because she isn't considered sexually mature until she has. But before the hunt, she's tied to the altar in her human form so that the pack master can look her over and declare her a fitting offering for his lust."

I looked into the fire, remembering that night, reliving it as I had tried not to for so many years.

"Luz," Jude said softly. "You don't have to go on."

I looked up at him. "Yes, I do. You wanted to know—well, all right, I'm telling you. Unless you'd rather not hear the ugly truth?"

He looked at me gravely. "I will hear whatever it is you need to tell me."

"Fine." I looked back at the fire because it was easier to talk about when I couldn't see the pity in his eyes. "They took away the robe and tied me to the altar," I said, remembering the way the full moon had looked so white and uncaring, floating high above me like a ghost. "That was when he came to me and...and I started to be afraid."

I closed my eyes tightly, remembering. "I wasn't used to being naked and I had never...never been touched before. Not the way he touched me. He...his hands were everywhere. In my mouth, on my breasts, between...between my legs." I swallowed hard. "He even put his fingers inside me to see...to see how tight I was. Then he climbed on the altar with me."

"Luz—" Jude began but I held up a hand to stop him. I had to get this out now or I never would.

"He climbed on the altar with me," I repeated. "And he told me how it would be—what he was going to do to me, how he was going to...to take me. He...there were other males with him—other alphas—and they laughed when he talked about it, when he said how much he was going to enjoy fucking me." I felt raw inside but still I couldn't stop. "He...he tried to fit himself inside me. But I was too tight and I was screaming by then. He just laughed and said I could scream until I was hoarse. Because...because after the hunt he was going to do whatever he wanted."

Something wet and warm dripped off my cheek and landed on my clasped hands. I didn't feel like I was crying but apparently I was. Still, waterworks or not, I had to finish my story.

"I thought there must be some misunderstanding—that what he was doing was wrong. You're taught not to let people touch you like that—to report it to the nearest adult. So as soon as they untied me and let me go, I ran to find my mother. I-I told her what had happened and I thought she would tell my father and he would stop it."

"That isn't what happened," Jude murmured and it wasn't a question.

I shook my head. "No. She told me it was time I grew up and learned that not all of being an adult is pleasant. She said...said that I had to go through with it for the family—that it was my duty. And of course my father backed her up."

I could still remember the horrible feeling of betrayal. The realization that what had happened to me was sanctioned by the people who were supposed to love and care for me and that they expected me to go back and let it happen again—only worse next time. I tried to tell Jude that but it hurt too much to put into words. I shook my head, deciding to skip to the next part.

"I knew then that I couldn't get out of it. The pack master had accepted me as a sacrifice and by pack law he owned me—or at least my virginity. And after the hunt he was going to take it—to take me—on that cold stone altar, any way he wanted, for as long as he wanted. And this time the entire pack would be watching."

I lifted the hem of the T-shirt I wore and blotted my eyes.

"Luz..." Jude's voice was hoarse and when I looked up, I saw my own pain reflected in his eyes. Somehow I made myself go on.

"The time to shift came and all around me everyone was changing. People becoming wolves in the moonlight—it was magical. And I knew I was supposed to do it too—I'd been looking forward to it my entire life. But I just..."

"You couldn't," Jude said quietly.

I shook my head. "I couldn't. I tried—or I told myself I tried, anyway. But then I couldn't breathe and I started to tremble and feel sick to my stomach..."

"You had a panic attack."

"The first of many as it turns out. But since I couldn't shift, I wasn't technically sexually mature. So Engle—the pack master, I mean—couldn't have me." I blotted my

eyes again. "It was a huge scandal, of course. It ruined the ascension ceremony and both my parents and the pack master were furious."

Jude's eyes flashed red. "Savages."

"Not in their eyes, they weren't. To them, it was all my fault. To me too, I guess." I sighed. "After that, nothing I ever did was good enough. My grades suffered because when I felt put under pressure—like trying to pass a major test—I panicked. I had terrible nightmares and I couldn't eat because everything that went down came right back up again. I felt like my parents hated me—almost as much as I hated myself. I think...I think I would have killed myself eventually if it wasn't for my little brother."

"You care for him a lot," Jude observed.

"More that all the rest of them put together," I said. "He was too young to know what was happening—too young to condone it or to condemn me afterward when I couldn't shift. Being around him made me feel calm and gradually I learned to forget, to push it under the rug and pretend it never happened."

"That's why I was so clueless when I first met you. I'd been telling myself for years that it hadn't happened or that it wasn't worth remembering." I shook my head. "I pretended I didn't know why I had panic attacks and freaked out under pressure, pretended I didn't know why I couldn't shift. And I did it so well that I believed it myself." I pinched the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. "God, I wish I could have just kept on pretending."

Jude frowned. "So what broke the cycle? Did your successful shift tonight bring it back? Or was it what happened between us a few nights ago?"

"Neither. Both." I shook my head. "I think it was always in the back of my mind, to tell you the truth. I just didn't want to face it. But lately...lately I've had to." I sighed. "The past is bad enough but I have new problems now."

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow. "What happened to you tonight, Luz?"

I cleared my throat. "I'll tell you but first you have to promise me you won't take matters into your own hands. No killing or skinning or beheading anyone, no matter how angry you get. Okay?"

There was a dangerous gleam in Jude's eyes. "And why must I make this promise?"

I explained about Diego and the way Engle had invoked the Rite of Blame on him. "So now if something happens to Engle—anything at all—until their conflict is settled, Diego is to blame. He could be banished from his pack or even killed—depending on how his own pack master reacts. It's very serious—that's why you *have* to keep your temper."

"I am holding on to it with both hands, as the expression goes. Please, continue." Jude made a motion with one hand. "Was it this Engle who threatened you tonight?"

I nodded miserably. "He's still the pack master so technically, my virginity is still his to claim until he steps down. And I don't think he will step down until he gets it—gets *me*."

"Didn't I tell you that no one would take you against your will? He will *never* have you." Jude's eyes were blazing red by now, which I was learning meant he was either deep in lust or very angry. I didn't think it was the former.

I bit my lower lip. "The thing is, I think he's been planning this for a long time. He was the one who hired those two human goons who tried to kidnap me—I think he was going to...going to take me whether it was legal or not. Which it wasn't at the time they tried to grab me—not by pack law, anyway. But now that I've shifted, no one can argue that it's his right to have me. It's his right to take my virginity." I took a deep breath and looked at Jude. "Which is why I need you to help me get rid of it."

He frowned at me. "What are you talking about?"

"It makes perfect sense," I said, trying to sound logical. "It's my virginity Engle is after. The moment it's gone, he has no more claim or interest in me. I'm safe, my brother's safe, and we can all go on with our lives. It's the only solution."

"No." Jude shook his head emphatically. "No, Luz—I won't do this."

"You have to." I lifted my chin and looked him in the eye. "You promised. This is my second request and you gave your word to honor it."

"I didn't give my word to rape you." He was really angry now—his eyes glowing like coals in the dim room. He scooted closer to me on the couch but I flinched away before he could touch me.

"It's not...it wouldn't be rape." I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. "I-I'm giving you my consent. I'm not unwilling."

"Luz, look at yourself." Jude's voice dropped and his eyes were suddenly normal again. "You *are* unwilling and I don't blame you for it in the least." He put out a hand to me and I flinched away again—I couldn't help it. "See?" he said quietly. "You can't even stand to have me touch you right now."

"I can stand it," I said. "I-I have to stand it. Please, Jude, this is the only way."

He shook his head. "You sit here and tell me your tale of abuse and betrayal and then expect me to abuse and betray you also? I tell you, Luz, I cannot do it."

"You have to," I said, looking him in the eye. "You promised to help me. So damn it, Jude—help me!"

His eyes were blazing again and suddenly he was looming over me. "And how do you expect me to do it? Should I hold you down, ignore your screams and tears? Force myself inside you and take my pleasure no matter how you beg me not to?"

He was so close now I could feel the heat from his big body branding me. Every instinct I had screamed at me to run, to get away from the masculine form about to cover my own, but I forced myself to hold still. I didn't move a muscle...until he cupped my cheek in his hand.

At his touch, something broke inside me. I jumped up from the couch and was halfway to the door before I could make myself stop. *No, can't run. Have to stay. Have to*

let him. As pep talks go, it wasn't much, but at least it reminded me of what I had to do. I turned to face him, my breath coming short and my heart jackhammering in my chest.

"Do you see now, beloved?" Jude's voice was gentle again. "You're traumatized right now. It may take you weeks or even months to be ready to try anything physical again. Tonight is not the night for this."

"Tonight is the *only* night for this," I countered. "The longer I let this go, the greater the chances that Engle will find a way to pin some imagined slight or injury on my brother. I need my virginity gone *now*. This won't be over until my scent changes and everyone can tell I'm not a virgin anymore."

Jude was shaking his head and I knew I had to find some other way to convince him. "Look," I said, making myself walk toward the couch where he was still sitting and watching me. "I know...I know I'm a little jumpy right now. But I swear I'll try not to run away again. I mean, maybe you could tie me up and just...just do it fast. Couldn't you please do that?"

"You're asking me to tie you down so you can't run away while I force myself on you?" He looked at me incredulously.

"If you have to," I said stubbornly.

"Luz, please listen to me." Jude put out a hand and, very reluctantly, I allowed him to take my fingers and pull me toward the couch. His hand on mine was scary at first but I forced myself to get used to it. He'd touched me much more intimately than this, I reminded myself. It was just that I was so jumpy right now.

When I was seated beside him, a good deal closer than was comfortable, he continued. "It isn't that I don't want to make love to you," he said, looking intently into my eyes. "There is nothing I desire more—except not to hurt you. And what you're asking me to do would scar you—scar both of us. It might solve your problem but it would make you hate me also. And I would hate myself." He sighed. "I don't want that for either of us. So please, beloved, don't ask me again."

I could feel my heart breaking because I knew everything he said was true. But at the same time, I still didn't see any other way out of my dilemma. It was this or nothing. Now or never.

"I-I'm sorry if this is hurting you," I said, watching his long fingers interlaced with mine. "But I can't help it, Jude." I looked up at him. "I need you to do this for me. I have to ask you to keep your promise."

He took a deep breath and for a minute I thought he was going to be angry again. But all he said was, "Very well."

Then he picked me up and carried me down the hall and into his bedroom.

Chapter Ten

The satin sheets on the bed were blood red this time—which seemed fitting considering what we were about to do. I tried not to think about my last abortive effort at sex in this room but I couldn't help flashing on the way I had freaked out and run away the minute Jude had begun to enter me. God, how was I going to get through this? *You'll get through it because you have to*, I told myself sternly. *And besides, maybe it won't be so bad.*

Maybe it wouldn't at that. After all, Jude was holding me, carrying me close to his broad chest, and I wasn't screaming or struggling to get away. Of course, neither was I very relaxed or enjoying the closeness with him in any way. I held my body stiff, like a piece of wood, anticipating the moment he would lay me down and stop touching me.

It came soon enough when he deposited me gently on the bed and murmured that he would be right back. I wasn't sure where he was going and I wasn't sure if I cared. I just concentrated on not jumping up and running away. Instead I closed my eyes and imagined looking down on myself from the ceiling—a petite woman with long, curly black hair and dark eyes ensconced in a sea of red satin. I thought it must look as if I were lying in a pool of blood, which wasn't very comforting. But before I could brood too much over the position I found myself in, Jude returned.

Dangling from his hand was a pair of handcuffs.

I could tell they were silver the minute he got close to me and very high content, at that. There was a sharp metallic tang in the air that alerted me to the fact. They would have burned any vamp or were they were put on except for the fact that the cuffs were encircled with thick black velvet to block skin contact.

But covered or not, they were enough to start my heart racing all over again. *Easy*, I told myself, trying to stay where I was and not run away. *You asked him to tie you down—he's just doing what you said.* It didn't matter how I tried to calm myself, though—I still stared at the velvet-covered silver handcuffs in dismay. The thought of being held down, unable to move while Jude parted my legs and did what I'd all but begged him to do had me in a cold sweat. *But it's still better than Engle*, I reminded myself, trying to control my breathing. That was true. But there was no denying that no matter who took my virginity, it was bound to be an excruciatingly awful experience.

"Nice cuffs," I made myself say, hoping my voice didn't sound too shaky. "Where...where did you get them?"

He raised an eyebrow. "My father was a magistrate among our kind. These were specially made to restrain even the strongest vampire. There is absolutely no possibility of escape once they're put on."

"I-I see." I had to blink rapidly because black spots were suddenly dancing in front of my eyes. It took an enormous effort of self-control but I took a deep breath and made myself sit up and hold out my bare wrists to him. "Do it," I said, my voice tight. "Just do it quickly, that's all I ask."

"Luz..." He sat down beside me on the bed and put the cuffs to one side. Then he gathered me to him, cradling me in his lap. "Be still," he murmured, when I moved restlessly against him. "Be still, Luz. Let me hold you. Let yourself relax."

I didn't think I could relax—not with the thought of the silver handcuffs dancing in my brain, but I *could* let him hold me. We sat there, unmoving, for what felt like hours and finally I began to be less tense. Carefully, as though he was touching a wild animal that might bolt, Jude began to stroke my hair. He used a soft, almost hypnotic rhythm, his big hand moving over my curls in long, soothing strokes. So slowly I barely knew what was happening, he pressed my head toward him until it was resting on his shoulder.

The warm scent of his skin invaded my senses and the heat of his big body against mine began to seem comforting instead of threatening. I didn't even mind the way his large arms encircled me, holding me close. It felt safe instead of scary to be held that way—it felt right.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice less shaky.

"Gentling you. I want you to know that no matter what happens, you'll always be safe in my arms."

How I wanted to believe him! I turned my face to the warm skin of his chest and breathed him in, filling my lungs with his comforting scent, allowing myself to enjoy having him close. I knew in a moment my calm would turn to fear, that the minute Jude put me on my back and spread my legs the panic would return full force. But I didn't want to deal with that until I had to. Right then I just wanted to relax and breathe his scent and let him hold me.

After what felt like an eternity, Jude put me down carefully and picked up the cuffs. Immediately my heart rate skyrocketed and my breathing became more shallow. *Here we go. This is it. No turning back now.*

I held out my wrists again but Jude shook his head. "No, Luz, these aren't for you."

"Not for me? But then why...what..." I looked at him in confusion. But instead of putting the cuffs on my wrists, he put them in the palm of my hand and curled my fingers around them.

"They're for me, beloved," he murmured. Moving slowly, never taking his eyes off me, he pushed down his jeans and boxers until he was bare before me. He wasn't hard—not yet—and he was careful not to crowd me once he was naked. Instead, he lay on his back in the middle of the bed and put his arms up over his head.

I looked at him stupidly. "I don't understand."

"Put them on me," Jude said patiently. "There's a center strut in the middle of the headboard—you can slide the chain through there."

I still wasn't getting it. "But why...how can you do, uh, what you have to do if you're chained up?"

A small smile flitted around the corners of his full mouth. "I'll be able to perform, never fear. But only if *you* come to *me*."

"This isn't what I meant at all," I protested.

"I know. But if we're going to do this, we'll do it my way." He looked at me sternly. "I'll keep my word to you on *my* terms. And my terms are that you chain me up. You're going to take the lead on this one, Luz. You're going to be completely in control."

For some reason his words seemed to echo in my mind. I had never thought of doing anything like this—not even in my most vivid nightmares or wildest fantasies. It seemed wrong for Jude to be the one tied down and not me, but it was also strangely appealing.

"Go on." Jude nodded at the cuffs, his muscular arms still stretched up over his head. "Do it, Luz."

Numbly, I did as he said. I crawled to the head of the bed and circled one of his wrists with a velvet-covered cuff. "You *do* have the key for these, don't you?" I asked as I threaded the chain that connected the cuffs around the base of the headboard. "I mean, this would be really hard to explain if we had to call a locksmith."

"The key is in the top right drawer of my armoire." He nodded at the tall, solid oak piece of furniture that looked like it had been made in Colonial times. "But you won't have to use it until you're done."

I finished clicking his other hand in place, making sure everything was secure. Then I sat back on my heels and just looked at him. Stretched out on the bed, naked as he was, he was a real treat for the eyes. There wasn't a spare ounce of flesh on him anywhere—it was just a vast expanse of marble-white rippling muscle. His nipples stood out, two small pink nubs in the center of his broad chest, and his sculpted torso led to narrow hips and long, muscular legs. A soft trail of dark blond hair ran from his navel to his shaft.

Looking at it, I saw that he still wasn't aroused but neither was he completely soft either. Hmm, did he like being restrained or did he like the fact that it was me doing the restraining? Either way, I found that I didn't feel nearly as threatened as I had earlier. What had bothered me before he was cuffed wasn't just his cock—it was how big he was, how obviously and completely male. After what I'd been through, just being with someone so much bigger and stronger than me was scary. But with Jude restrained and unable to touch me, I felt much of my fear leak away to be replaced with just the tiniest spark of interest.

I looked back up to his face after my leisurely visual tour. "Now what?"

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Now you take the lead, Luz. I am completely at your mercy."

"But I..." I licked my lips. "Jude, I'm not sure I can do this."

"Then it won't get done. If you want me, you'll have to take me."

When I was still silent he lifted his head and looked into my eyes. "I am serious. Do whatever you want to me, Luz. I'm yours."

I fluttered my hands helplessly. "I appreciate the offer. I just...don't know where to start."

"Why not start with a kiss?"

"That sounds nice," I admitted, and it did. Now that he was the helpless one, I found myself remembering how much I liked to kiss him and how delicious his mouth always tasted.

I was still near the head of the bed kneeling beside him so it was easy to lean over, my hair hanging to one side like a dark curtain, and press my lips to his. They were soft and giving and for a minute Jude didn't even try to kiss me back. He just let me take my time exploring his mouth. Then slowly he parted his lips—an invitation. One I felt ready to accept.

Carefully, I slipped my tongue into his mouth, lapping tentatively, tasting him as delicately as a butterfly drinking nectar from a flower. Jude held very, very still but finally I felt just the tip of his tongue brush mine. I withdrew for a minute but then came back for more.

Jude began to kiss me back, slowly at first and then with more strength. I traced his fangs carefully, feeling their sharp points against my sensitive flesh and sucked his tongue, taking him into me. He groaned softly and I felt a surge of empowerment at the low sound. *I* was the one turning him on and I had the power to continue to feed his desire or to leave him wanting.

I don't know how long we kissed but I do know that at some point it wasn't enough and I wanted more—wanted to explore him. Slowly, I kissed my way down the strong column of his throat, nipping playfully to make him groan again. Jude definitely liked being bitten, maybe as much as he liked biting, something I would have to keep in mind for the future.

A part of me wondered, *What future?* Hadn't I decided I would never want to see him after this was over? But somehow, I no longer felt that way—maybe because I was no longer afraid. I didn't feel like a victim anymore. I felt strong, empowered and, from the way Jude was responding to my attentions, I was beginning to feel sexy too.

I reached his nipples and teased the hard little nubs with my tongue. Then I looked up at him. "Do you like that?"

His eyes were glowing softly in the dim room. "I love the feel of your sweet mouth on any part of me," he murmured, his gaze fixed on mine.

"What about this?" I sucked a nipple into my mouth again, nipping him sharply until he gasped.

Jude's eyes were half lidded now and his deep voice was hoarse when he answered. "Do as you wish, Luz. Lick, suck, or bite me—I don't care as long as you don't stop."

"I don't want to stop," I whispered, and to my surprise it was true. In the slow exploration of his body and the knowledge that I was utterly and completely safe with him, I had found the desire I had thought would never come back. The flame of my lust had been rekindled and though it was only a tiny spark right now, I had the feeling that with a little encouragement it could become a raging bonfire.

"What next?" I asked Jude. I wasn't quite ready to touch him lower yet—I needed a little more time before I could go there. But I wanted to keep the momentum building, wanted to keep feeding the flames of desire I could feel growing between us.

"Do you feel ready to let me see you?" he asked softly. "You don't have to if you'd rather not, but I would love to look at your beautiful body again."

Although earlier that evening I would rather have died than let him see me naked, it suddenly seemed like a good idea. I remembered the way I had felt the other night, before things had gone wrong. The way I had seen myself through Jude's eyes and had known deep down that I was beautiful. I wanted that feeling—that knowledge of my own beauty—again.

"All right," I said, making a decision. "I think I can do that." I sat back on my heels and reached for the hem of the red T-shirt. Then slowly, taking my time, I pulled it up and over my head, baring my body to him completely.

Jude gave a low murmur of appreciation.

"What?" I asked, uncertain of what he'd said.

"Beautiful." He smiled at me. "You're so beautiful, Luz."

I felt a sudden stab of regret. "Beautiful and broken, you mean." I crossed my arms over my bare breasts and looked down.

"That which is broken can be fixed," Jude said softly. "Don't hide yourself, Luz. Let me see you."

Reluctantly, I let my arms fall to my side and watched his face as he drank me in. He didn't say anything else but his expression of reverent desire made me feel beautiful as no words ever could. *I'm the one who put that look on his face*, I thought, loving the way it made me feel. *I'm the one he wants. And I want him too.*

With that realization, I understood that letting him look at me wasn't enough. I wanted to feel close to him, to feel his skin against mine. Slowly I lay down beside him and pressed my bare breasts against his side.

"Mmm, that's nice." Jude smiled down at me and I knew he wished he could put his arms around me. I wished it too, but I was still more comfortable having him restrained. So I didn't mention the handcuff key in the top drawer of his armoire and he didn't either.

"You're always so warm," I murmured, nuzzling my face against him. "I thought vamps were supposed to be cold."

"Made vampires are," he said, his voice rumbling through me since I had my ear pressed to his chest. "Their bodies are essentially human so the blood they ingest

doesn't really circulate—it only keeps them alive. But I was born a vampire so this state is natural for me. As natural as changing during a full moon is for you."

I sighed. "I wonder if it will ever really be natural for me. Or if I'll find a place I can change and be left alone."

"Everything will be made right in the fullness of time." Jude bent his neck to kiss the top of my head. "Don't think about it now, Luz."

I looked up at him. "What should I think about then?"

He gave me a lazy smile. "I don't know about you, but I was thinking how good your breasts feel pressed against my chest. Do you think you could let me kiss them?"

I bit my lower lip, feeling a surge of desire mixed with uncertainty. Up until now, I had been doing all the touching. But now Jude wanted to change things by touching me—well, kissing me anyway.

Where's the harm? whispered a little voice in my head. *It's not like things can get out of hand—he's chained down.* It was true and it gave me the surge of confidence I needed.

"All right," I said, sitting up so I could look at him more easily. "I guess that would be okay."

"Come here, then." His voice was rough with lust and I felt another surge of confidence when I realized that it was lust he could do nothing about. It was entirely up to me if he touched me or not. Entirely up to me how far we would go and what we would do.

I crawled higher on the bed and leaned over him to put my breasts in his face but the angle was wrong.

"Straddle me," Jude said. "Put your knees on either side of my chest."

For a moment I hesitated to be so open, so close to him. But the desire I could see burning in his eyes and the heat that was slowly building between my own thighs helped decide me. Moving a little awkwardly, trying not to hurt him, I got one knee on either side of his chest and leaned down, letting my breasts brush against his face.

I expected him to suck one of my nipples into his mouth at once but he didn't. Instead he began by nuzzling against me, pressing his face to the slopes of my breasts, breathing me in as I had breathed him in earlier. Then, slowly and carefully, he began to lick and kiss.

His hot tongue made a ticklish trail across my flesh and I quickly realized that since Jude had limited mobility, it was up to me where he licked me. I could give him the undersides of my breasts, or the sides, or the nipples if I wished. All I had to do was move against him and he would gladly accept whatever part I offered.

I played with my new power for a while, teasing him by offering just the sides of my breasts and one or two quick licks at my areolas. But at last my desire grew too great and I pressed one of my nipples against his seeking mouth.

Keeping his eyes on mine to see my reaction, Jude slowly extended his tongue. I moaned breathlessly as he lapped my tight pink nub and then sucked it into his mouth.

He was gentle at first and then, when I moved restlessly against him, he increased his suction, taking as much of my breast as he could into his mouth at one time. I could feel the twin points of his fangs bracketing my tender nipple and knew he was being careful not to bite me—even though I don't think I would have minded at that point.

Jude sucked and licked for a long time and then I gave him the other nipple. I could feel the pull of his hot mouth all the way down between my legs where my pussy was getting wet and ready. It seemed amazing that he could have this effect on me after the trauma I'd endured earlier but I couldn't deny my own arousal. I didn't think it would have been possible without his infinite patience and the fact that I had complete and total control of the situation, but it was true—I wanted him.

After what seemed like hours of having him suck my nipples, I sat back, panting. I was ready for more but I didn't know what. One look in Jude's eyes told me he did, though—and he was eager to share his ideas.

"What is it?" I asked, half amused and completely turned-on. "What do you want to kiss now?"

"I think you know, Luz." His eyes flicked down between my legs to where my pussy slit was slippery with my juices. My legs were spread wide to straddle his broad chest and the position opened me up, showing the deep pink of my inner folds. "You're wet, aren't you?" he murmured.

"Yes," I whispered, feeling a pleasurable kind of embarrassment.

He looked at me with that lazy smile. "What do you think we should do about that?"

"I don't know." I returned his smile tentatively. "But I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"I want to taste you. Want to put my tongue inside you and lick and suck all that sweet cunt honey I can see all over your pussy." His voice was hoarse with need—a need I felt echoed in myself.

"All right," I said softly. "But I'm not sure how...should I uncuff you so you can reach me?"

Jude's response was immediate. "No, don't do that yet. I don't want you to set me free until we're completely finished."

"But then how..."

"Sit on my face," he answered my unfinished question. "Just come a little higher and put your knees on either side of my head. Then lower yourself down so I can reach you."

"I'll hurt you," I objected. But Jude shook his head.

"You can't. Remember what I am, Luz. Vampires are nearly indestructible so there is no way you can hurt me with your sweet, curvy body."

"You're sure?" I asked uncertainly.

"Very sure." His eyes were burning again but this time I knew the red light in them was pure lust. "You know how I love to taste you, Luz. Don't deny me."

I didn't want to deny him or myself. There was no doubt he could do magical things with his tongue and I couldn't help remembering the overwhelming pleasure he'd given me that last two times he'd gone down on me.

Moving carefully, I crawled up his body and repositioned myself with my knees on either side of his head, just as he'd asked. Luckily the headboard was close enough to grab on to now so I used it for leverage as I lowered myself slowly and tentatively toward his eager mouth.

I felt a long, slow lick from the bottom of my slit to the top and heard Jude's low rumble of desire as he tasted me again. Pleasure spiked through me as he darted his tongue over my swollen folds and flicked it rapidly against my clit. But though the feelings were delicious and intense, they weren't quite enough to push me over the edge.

Jude seemed to understand my problem because he stopped licking and looked up at me, his eyes burning with need. "You need to trust me, Luz. I'll never be able to make you come in this position unless you give me more direct contact."

"You need me to come down lower?" I asked and he nodded.

"Come all the way down for me, beloved. And don't be afraid to move. I love to press my tongue against you and feel you take your pleasure with me."

"Take my pleasure?" I asked.

"Ride me. Ride my tongue." The look in his eyes was beyond lust and I could tell that this, more than anything else we'd done together, made him hotter than hell. "I love the taste of your juices," he murmured. "Come down to me, Luz, and let me drink again."

His words and the look in his eyes aroused me all over again. "All right," I said, breathlessly. "I-I trust you, Jude. I'll come lower."

"Very good," he murmured and flicked his surprisingly long tongue up to bathe my clit once more.

I moaned softly and lowered myself down on him as he seemed to want. This time I didn't hold back. His perfect confidence made me confident too, so when I felt his tongue, flat and hot against my open cunt, I pressed against it, rocking against him in a slow, delicious rhythm that sent showers of sparks humming through my entire body.

Jude held still and let me use him. I made the most of what he offered, rubbing my pussy against his tongue and reveling in the feeling of his hot, wet mouth against me. I didn't have to worry if he was enjoying himself either—the low groan I could hear building in his chest let me know he was loving every minute of the long, intimate kiss. He swallowed every once in a while, lapping briefly at me before going back to holding still, and I knew he was tasting my juices, just as he'd wanted to.

Slowly at first and then faster, I felt myself beginning to climb to the peak. I was getting close...so *close*. I gripped the headboard until my knuckles turned white and threw back my head, feeling the ends of my long hair tickling the small of my back. The orgasm was in my reach—if I could just grab it...

Biting my lower lip, I pressed as hard as I could, pumping my hips in time to my own internal rhythm, working myself against Jude, riding his tongue as he had asked me to. And then, finally, the orgasm was on me, rolling over me like a warm tide. I couldn't think anymore—couldn't do anything but feel. I was gasping and crying, gripping the headboard with one hand and Jude's thick hair with the other as I shuddered with pleasure, giving myself up to the delicious sensation of his mouth against my pussy.

Jude's response was immediate. As soon as the first tremors of orgasm were over, he moved his mouth down and pressed his tongue deep inside me. The feeling of it filling me, of his short, shallow strokes inside my trembling inner walls, almost made me come again. God, in this position he could really get his tongue deep inside me. It was almost like...

Almost like he was fucking me with his cock.

The thought almost stopped me cold. Because it wasn't fear or loathing I felt when I imagined Jude moving inside me. It was desire. Need. Lust. I wanted him in me—really wanted him.

I moved back, out of reach of his mouth and started to tell him I felt ready but the look in his eyes stopped me. They were burning and hooded, so filled with longing and desire it took my breath away. His mouth was shiny with my juices, his lips red from our prolonged erotic contact.

"Kiss me," he rasped and it wasn't a request.

Leaning over I pressed my mouth to his, moaning softly when I tasted myself on him. Jude pressed his tongue rhythmically into my mouth, just as he had done to my pussy a few moments earlier. I twined my fingers through his hair and held on tight, kissing and sucking and licking, trying to get every last trace of my honey from his lips.

The way Jude kissed me—and let me kiss him—was amazing. But now more than ever, I knew I wanted more. So at last I straightened up and looked at him.

"Jude," I murmured. "I want you in me."

"Are you sure?" Some of the lust in his eyes faded to concern. "Really sure this time? I don't want you to rush yourself or do anything you're not ready to do."

"I'm sure," I said and this time there was no niggling little voice of doubt at the back of my brain. I was ready for him, body and soul.

When I scooted lower, straddling his hips instead of his chest, I saw that Jude was ready for me too. His shaft was rigid, almost pulsing it was so hard, and the head of it was glossy with his precum. He moaned raggedly as I circled it with my fingers and I knew if he hadn't been cuffed to the bed, his hands would have been all over me, stroking my breasts...caressing my thighs...teasing my pussy.

I liked the idea so much I almost uncuffed him right then and there. But I remembered the way I had felt ready before and then freaked out. Better to leave him as he was and see how I reacted to the feel of his long cock entering me before I rashly decided that I was healed enough emotionally to let him go.

I had him in my hand and was ready to start but I felt...awkward...unsure. I'd seen sex in movies and I had a vibrator I used regularly but it seemed strange to just saddle up and mount him while he lay there supine on the bed.

Jude must have seen the uncertainty on my face because he lifted his head and caught my eyes with his own. "Are you all right, Luz?"

"I am, I really am," I told him truthfully. "And I want to do this but it seems strange to just, I don't know...stick it in."

Jude rumbled laughter. "Then don't just 'stick it in' as you put it. Take your time. Rub me against yourself. Make yourself feel good first."

It sounded like good advice to me. Grasping him firmly in one hand, I lowered myself until I could stroke the broad head of his shaft over my slippery inner folds. Jude and I moaned at the same time as he slid over me, teasing the heated pearl of my clit with his cock.

"Like this?" I asked, as I did it again, looking into his eyes.

"Just like that, beloved." He groaned again. "That's right—use me to make yourself feel good, work yourself against me, Luz."

I was really beginning to get into it now. The feel of his hot, hard shaft slipping back and forth over my open pussy and hearing Jude's low groans as I rubbed him against me was incredibly arousing. It must have been for him too. Judging from the hot look in his eyes and the way his hands were clenched into fists, he was enjoying the show I was putting on and the feel of my pussy against his cock almost as much as I was.

It was inevitable that his shaft would finally find entry to my channel. I was enjoying myself too much to pay attention to how far I was letting him slide and before I knew it, the broad, plum-shaped head was lodged firmly at the entrance to my pussy. In fact, it was almost halfway inside me before I realized what was happening and stopped.

"Luz?" Jude looked at me again, lust and concern mingling in his face. "You can end this now, if you need to," he said though I could tell from the tension in his big body how much he wanted me to continue. "It's all right. Just stop."

But this was what I had come here to do and by now I not only needed to do it—I *wanted* to. Wanted to feel Jude inside me, filling me to the limit. Wanted to give myself to him and see the look in his eyes when he came inside me. Was I still a little frightened? Yes, I had to admit to myself. But my desire for Jude and the trust I felt for him was enough to overcome that with a stronger, deeper emotion.

Looking him in the eye, I said, "I don't want to stop." And then, my legs trembling with the effort to hold myself in position, I began to lower myself down.

Of course, it was easier said than done. I'd had nothing inside me but a very slim wand vibrator and Jude was considerably longer and over twice as thick as my little toy. I bit my lower lip as I felt him stretch me while he slid deeper and deeper into me, inch by inch.

"Slowly, beloved," Jude urged me, watching as I lowered myself onto him. "I don't want to hurt you – you're very tight."

"I know," I said softly, still trying to ease him into me. "I'm sorry."

Jude shook his head. "Don't apologize, Luz. You're beautiful. Beautiful and brave, taking me inside you like this. You have no idea how erotic it is to watch your tight pussy sliding down onto my shaft."

It *was* an incredibly hot sight, watching his thick cock disappear into my cunt. And the pleasure wasn't purely visual, either. Despite the stretching feeling as he entered me, it felt good too – felt right to be filled with him so intimately. And because I was the one in control I had no fear or anxiety about having him inside me. I knew at any time I wanted I could get up and walk away. Though I had no wish to do that, the knowledge that I could if I wanted to gave me the strength and confidence to keep going. And then finally, his pelvis was flush with mine and I knew he was all the way inside me.

I moaned softly as the head of his cock pressed hard against the end of my channel and Jude gave an answering groan. But to give him credit, he didn't move a muscle though every instinct he had must have been screaming for him to thrust into me as hard as he could.

Bracing my hands on his torso, I rested and trying to get used to being filled with him. Jude was as still as a stone underneath me but I could feel his cock throbbing with need, stretching me even as we were both perfectly still. At last I looked up at him.

"How does it feel?" He was watching me with half-lidded eyes, desire written plainly on his face.

"Good," I said. "I feel...I've never felt this full before. But I think I like it." I moved tentatively and Jude made a low, appreciative sound.

"That's right," he growled softly. "Do that again, Luz. Move up and down – fuck yourself on me."

The hot, dirty words seemed to ignite something inside me. With a soft moan of pleasure, I lifted myself so that several inches of his long shaft slid out of me and then lowered myself again until I felt him all the way inside me once more. Then I did it again...and again.

Each time I raised off him a little more and let myself down a little harder, a little faster. Jude groaned along with me on each deep penetration, his fangs showing in a silent snarl of effort as he forced himself to hold back and let me do whatever I needed to do. But at last, my own efforts weren't enough – I needed more of him and I needed it *now*.

"Jude," I gasped, grinding against him as I tried unsuccessfully to get more of a rhythm. "I need more...need you..."

"What do you need?" His eyes blazed at me. "Tell me, Luz – say it."

"I need...need you to help me," I moaned. "Please, Jude, I'm so close but I just can't...quite...make it. *Fuck me.*"

My words seemed to set something loose inside him—some animal of pure lust he'd been keeping tightly chained suddenly slipped its leash and ran free. With a low roar, he pulled back and then surged upward, thrusting his shaft to the hilt into my pussy and sending shock waves of pleasure through my entire body.

I gasped at the sudden invasion, loving the feeling of him pounding into me. Jude had been holding back for ages by now and I realized that, having invited him to break his own self-imposed restraint, I was in for a wild ride.

Leaning back, I braced my hands against his thighs, opening myself for him completely as he fucked me. I could feel the muscles of his long legs moving under me, could see his biceps knotting and his fists clenching with effort as he thrust up into me again and again. I'm sure it would have been easier for him if his hands had been free but he had been right in telling that he could still perform—even chained down he was beyond amazing.

"Jude...oh God, *Jude.*" I was moaning his name, unable to stop as I felt myself climbing to another orgasm. I was close and getting closer all the time but I still needed a little something more.

Despite the effort he was putting in, Jude obviously noticed my problem.

"Touch yourself for me, Luz," he said hoarsely, never stopping the deep, delicious rhythm he'd established. "Pet your pussy while I fuck you—let me see you make yourself come."

Once again his hot words had an electric effect on me. Though I had never imagined doing anything so intimate for a lover, I let my fingers trail down to where we were joined. Then, keeping my eyes locked with his, I began to stroke the sensitive button of my clit as he continued to thrust inside me.

"Does that feel good?" His voice was ragged. "Tell me how it feels, Luz."

"Feels wonderful," I moaned. "Not...not as good as you though. As your tongue."

His eyes flashed. "Love to eat your sweet little cunt. Love to feel you quivering all around me when you come."

"I...I love it too." The intimacy of letting him watch me touch myself along with his hard, driving thrusts inside me was too much. With a low moan, I felt myself tipping over the edge of orgasm as pleasure sparked through my veins. I came so hard I actually saw stars for a moment—white-hot explosions in front of my eyes that made me wonder if I was going to pass out. I didn't though, and when my vision cleared, I realized that Jude was coming too.

I could feel my inner muscles clenching around him, milking him like a fist and then, with a low groan, he pressed up, entering me as deeply as he could, and began to pulse inside me. I didn't know what other women felt at this moment or if they felt

anything at all, but with Jude, it was an incredibly intense moment. I could actually feel his cum filling me, feel its heat spilling into me as he released.

For a moment we were tense, straining against each other as the pleasure overwhelmed us. I could have sworn I felt Jude's pleasure as well as my own—his joy at having me, his need to keep me near. Or maybe I only thought I did. But whatever the cause, the result was the same. It was an emotional and physical release more intense than any I had ever experienced in my life.

I put my head on his chest and cried.

Chapter Eleven

"Luz? Luz, are you all right?" Jude's deep voice was as close to panic as I had ever heard it and I knew I had to get hold of myself. But no matter what I did, the tears wouldn't stop.

"I-I'm fine," I said, or tried to say, anyway.

"Did I hurt you?" he demanded. "Please, tell me—I'm getting flashes from you but they're jumbled."

I took a deep breath and was able to at least slow the tears if not stop them all together. "No," I said truthfully. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I'll be sore for a while, but in a good way."

"Then why are you crying?" he asked gently. "Was it harder than you thought it would be?"

"No, nothing like that. It was easier...better...just so much more than anything I'd ever imagined." I took another deep breath and wiped my eyes with my fingers. "I think the word I'm looking for is *intense*. There at the end—it was almost like I could feel you—feel the way you felt in me..." I shook my head. "I don't know how to put it, but it was amazing."

He smiled. "I thought it was pretty amazing too. But I think my arms are going numb."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" I hopped off the bed and ran to get the key out of the armoire. I fumbled around for a minute under a stack of silk boxers until I found it and then ran to let Jude out of the cuffs. The minute I unlocked them he sat up and reached for me. I went to his arms willingly and snuggled against his chest, enjoying the closeness. He held me to him and pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

"How did you know?" I asked, trying unsuccessfully to repress a yawn. Now that the tears had gone, an overwhelming exhaustion had taken their place. I had been up literally all night with enough emotional turmoil to wear me out twenty times over.

"How did I know what?"

"That letting me be in control would help."

He shrugged. "I didn't know. But I hoped it would—it was the only thing I could think of under the circumstances."

"The circumstances being your crazy girlfriend barging in on you in the middle of the night and demanding sex, right?" I laughed and then realized what I'd said. "Uh, not that I'm your girlfriend or anything. I mean we haven't even known each other that long and you're a vamp and I'm a were which means we're —"

"Perfect for each other," Jude finished for me, which was pretty much the exact opposite of what I had been going to say. "And as for you being my 'girlfriend'," he continued. "I was hoping for something a little more permanent. But I don't mind settling for that to start with."

"Wow." I looked up to see he was smiling down at me. "No fear of commitment issues with you, huh?"

He shook his head. "Why should I fear to commit to the one who is right for me?"

"Wow," I said again because I didn't know what else to say. "Are we really going to have this conversation now?"

Jude frowned. "What conversation?"

"You know...the one where we decide we're a couple?"

He leaned down and kissed my cheek. "I thought that was already decided."

"But, Jude, seriously...we come from such different backgrounds. Our families will *hate* each other."

"My parents have been dead for decades. And I was under the impression that, aside from your younger brother, you didn't care much for yours."

"That's true," I admitted.

"Then there is no problem," he said, sounding completely logical. "We should be together, Luz—be together forever. Why let convention stand in the way when you have found true love?"

I shook my head, unable to believe him. "So we're having *that* conversation too?"

Jude smiled. "Which conversation is that?"

"You know..." I gestured vaguely. "The L word conversation. As in who's going to say it first and will the other person say it too or—"

"I love you." He gave me a serious look. "Does that take care of the issue?"

"I, uh...give me a minute." I shook my head, feeling dazed. "I don't know what to say."

"That's all right." Jude seemed completely comfortable with my uncertainty. "Take some time to think about it. But I wanted you to know how I feel."

I thought of the way he'd been so patient with me, how easy it was to talk to him. And let's not forget what an incredible lover he was. I didn't have any experience but from what I'd heard from other women, the sexual chemistry we shared was something to be envied—especially considering the trauma in my past. Yet Jude had helped me overcome that old pain to enjoy sex—something I would never have believed possible. He was a wonderful guy, even if he was a vampire. And to tell the truth, I kind of liked the biting and blood sharing we'd done. *More* than liked it. Just as I more than liked him.

"I think...I think I love you too," I said tentatively.

Jude laughed. "*There's* a rousing agreement."

"No, it's just...I've never felt this way before," I protested.

"What way?" He lifted my chin, capturing my eyes with his own.

"Like...like I always want to be with you. Like just being near you makes my whole day better—uh, or my whole night, I guess." I looked at him in wonder. "You know, I *do* love you."

Jude kissed me—a long, slow kiss that took my breath away. "Luz...you are my light in the darkness."

I kissed him back, marveling at this new development. It seemed so obvious now that we'd said it out loud. But I had spent so much time telling myself why we *shouldn't* be together that I hadn't considered why we should. Despite our differences, we fit together perfectly and made each other happy. Jude was right—we belonged together.

"So since we've gone from business associates to lovers, I guess I should refund the money you gave me," I said, only half joking.

"Absolutely not." Jude shook his head firmly. "And besides, who said our business agreement was dissolved? I still want to exchange blood with you again, at least one more time."

"Why one more time?" I asked curiously. "Is three the magic number or something?"

"You could say that." He smiled. "Or maybe I just like the way you taste. And you know, now that you have a vampire for a lover, you might have to get used to being bitten sometimes—if you don't mind."

"I don't mind." I felt a warm sexual thrill run up my spine. "Actually, you can bite me now, if you want to."

Jude gave me a lingering kiss on my neck and I could feel my pulse racing under his lips. "A tempting offer. But it's almost dawn and I would like to take my time. Maybe tomorrow night?"

"It's a date," I said, smiling. And then I yawned. "Oh, I'm sorry. I've just been up for almost twenty-four hours at this point."

"A lot has happened to you tonight," Jude observed. "Of course you're tired."

I was more than tired. Suddenly I was dead beat. So exhausted I could barely keep my eyes open. Jude seemed to understand because he tucked me carefully between the red satin sheets and kissed me lightly on the forehead.

"Sleep, beloved," he murmured in my ear. And almost immediately, I did.

When I woke up it was the middle of the afternoon and Jude was gone. He'd left me a note, though, letting me know he was in his daytime resting place and would be up later, as soon as it started to get dark. I couldn't wait. When I thought over everything that we'd done and said the night before I felt both impatient and a little embarrassed to see him. Part of me couldn't believe the way I'd acted or the way I had

explored and ridden him to the most delicious orgasm of my life. And part of me couldn't wait to try it again.

Getting out of bed, I wondered if sex would still be difficult now that I'd finally gotten the first time out of the way. I didn't know if we'd need the handcuffs again but I was sure Jude would wear them if I asked. Of course, it might just be enough for me to be on top instead of under him—it was being covered by a large male body that really freaked me out. I supposed my sexual claustrophobia was due to my past abuse though maybe in time I would be able to get over that too. But whatever happened, I knew Jude would be willing to take things slowly and do whatever I felt comfortable with.

I took a long, hot, refreshing shower that was considerably better than the one I'd had the night before—mainly because I was in a much happier frame of mind. I'd taken care of my problem by losing my virginity and gained a lover at the same time. Having never dated any man long enough to have a relationship, I wasn't sure where we went from here. But I had a feeling we would find out together which was fine with me.

I got out of the shower and found that someone had washed and dried my baggy jeans and T-shirt and left them folded neatly on the bed. The sound of tuneful humming outside the door let me know that Rosie, Jude's maid, was my benefactor.

I pulled on the jeans but decided to wear Jude's dark red T-shirt instead of my own. It still had his scent on it and I wanted to feel he was near me, even when I couldn't see him. Actually, I realized as I put on the shirt, I had his scent on me too. My sensitive nose could detect the subtle but definite change in my body chemistry from the sex we'd shared. I was no longer a virgin and any other were who had known my scent before would instantly know that. Well, good—that was what I wanted. I would wear Jude's scent with pride.

I wondered idly as I twisted my hair into a loose bun if he was completely out of commission during the day or if he just went somewhere light-tight and twiddled his thumbs. If it was the latter, I hoped we might spend some of that time together since otherwise, I was going to have to become a permanent night person.

Whistling to myself, I left the bedroom and went in search of the kitchen. After the stress of the night before I was famished and I hoped there would be some actual food somewhere in the house since I knew vamps subsisted mostly on blood. If I was going to stay here, maybe I should do some grocery shopping. Of course, now that I wasn't a virgin anymore it ought to be safe to go back to my crappy apartment but why should I? Jude seemed happy to have me here and the house was huge enough that we wouldn't get in each other's way if we wanted time apart. Although at the minute I couldn't imagine wanting to spend a second away from him. I was already counting the hours until sundown and anticipating our third blood exchange.

I'd been a little worried about finding my way around Jude's huge house but it wasn't hard to locate the kitchen after all—I just followed my nose. Someone was cooking something that smelled delicious and when I rounded the corner I saw that it was Rosie, standing there smiling at me with a spatula in her hand.

"Well, well, just look at you, Miss Luz." She gave me a big smile. "Bacon and eggs'll be ready in a minute. Just make yourself at home."

"Hello, Rosie," I said, returning her smile. "Bacon and eggs are my favorite. I was hoping there was some food in the house."

"Food, child? Lands' sakes — there's enough for ten hungry girls your size. Mr. Jude left me a note and a shopping list. Said you'll be staying with us awhile — that true?"

I nodded. "Yes, I've been having a little trouble. Uh, pack politics — you know how it is."

Rosie nodded grimly. "Oh, don't I just. You must have crossed your pack master somehow and now he's out to get you."

"That's exactly it," I said. "So Jude said I could stay here for a while — to be safe."

"Oh, you'll be safe enough here all right. There's not a pack master in the world who can stand against Mr. Jude when he gets upset."

It seemed a little odd to me that she took pride in her employer — a vampire — over her own kind but what did I know? I was currently dating the enemy myself and loving every minute of it. As before, I had the realization that it was nice to be around someone else who knew the real Jude — not the scary boogiemán everyone else had made him out to be.

"Do you mind if I get something to drink?" I asked, since Rosie was still cooking on a flattop stove that looked like it cost more than my car.

"Help yourself, child. Mr. Jude had me stock all your favorites."

"Really?" I frowned as I pulled open the fridge. How could he have known my favorites? We'd talked about a lot of things but never food — it just hadn't come up, maybe because it wasn't something he needed.

But sure enough, the inside of the fridge looked like someone who knew me had stocked it. There was no-pulp orange juice with extra calcium, the aforementioned bacon and eggs, my favorite brand of low-fat yogurt in all my favorite flavors. And down on the bottom shelf the crowning piece — a key lime pie from Writes Gourmet Dairy House. Even though I was about to have breakfast, my mouth watered at the sight. Real key lime pie isn't bright green and covered in that awful gummy meringue people who don't know how to make it always pile on top. It's a pale yellow color with little swirls of real whipped cream dabbed at intervals along the perimeter of the crust. It's tart and sweet and rich all at the same time. But though I was dying to carve myself a fat slice and go to town, there was something about the pie that bothered me.

"How did Mr., uh, Jude know I liked these things?" I asked, gesturing to the open fridge. "I mean, I never told him what my favorite foods were. How did he know to ask you to get these things?"

"Oh don't worry about that. Mr. Jude — he knows things about people sometimes."

"I guess," I said doubtfully, remembering that all he'd admitted to was very limited telepathy. Maybe I'd been hungry when we were talking and he'd picked the things I

liked to eat out of the top of my mind. But I didn't remember compiling a list of favorite foods at any given time when we were together—had Jude seen deeper into me than he'd let on? If so, we needed to have a little chat. It was troubling to think of having a lover you couldn't keep secrets from—very troubling indeed. Not that I wanted to hide my innermost thoughts and feelings from Jude—just that I would prefer to share them in my own time.

Rosie was sliding two sunny-side-up eggs and four strips of bacon onto a plate. "Better get it while it's hot," she called. "Come sit down and I'll pour you some juice."

Reluctantly, I left the well-stocked fridge and sat down to eat. It was actually somewhere around three in the afternoon but since I had just woken up, I wasn't quibbling with the idea of having breakfast. Especially since it smelled absolutely heavenly.

"Mmm, these are amazing," I told Rosie as I tore into the eggs. "Thank you so much for cooking for me and doing my laundry. But I honestly don't expect you to keep on doing that. I can pick up after myself and I promise not to leave a mess in the kitchen."

She sat down across from me. "It's no trouble, Miss Luz. I kind of like having someone else to look after. Mr. Jude is always so quiet—half the time I can't even tell if he's home or not."

"You might miss having the house to yourself during the day," I pointed out.

"Not at all, I'll be glad to have some company. And I expect we'll be seeing a lot of each other now that you and Mr. Jude are bonded."

"Bonded?" I frowned. "Is that some kind of vampire thing I don't know about?"

Rosie shrugged mysteriously. "Could be. I'm sure Mr. Jude can explain. So...it's none of my business but my nose tells me that after last night you and he are more than just friends, is that right?"

I blushed and put down the slice of bacon I'd been about to demolish. "Well...yes, actually."

She laughed. "You don't say another word. I can tell you're shy and I don't want to intrude more than I already did."

"No, it's okay." I smiled at her. "Actually, it's nice to talk to someone who knows the real Jude. I mean, everyone else seems to think he's some kind of horrible, dangerous monster."

Instead of agreeing with me, Rosie frowned. "Well, now, monster—no. He's not that no matter what folks say. But dangerous—yes. Mr. Jude is one of the most dangerous males I've ever met."

I frowned. "Well yes, but he's not as horrible and bloodthirsty as everyone is always trying to make him out to be, right?"

"All vampires are bloodthirsty, child. It goes with the territory," Rosie said mildly. "You got to know that going in or you're gonna be mighty disappointed down the road a piece."

"Yes, but..." I groped for words, frustrated at the way the conversation was going. I just wanted Rosie to agree with me that Jude was a nice guy and move on. Instead, she seemed bent on playing devil's advocate.

"If you're asking me do I like Mr. Jude—yes I do, very much," Rosie said, apparently sensing my frustration. "But would I want to cross him or get on his bad side? No, not in a million years." She shivered slightly. "Now look, I don't want you thinking I'm trying to warn you off him—it's not like that at all. I just think that if you're gonna be starting something with him you need to go into it with both eyes open."

"Okay," I said, feeling subdued. "Thanks for the warning, I guess."

"Now don't go getting all down in the mouth." Rosie poured me some more orange juice. "He's a good man, he's strong enough to protect you no matter what kind of trouble you're in with your pack master, and he *loves* you. That's the important thing—right?"

"How do you know he loves me?" I asked curiously.

Rosie laughed. "Why it's the easiest thing in the world to tell—you should see how he lights up when he talks about you. He thinks you're just the cat's pajamas."

I laughed at the expression, feeling suddenly better. It wasn't like I hadn't known Jude was dangerous—I'd seen him rip a man's head off, after all. But as Rosie said, the fact that he loved me was the important thing. I decided I should just finish my breakfast and leave well enough alone.

Just then a soft chime echoed from the front of the house.

Rosie hopped up. "Oh, the doorbell. You just stay here and eat, Miss Luz—I'll get it." But I was just going back to my bacon and eggs when she reappeared with a grim look on her face. "There's a man at the door says he's your brother and he wants to see you but he won't come in."

"Diego!" I took a last hasty gulp of juice and jumped up. "What is he doing here?"

"I don't know but he's mighty upset." Rosie put a hand on my arm. "You want me to send him away?"

"No, that's okay. I'll talk to him." But it was with a feeling of dread that I walked to the front door. I had known I would have to have this confrontation with my brother at some point but I wished I could have put it off, at least a little. Why couldn't I just have twenty-four hours to enjoy my new relationship before something else bad happened to me? Not that I didn't care deeply for Diego but I was pretty sure he was going to rain all over my love parade and I just wasn't in the mood right now.

Well, in the mood or not, here we go.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped outside onto the small front porch area and smiled at him. "Hey, *hermano*."

"Thought I'd find you here." Diego was standing on the front walk, well back from the porch and front door, as if he thought he might get grabbed and dragged inside if he stood too close.

"Yes, well, here I am," I said. "I decided staying with Jude was safer than a motel."

"Bullshit. You were going to come here all the time. You lied to me last night." Diego scowled and took a step forward. Then his nose wrinkled and he lifted his face like a dog catching a scent. "Holy shit, Luz – what did you do?"

"I took care of the problem," I said evenly. Discussing the loss of my virginity with my brother was about as much fun as a root canal but it had to be done eventually.

"You fucked that bloodsucker?" Diego's eyes narrowed with fury. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"I love Jude," I said, crossing my arms protectively over my chest. "And he loves me. You have a problem with that?"

"Hell yes, I have a problem because you only *think* you love him."

"I'm sure you'd like to believe that but I'm sorry, I really do love him. So I'm going to stay here for a while until things die down. And maybe...maybe you can spread the word that what Engle wanted is gone so he might as well give up and step down as pack master."

Diego gave me a look of pure disgust. "You want me to go around spreading the fact that my sister lost it to a leech? *Mierta*, Luz – I'd fucking kill anybody else who spread that rumor about you."

"It's not a rumor – it's the truth. And I'm not ashamed of it."

"Let me see your neck." He came closer, his eyes trained on my throat.

"Why?" I took a step back.

"Because I need to know if he bit you again. Tell me, Luz, how many times have you exchange blood with that *hijo de puta*?"

"Twice," I said shortly. "Not that it's any of your business."

"Only twice – you're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. It's not like we go around biting each other for fun," I said, feeling guilty for lying. The blood exchanges we'd done so far had been extremely hot but Diego didn't need to know that. "I told you, his blood calms me down."

"No – his blood *controls* you." Diego took another step forward. "*Dios*, Luz – how could you go running to that fucking bloodsucker again after I warned you about him last night?"

"You didn't say anything specific," I pointed out. And in fact, I hadn't taken his warning very seriously. I'd had a lot on my mind at the time and the idea of Jude being an "evil monster" was so widespread and often repeated it was old news – not worth bothering about since I knew the real Jude.

"Well, I *should* have been fucking specific. Damn it, Luz – do you know what he is?"

"A vampire," I said promptly. "And yes, I know that's considered sleeping with the enemy. But this 'enemy' has treated me a hell of a lot better than my own kind lately."

Diego shook his head. "He's not just a vampire, Luz. He's a fucking *incubus*."

"Oh come on, Diego—there's no such thing." Humans thought of an incubus as being a sexual supernatural creature who assaulted human women in their sleep. But according to shifter legend, an incubus was a kind of super-strong vampire demon with glowing red eyes who lived by giving horrible nightmares to children and feeding on their fear. They were a monster's monster—a tale that mother weres used to frighten their kids when they were bad. So to me, it was like Diego had told me that the man I was in love with was the boogiemer—the idea was just too ridiculous to be real.

My little brother had a grim look on his face. "They *are* real, Luz. I got one of the bloodsuckers to tell me about Jacobson—I had to let him fucking bite me to get the facts. Look." Pulling aside his collar, he bared a set of fang marks that looked a lot like the ones that were healing on my own neck. I stared at them in surprise—Diego must have really been desperate to get some dirt on Jude if he let a vamp bite him. He probably would have been more comfortable letting a rabid dog take a chomp out of his hide.

"Look," I said, as gently as I could. "I appreciate what you went through to get this information—really I do. But I'm sorry, I just don't believe it. Jude has never done anything that made me think he's more than just an ordinary vampire."

"Do his eyes change color?" he demanded. "Do they turn red when he's upset or, uh, feeling kinda excited?"

I frowned. "That's just a regular vampire thing, isn't it?"

Diego shook his head. "Not according to Gavin."

"Gavin being the vampire you let bite you?" I raised an eyebrow at him, trying to act skeptical, but I was beginning to be alarmed.

He blushed but held his ground. "Yeah, he is."

"Well, I don't think—"

"Can he read your mind?" Diego interrupted. "When he touches you, does he know what you're thinking?"

Now I was feeling *really* worried but I still didn't want to let it show. "So what if he can?"

"So? So normal vamps can't do that—only an incubus can. And not only that, Sis—they feed off of negative emotions. Hurt, anger, pain, fear—that's why he skinned the Clear Water pack master—to feed off the poor guy's agony. He's probably been gorging himself on you ever since you met the bastard."

"That's not true," I said, but my voice trembled and my mind was galloping a hundred miles a minute. I had wondered why Jude was so kind and patient with me, why he didn't seem to mind my traumatic past or the emotional scars that made me such a basket case. Could it be he actually *relished* them for the negative emotions they

generated? No, surely not—Jude wouldn't do that, wouldn't feed on me that way, would he?

"It is true. Damn it, Luz, you have to listen to me." Diego ran up on the porch and grabbed me by the arm before I realized it.

"What are you doing? Let me go!"

"No, you're coming with me before that *cabrón* can bite you for the third time."

"What are you talking about, the third time?" I demanded.

"The third bite—the bonding bite." Diego gave me a look of mingled frustration and disgust. "That's how a vamp binds you to him. Only with an incubus, it's a bond that can never be broken except by death. Don't you get it, Luz? You exchange blood with him again, he'll own you until you *die*."

"Wait a minute!" I protested, as Diego started to drag me down the steps. "Just wait a minute, goddammit, and let me think!"

At last he was really getting through to me. I remembered how adamant Jude had been about wanting to exchange blood with me again at least one more time. I had asked if three was the magic number and he'd given me some vague reply and changed the subject. Had he been hiding something from me? It seemed likely, especially when I added that to the fact that his eyes turned red when he was aroused or angry, *and* he could read my mind—maybe more than he'd originally let on. Plus, hadn't Rosie said something about Jude and I being bonded? Maybe she'd assumed the third bite had happened last night since I'd given Jude my virginity.

Could it be that Diego was right?

No, I can't believe it. It can't be true. Jude wouldn't hide something like this from me. He loves me and I love him. But my faith in him was definitely shaken. So much so that I allowed my brother to pull me several more feet down the sidewalk without any resistance at all.

"I just...can't believe it," I said, but my voice lacked conviction. "Jude isn't like that. He's gentle and kind and patient..."

"Sure he is—until you exchange blood for the last time. What do you think, Luz—that he's gonna tell you the truth and scare you off before he gets you for good? This is one seriously scary motherfucker we're talking about. Why do you think the other vampires don't want anything to do with him?"

"He...he told me he had a disability that made them not like him." Even to my ears it sounded weak.

"A disability, huh? That's what he calls feeding off your worst thoughts and feelings and controlling the minds of everybody around him?"

"I don't know, okay?" I glared at Diego. "I don't know but I'm sure that Jude can explain all this when he wakes up."

"Yeah, I'm sure he can too only you're not gonna be around to hear his damn explanation." Diego started pulling me to his car, which he'd parked in the large semicircular driveway that skirted the front lawn.

"Stop! I can't just take your word for it—I have to at least give him a chance to explain." But my brother kept pulling me inexorably toward his car. "Diego, I love him—really and truly love him. I've never been able to say that before about a man, can you understand that?"

He must have heard the pleading in my voice because he stopped dragging me and just stood there. "Luz," he said at last. "Okay, I'm not saying never talk to him again and I'm not saying don't give him a chance to explain. But let him explain over the phone or something. You have to get away from his territory—away from his influence. So you can listen with a clear head."

"I don't know..." To say I didn't want to leave was an understatement. But I was also no longer completely certain that I knew the real Jude, either.

"Come on, Sis—you know what I'm saying makes sense."

"I should at least go back and tell Rosie where I'm going."

"Who the hell is Rosie?"

"She's Jude's maid—and she's a were, too. She trusts him," I pointed out.

"Probably because he's got total control of her mind by now. Why else would a were work for a vamp?" Diego demanded.

At last I gave in. "Fine. But I'm calling him as soon as it gets dark. And you'll see—he'll have some kind of rational explanation for all this...this nonsense."

Diego put up his hands. "Hey, it's not like I don't want you to find love. Even being with a vampire is probably better than being alone all your life."

"How nice of you to make that concession," I said dryly.

"I'm just saying—maybe they're not as bad as we were always taught growing up."

Diego's sudden sympathy for the fanged set surprised me so much I actually allowed him to lead me to the car without a backward glance at Jude's house. "Would this new tolerance for the sunlight challenged happen to do with Gavin, the vamp who bit you?" I asked, as I slid into the passenger seat of his tricked-out low-rider.

"Yeah, well...he's a decent guy." My brother blushed again and I stared at him in growing comprehension.

"You enjoyed it, didn't you? Don't try to pretend you didn't," I said, when he started to protest. "I know what it feels like to get bitten. It's not the horrible, painful experience you think it's going to be at all. It actually feels *good*—admit it."

"It...wasn't so bad," he mumbled, keeping his eyes forward and concentrating fiercely on his driving.

I was beginning to wonder about my little brother. "Diego," I said quietly. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"About what?" He looked at me uncertainly.

"About how it felt to let Gavin bite you. About how you're the biggest, baddest alpha around but you never seem to have a girlfriend."

"I'm not a fucking *mariposa*, if that's what you're asking. I mean, like I would turn gay for a bloodsucker? Please."

"I think you're protesting a little too much," I said, making sure my seat belt was securely fastened as he blew through a stoplight. "You can tell me, Diego. You know I won't judge you and I won't tell the rest of the family either."

"I said I'm not gay so just drop it, okay? So what if I let him...I mean if it felt good when he bit me? It's no big deal."

"Okay, we'll drop it. But maybe you can see where I'm coming from now," I said.

"Yeah, I could—if Jacobson was a normal vamp." He shook his head and took a corner way too fast, making me glad I'd buckled up. "But he's not, Luz, and you're in danger every minute you're with him."

"I still can't believe that," I said, but my stomach was rolling with uncertainty, making me regret the eggs and bacon I'd shoveled down.

"I know you don't want to." Diego put his hand on mine and squeezed briefly. "I'm sorry, Sis."

"Me too," I said and suddenly I was seeing the golden August afternoon through a haze of tears. Oh God, what if Diego was right? What was I going to do?

Chapter Twelve

"Luz, where are you? Rosie said you left without any explanation. Are you all right?" Jude's deep voice was extremely worried and I felt a warm rush of love for him all over again. *He cares. He loves me.* But I had to push the warm fuzzies aside and get to the bottom of this mess before I let myself get too carried away. So I took a deep breath and got right to it.

"Jude, are you an incubus?"

I was hoping for an incredulous laugh or an instant denial. What I got instead was a long, long silence. Then he said, "I'd better come talk to you. Are you at your apartment?"

"Yes, but I really don't think—" But I was talking to a dead phone. He'd already hung up.

"Well?" Diego, who had refused to leave me alone, glared at me from his spot on my couch.

I shrugged. "He's coming over. He wants to talk in person, I guess."

"So he can control you better."

"Diego, for the last time, he's not controlling me."

"Yeah, whatever you say. But I'm staying right here just in case." He crossed his tattooed arms over his chest and lounged back on the couch.

"Fine, do what you want." I was irritated at my little brother's overprotective alpha instincts but there was obviously no budging him. Plus, I was secretly a little relieved he was staying. What if there was some truth to the rumors he'd heard? Why hadn't Jude just denied them right away and put my mind at ease? *Please don't let it be true*, I thought, staring at my apartment door and remembering the way Jude had pushed me up against the wall beside it and pleased me until I couldn't think straight. *Please.*

In a surprisingly short amount of time there was a quick double knock at the front door. I started to go get it but Diego beat me to it. He opened the door and there was Jude, with a very unhappy expression on his face. He towered over Diego but my brother was used to being the shorter man in almost any given situation so he didn't back down a bit.

"It's okay, Diego—let him in," I said when it was clear the alpha-male staring contest was going to go on all night if I didn't break it up.

Growling low in his throat, my little brother stepped aside and Jude walked in and went straight to me.

"Luz," he said, "Please believe me when I say I didn't want you to find out this way."

I felt suddenly numb. "Then it's true? You actually *are* an incubus? But...but I thought they were just fairy tales."

"All fairy tales have their basis in reality, I am afraid. With my people it happens to only the oldest and purest bloodlines – sometimes one is born with...extra abilities."

"Like the ability to suck down pain and fear the same way you suck down blood?" Diego demanded, coming over to us.

"We do feed on emotions as well as blood – that is true enough," Jude admitted. "But –"

"But nothing, you *hijo de puta*," Diego growled.

Jude turned to him, his eyes beginning to glow red. "You should be aware that I am fluent in sixteen different languages and one of them is Spanish. You should *further* be aware that I do not appreciate being insulted."

"Oh, I'll do more than insult you." Diego's eyes began to turn wolf gold. "You've been messing with my sister – I'm gonna fuck you up good, *cabrón*."

"Stop!" I stood up and got between them, putting a hand on both of their chests. "Stop it right now, both of you. Diego," I said, turning to my brother. "Let me talk to Jude."

"For a minute." He stepped back, still growling. If he had been in wolf form his hackles would have been raised and his ears would have been flat against his skull.

"Jude," I said, turning to my lover. "I just...I don't know what to think."

"Think that you love me as I love you." He took my hands in his. "Why does this have to change anything?"

"Because you lied to me." I pulled my hands out of his and took a step back. "I'm sorry but I have to know the truth. Can you read my mind? I mean, *really* read it and not just pick a few random thoughts off the top of my head when you're touching me the way you told me?"

Jude looked very unhappy. "I do have to be touching you to get anything but yes, I may have downplayed my abilities somewhat. My telepathy is something I've grown used to concealing. It...makes people uncomfortable if they know I can tell what they're thinking."

"No shit – wonder why that is?" Diego muttered sarcastically.

"Shut up, Diego," I said, but my heart was sinking. I turned back to Jude. "Is it true that after we exchanged blood a third time we would be bound together forever? Uh – bonded, is that the word?"

He nodded unhappily. "It is. But I swear I was going to tell you before we bit each other tonight."

Diego made a face. "So he had you biting him too? Fucking kinky vampire assholes."

Jude eyed the fang marks on his neck. "It appears that you have recently let one of us 'vampire assholes' bite you as well, friend. Hypocrisy is scarcely an admirable trait, despite your fear for your sister."

By now Diego's face was as red as Jude's eyes. "I'm not your fucking friend. And I let him bite me to find out what you are."

"You wouldn't want to give me the name of your little fanged informant, now would you?" Jude took a step toward him, his eyes coal red and his fangs extended. "I do not appreciate those who spread untrue rumors about me to others."

"But that's the thing, *friend*," Diego spat. "What part of all this is untrue? You just fucking admitted to every damn thing he told me. You don't have a leg to stand on."

I opened my mouth to defend my lover...and shut it again. Diego was right. Everything he'd told me about Jude was true. The boogiemán was real and I was dating him. Hell, considering he'd apparently been about to tie me to him for eternity—or however long it was that vamps lived—I was practically engaged to him. But while I stood there, mute with misery, things were escalating at an alarming pace.

Jude took a step forward and reached for Diego. Diego threw a punch but Jude caught his fist and held it immobile in midair, a look of concentration on his face.

"Gavin," he said, looking into my brother's eyes. "Your lover who told you lies about me is called Gavin and he is of the Clan of the Bat."

"He's *not* my lover." Diego struggled to free his fist but he might as well have been trying to pull his hand out of solid concrete.

Jude raised an eyebrow. "Oh no? Then why did you allow him to pleasure you with his mouth before he bit you? I believe you thought it was the best blowjob you'd ever had. Or am I wrong?"

"Of course you're fucking wrong! I'm not fucking gay!" Diego swung with the other fist too but Jude just caught it in his other hand. His eyes gleamed with rage but his voice was light and sarcastic.

"Is that right? Because I believe allowing another male to service you sexually is the very definition of homosexuality."

"Stop!" I couldn't bear this anymore. Couldn't bear to see Jude stand there and expose my brother's darkest secrets the same way he'd exposed mine.

It suddenly occurred to me that he'd know all along—all the ugly, awful details of that night fourteen years ago with Engle. He must have seen them in my head when he touched me. But he'd made me slit myself open and spill my guts for him anyway, made me relieve that old, awful horror and despair. And all because he liked my taste—not the taste of my blood or the taste of my sex—the taste of my pain.

Pain. That was what Jude had been feeding on the whole time we'd been together. With my fucked-up past I must have been like an all-night Vegas buffet for him. No wonder he wanted me with him forever—I would never completely get over the things that had been done to me so Jude would never run out of nourishment. And any time

he wanted a little more he could just go digging around in my head for it and urge me to “talk about it” until he got what he wanted.

“You sick bastard,” I said, my voice trembling.

Jude looked at me, obviously surprised. “Luz —”

“No. Shut up and let my brother go. *Now.*”

He did what I said, letting go of Diego’s fists and sidestepping when my brother charged him. “Please listen to me. All is not the way it seems — just let me explain.”

“You used me and lied to me. I’m not interested in any more of your fucking explanations. Get out.” I pointed at the door.

Diego was suddenly right beside me. “Rescind his invitation.”

“What?” I looked at him.

My brother gestured in frustration. “You had to invite him to come in the apartment in the first place. Just take back your invitation and he’ll have to leave.”

“Luz, no.” Jude shook his head but I was already speaking.

“Jude Jacobson, I rescind your invitation to my apartment.”

Jude walked rapidly toward the door although it was apparent he didn’t want to. He opened it, took a step outside and turned around to face me again. “Please, hear me out,” he begged, his voice hoarse with emotion.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to hear anything else you’ve got to say.” I could feel tears building in my throat and stinging my eyes. I was about to bawl and I didn’t want him to see me do it.

“Please.” Jude dropped to his knees in the doorway and leaned forward as far as he could, his hands held out in a beseeching manner. It looked almost as though he was pressing against an invisible barrier. “Please, beloved,” he whispered. “Don’t turn me away — we are pledged to each other. *I love you.*”

I started to cry then, I couldn’t help it. “Just go,” I somehow managed to say between sobs. “Please, Jude, there’s nothing left to say. Just go away and leave me alone.”

“Very well,” he whispered and I thought he might be crying too. But before I could be sure, he was gone.

“Hey, sweetheart. Your brother tells us you’re not feeling too good lately.” My mother’s voice on the phone sounded sweetly concerned. I wondered, as I always did, if she was just pretending or if she really cared about her black-sheep daughter.

“Hi, Mom. Yeah, I’ve been a little, uh, under the weather,” I said cautiously.

I wasn’t sure how much Diego had told her — the less the better as far as I was concerned. I couldn’t ask him because he wasn’t taking my calls at the moment — probably because he was chronically embarrassed at the way Jude had outed him the last time we’d seen each other. I wished he would pick up the phone even once and

hear what I had to say. I wanted him to know that I still loved and accepted him—the way he had loved and accepted me for years when I was a non-shifter. But it had been a week since I'd talked to him—a week since that awful last visit from Jude—and by now I figured Diego would call me when he was good and ready and not before.

Meanwhile, though I was monitoring my own incoming calls pretty closely, Jude had only called me once. I had let the call go straight to voicemail and sure enough, he'd left me a message. "Luz," he said, his voice filled with pain. "I will never stop loving you." And then he'd hung up.

I had played the message multiple times and cried every time. It had been a wretched week—the week from hell. And talking to my mom wasn't exactly making things any better.

"I was hoping you'd like to come by this Thursday for dinner," she said, breaking my train of thought. "We never did get to celebrate your first shift and that would be the perfect time."

"Geez, Mom, I don't know," I hedged.

"Everyone will be there. And I'm going to bake a cake."

"A cake? What kind of cake?" I couldn't help asking. Mom's cakes were legendary. Rich and dense and topped with homemade buttercream frosting, they melted in your mouth and made your taste buds do the happy dance.

"Your favorite—black forest triple fudge volcano cake," she said promptly. And though the thought of getting together with my dysfunctional family to celebrate an event that had brought me nothing but pain was off-putting, the cake tipped me over the edge as she'd no doubt known it would.

"Well..." I hesitated.

"What time should we expect you, dear? Would seven be too early?"

"No, I guess not," I said, resigned to going. Then I had another thought—more about me had changed recently than my status as a non-shifter. "Uh, Mom, you ought to be aware that things are different with me now," I said, trying to think how I could tell her I was no longer a virgin without actually coming out and saying it.

"Of course they are, dear. You're a full-fledged were now and Daddy and I couldn't be prouder."

"No, Mom, that isn't what I meant." I sighed. "You know I'm still single and I'm not, uh, currently seeing anyone. But I was seeing someone a while back and I'm not actually...we didn't always sleep in different rooms. Do you know what I mean?"

"Oh dear..." For a minute Mom sounded genuinely distressed. Aside from the fateful night of Engle's ascension to pack master when she'd basically told me to suck it up and take one for the team, she'd always been extremely prudish about sex.

"Come on, Mom," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "I'm twenty-seven. It had to happen eventually."

"Well...I suppose so. Although your father might be upset."

"Hey, I don't have to come if it's going to be a problem," I said, sensing a possible escape route. The more I thought about it, the less appealing sitting down to dinner with my entire family, all of whom knew I was no longer a virgin, seemed. But Mom was quick to squash my attempted escape.

"No, no—you're still our daughter no matter what you've done," she said, sounding even more prim and proper.

So I'm a bad daughter because I waited until my own good time and found a man I cared about instead of giving it up when I was still practically a child to the man you and Daddy picked to rape me? Is that it? It was on the tip of my tongue to say that or something like it but, as always, I kept my accusations and bitterness to myself. My anger was buried under so many layers of the past, so many years gone by, that it seemed impossible to bring it up now.

I'm sure any therapist worth his or her salt would have said that I was massively repressed but the fact was, pretending that horrible night had never happened was the only way I knew how to deal with my mom and dad. Because if I *did* bring it out in the open it was the same as saying they didn't love me. And though I had suspected that was true for years, hearing my parents say it out loud was more than I could bear. So I went on pretending and pretending and my mom and dad and the rest of the family all pretended right along with me.

The only question was, now that I had told someone about my pain and faced it head-on, would I still be able to pretend? I had a feeling I was going to find out because my mom was reminding me one more time when I should be there for dinner and obviously winding up the conversation.

"Goodbye, sweetheart. We'll see you Thursday," she said. "Love you."

"Love you, too, Mom," I said dutifully. "See you then."

And that was how I found myself back in the house I'd grown up in for the first time in over a year on Thursday night. My big sister Essie greeted me at the door, her nose wrinkling as I stepped in past her.

"A vampire? Really, Luz, couldn't you do better than that?"

Before I could formulate a suitably scathing reply, my mom came bustling up and took me by the arm. "Now girls, come help set the table. Daddy is outside with Frank having a cigar before dinner so we need to get everything ready before they finish."

My mom was about as old school as they come where serving her man was concerned so I sighed and followed her into the kitchen. But not before I'd given Essie a dirty look for being a bitch.

Besides the fact that she had somehow gotten all of the tall genes in the family and had a perfect figure, Essie was also the favorite daughter. Worse, she knew it and wasn't opposed to rubbing it in. I'd hated her when we were kids and somehow, despite being the only two girls, we never did bond even as we got older. Essie was deep into pack politics and seeing her man get ahead, just as my mom had always been.

And I, of course, was too busy trying to make it in the human world since the were world didn't want me. Why should I worry about which alpha had the most status and who gained or lost face during the monthly hunt when I wasn't even a functioning member of the pack?

The kitchen was decorated the same way it had been since I was a child—in pale sunny yellow with blond wood cabinets and cream-colored appliances. Sitting on the countertop nearest the dining room was the hugest, gooiest black forest triple fudge volcano cake I had ever seen. It really was shaped like a volcano with fudge-like molten lava running down its sides. I knew when it was cut, a cascade of dark cherries in chocolate sauce would come tumbling out of its moist crust, making even the most determined dieter beg for seconds.

"Wow, Mom, you've outdone yourself." I stopped in front of the cake, itching to sneak a fingerful of icing and knowing I wouldn't be able to get away with it as long as Essie was in the room.

"Well, I thought it was important to celebrate your accomplishment." Mom smiled and turned to the stove.

"Huh." Essie sniffed. "Like celebrating her first steps years after she should have been walking."

"Now, now. It takes some of us longer than others, that's all." Mom nodded at the dish cabinet. "Go ahead and set the table while I get this roast on a plate, will you, girls?"

Essie took the plates and silverware and I took the cups and napkins and for a minute I felt like I was ten again, back when everything was perfect and I had no reason to suspect my parents cared more about their standing in the pack than they did about my emotional well-being. Then Essie wrinkled her nose when I got too close to her and I was back in the here and now, setting the table for a dinner I really didn't want to be at.

"So seriously, Luz—a vampire? I know none of the pack was probably interested but couldn't you at least find a human who was willing?"

"That's none of your fucking business," I said pleasantly. "So how are Frank and the rugrats? Did he tell you he saw me the other night?" I was curious to know how much my alpha brother-in-law had revealed about my encounter with the pack master.

Essie's eyes flashed. "As a matter of fact he did. *And* he said you were being selfish as usual."

"Oh? And how was I being selfish?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Essie stood back from the last place setting and put her hands on her hips. "You know perfectly well what I'm talking about, Luz. Pack Master Engle just wanted what was his by right."

"My God." I threw up my hands. "So you're saying I should have lain down in the dirt and let him have me right then and there?"

"No, I'm saying you should have let him have you back when he first ascended as pack master. Do you know how much better off the family would be if you'd just—"

"Girls, girls, what's all this bickering?" My father walked in through the sliding glass doors, followed closely by my brother-in-law Frank. Both men smelled like they'd just been burning dirty gym socks—which is to say, you could tell they'd been smoking those stinky hand-rolled cigars Tampa is so famous for.

"Hello, pumpkin." Dad stooped to give Essie a fond kiss on the cheek. Then, clearly thinking that he had to treat me the same, he kissed me too—without the sweet nickname, however.

"Hi, Dad," I said, waiting to see if he'd blow up once he smelled my new, vampire-altered scent—if he could smell it over his own secondhand smoke, that was. But his nose barely even twitched. Maybe that was the reason for the cigars in the first place.

"It's good to have you here, Luz," he said stiffly. "Your mother and I are very proud of you."

"Thanks," I said miserably. In a way this was worse than Essie's open jibes. Sometimes there was so much unspoken angst in the air between me and my parents I felt as if I would suffocate or maybe just start screaming and never stop. I cursed myself for a fool for coming in the first place—no cake, no matter how delicious, was worth this tension. But I was stuck here now so I went back into the kitchen and helped my mom bring out the pot roast, mashed potatoes, gravy and green beans. I wished with all my heart that Diego was here to demand some *ropa vieja* or *picadillo*. My mom actually could make the traditional Spanish recipes—she just preferred not to.

We sat down to the decidedly non-ethnic dinner, which was, nevertheless, delicious, but I found I could barely pick at my plate. Essie and Frank were glaring daggers at me across the table and whispering to each other and my parents, who were sitting at the head and foot of the table respectively, were smiling and acting like nothing had ever happened—just as they always did.

At last the meal was over and it was time for dessert. As my mom got up to go carve the cake, I excused myself because I was sure if I didn't get away from the table, at least for a minute, I was going to scream.

The downstairs bathroom was still decorated in pale pink tile with gold and white accents and there were still little hand towels and tiny pink soaps in the dish by the sink that no one was allowed to touch. When we were kids Diego and I had called them "company soaps" because company were the only ones allowed to use them. Once, on a dare from one of our older brothers, he had put one of the soaps in his mouth and when my mom had found out, she'd made him chew it up and swallow it. It was a tiny soap but Diego had been sick all night—I remembered because I was the one who'd sat up with him.

God, I wished he was here now! I felt as if I were stuck behind enemy lines with no reinforcements and I knew if I had to choke down one more mouthful of food, even Mom's wonderful cake, I was going to hurl.

As if my wish for him had called him, my cell gave a muted buzzing and when I looked at it, my little brother's number flashed in the box. Feeling relieved, I hit the talk button and put the phone to my ear, but not before making sure the bathroom door was securely locked.

"Boy, am I glad to hear from you," I said. "Why haven't you been returning my calls?"

"I've been busy." His voice sounded gruff and then he sighed. "Gavin and I have been working some things out. All right?"

"Hey, that's fine with me. You know I'm not judging you, right?"

"Yeah. You're the only one in the family who wouldn't." He sounded morose.

"Tell me about it. I'm feeling pretty judged myself right now. Mom got me to come over for dinner by dangling a volcano cake in front of me and I was stupid enough to bite."

"Oh no." Diego's voice was suddenly panicky. "Luz, tell me you're kidding me—tell me you're not really there at Mom and Dad's house."

"Why shouldn't I be here?"

He made a frustrated sound. "*Mierta*, Luz, I left you a message. Don't you *ever* check your voicemail?"

"Of course I do," I said indignantly. "Your message must have gotten erased before I could hear it." Probably during one of the three million times I'd gone back to listen to Jude's voice saying he would always love me again.

"Well, whatever—just get out of there. *Now*."

"Why? What do you know?" I kept my voice low, hoping no one was snooping outside the bathroom door.

"Only that Essie was bragging that Frank was going to ascend to pack master soon because she and Mom and Dad were going to get Engle what he wanted so he would step down."

"But I'm not a virgin anymore," I protested in a low voice. "What he wanted is gone."

"No, what he wanted was *you*. He's plenty pissed you went off and, uh, lost it to somebody else but he still wants to have you. And he's pretty much refusing to step down until he does."

"That son of a bitch!" I swore. "I can't believe this—how could they do this to me?"

"I don't know, Luz." Diego's voice was sober and sad. "I've been asking myself the same thing. I didn't want to see it before—didn't want to admit to myself what they did to you back then. But there's no way around it now. They're all in on it so you have to go."

"But why would Essie tell you any of this in the first place? Frank was right there the other night—he knew you'd warn me if she talked."

"She didn't tell me—she's a bitch but she's not stupid. She told one of her best girlfriends who happens to be dating one of my pack brothers. Guess she couldn't resist bragging about her new status."

"Guess not," I said grimly. It was in keeping with my older sister's character. She loved feeling like the queen bee and letting other people know it.

"Well, never mind the details, just leave," Diego said. "Pretend you left something in your car and get the hell out of Dodge."

"Yeah, I will. Thanks for warning me, little brother. Sorry I didn't get your message earlier."

"Me too," he said. "Call me when you're safe. I need to know you're okay."

"Will do." I clicked off the phone and stepped quietly to the bathroom door. Slowly, stealthily, I released the lock and turned the knob. Then, making sure it didn't creak, I eased the door open with agonizing slowness.

"Hello, Luz," said Frank, who was standing just outside the bathroom. "Going somewhere?"

"Just back to the table to get some cake. You didn't eat it all, did you?" I gave him a big, fake grin and stepped around him, heading toward the dining room. I had no idea how much he'd heard but if he'd been outside the door it might have been quite a lot. Were hearing is very acute and the senses of an alpha—even a shithead like Frank—are razor sharp.

"I hope you saved some room," Mom said, as I stepped into the dining room with Frank right on my heels. He was a big guy with dark hair and a five o'clock shadow that never really went away no matter how much he shaved. I tried not to let his physical presence intimidate me, despite the panicky feeling that was rising in my throat.

"I can't wait. I've been looking forward to this cake all week," I said, turning my big, fake grin on her. I sat in my place and waited until Frank sat down too. Then, just when everyone started digging into the gooey mounds of chocolate cherry cake, I hopped up again. "You know, I think I left something in my car. I'll be right back."

I practically ran out of the dining room, my keys in my hand, but I didn't even make it to the front door.

"Not so fast." There was an ugly look on Frank's face as he dragged me back to the table.

"What are you doing? Let go of me." I struggled in his grip but he was too strong for me. He pushed me back down in the chair I had vacated and stood right behind it, his heavy hands on my shoulders.

"Now, Luz," Dad began in a father-knows-best kind of voice. "Your mother and I feel like you've been out on your own too long and you've made some fairly poor choices with your life."

"You mean like refusing to let the pack master rape me?" I spat, the words finally bubbling to the surface after all these years.

"Now, now." My mom looked distinctly uncomfortable. "What Daddy is saying is that we think it's better for you to move back in with us for a while."

I glared at her. "So you just want me to stay here? This has nothing at all to do with handing me over to Engle so he'll step down as pack master and put Frank in his place?"

"So what if it does?" Essie narrowed her eyes at me. "You're lucky the pack master still wants you at all! Here he waited all these years for your virginity and then you go and give it away to some dirty vampire just to spite him."

"And you're willing to stand by and let me get raped just to gain pack status." I pointed a finger at Essie. "You're no better than Mom and Dad."

"Young lady, I will not be talked about like that in my own house," my father blustered.

"Why? I'm just telling the truth. You people are sick—all of you are sick and what you're doing to me is abduction and assault."

"You've been living in the human world too long," Frank growled behind me. "What we're doing is giving the pack master his due. You've had several opportunities to go to him willingly but since you won't, we'll have to take you to him by force."

"How could you do this?" I looked at my mom with tears in my eyes. "How could you lie to me to get me over here and then hand me over to be assaulted? I don't understand how you could do this to your own daughter."

Mom looked confused and upset. "But, sweetheart, I made your favorite cake," she said at last, as though that excused everything.

"I don't care about the *fucking cake*!" I screamed and everyone at the table flinched.

"That's enough of this nonsense." My father threw down his napkin. "Frank, take her to her room. She needs some time to calm down before she meets the pack master."

I pretty much lost it then. I kicked and screamed and cursed and made it as difficult as possible for my thug of a brother-in-law to drag me upstairs. But as I said, he's an alpha and incredibly strong so in the end I wound up in my old bedroom with a twisted wrist and without my cell phone. It was Essie's idea to take that away but I kicked her a good one right in the stomach before she managed to snag it out of my jeans pocket so that was something. Still, the end result was the same. Me sitting on my old canopy princess bed decorated in unicorns and fairies, holding my swelling wrist, and waiting for the moment that had been coming to me for the last fourteen years.

The moment when Engle would take what he wanted, whether I wanted to give it to him or not.

Chapter Thirteen

Being chained naked to the stone altar was every bit as bad as I remembered. The only difference was the moon overhead wasn't full this time and it wasn't ropes that bound my arms but real silver manacles that burned and chafed my wrists. Apparently Frank and the other alphas weren't taking any chances that I might escape. They hadn't bothered with putting silver on my legs, though—they didn't need to. My ankles had been tied with a thick rope to a kind of pulley system at the end of the altar so no matter how hard I tried to close my legs, I couldn't manage it.

The altar was set in the middle of a small clearing, surrounded by the woods that were the pack's hunting grounds. The stones were rough and cold under my back and a cool breeze played over my naked body, making me shiver. I felt horribly exposed, laid out bare and helpless as the uncaring moon wheeled overhead and the alphas of the Arm Gard pack surrounded me. They were all shirtless and silent, their bare chests gleaming in the silvery moonlight. But I could still feel their eyes on me, wolf gold and as cold as the surface of the moon, as they stared at me dispassionately and waited for the ceremony to begin.

I closed my eyes to shut it out, praying it would be over quickly. But since Engle had been waiting fourteen years to have me, it didn't seem likely that he would settle for a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am approach. *Calm. Be calm. You can get through this. You'll be all right.* I didn't know why I was trying to calm myself down—maybe going into full panic attack mode would put Engle off fucking me. Then again, he might enjoy it even more and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"Well, well—so the prodigal returns." It was Engle's voice in my ear and I jumped—or would have if the silver chains and ropes hadn't been holding me down.

"Leave me alone," I said but with no conviction. There was no way he was going to leave me alone. He had me right where he'd wanted me and he was going to make the most of it.

Engle stood up and raised his arms over his head. He always was all about the drama. "Brothers of the Arm Gard pack, tonight we come to the end of an era. For tonight I will step down and name another to take my place—but first I have a little bit of unfinished business to attend to." Deep, trollish laughter greeted his words. Engle smiled to acknowledge his own wit and continued.

"Fourteen years ago when I ascended as your pack master I was promised this girl's virginity to mark the occasion. Well, as most of you know, that didn't happen. Luz Velez," he continued, looking down at me. "You stand accused of willfully refusing to shift in order to avoid giving your pack master his due."

"I don't owe you *anything*," I said angrily, yanking at the chains that held me down. "I was thirteen when my parents offered me to you—too young to consent to any kind of sex, especially with a man twenty years older than me, you sick fuck."

There were angry murmurs from the alphas of the pack and Engle leaned down and slapped my face. It must have looked like a casual blow to those observing but the force of it rocked my head to one side and split my lip. I tasted the warm copper flavor of my own blood and there was a ringing in my ears that hadn't been there before.

Clearly it was a warning but I didn't care. I spat the blood in Engle's direction and had the grim satisfaction of seeing it speckle his cheeks. He wiped his face with one hand in a quick, angry motion. "You'll pay for that."

I was sure I would but I was sick of being a victim, sick of hiding in the shadows and trying not to think of what he'd done to me. "Fuck you," I said and the alphas murmured again. Some of them even came forward but Engle held up a hand.

"As I said, Luz Velez is finally being brought to justice after all these years. I regret, however, that her virginity is gone—given to another when it should have been saved for me and me alone."

"She should be punished!" shouted one deep male voice that I recognized as Frank's.

Engle nodded. "And so she will be. For I will have this girl and though I am not the first, nor will I be the last." He looked at me, a cruel smile playing around his slash of a mouth. "Luz Velez, it is my ruling that tonight every alpha in the Arm Gard pack will taste your favors. Beginning with me."

"What?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You-you can't do this," I said frantically. "There's no law that allows you—"

"As pack master I *am* the law." Engle gave me an ugly grin. "Prepare to be mounted, bitch."

I closed my eyes, trying desperately to remember the *dulce de leche* flavor of Jude's blood, trying to keep the panic from overtaking me. But I couldn't breathe and my heart was pounding so hard it felt as if it were trying to break through my ribs with a sledgehammer. *Oh God, I can't...I can't...*

"Stop!" Another voice rang out, just as Engle was about to climb on the altar with me.

My eyes flew open and I saw Diego standing there, shirtless in the moonlight.

Engle snarled and suddenly there was a gun in his hand and it was pointed at my little brother. "What do you want, cub? We're conducting a ceremony and you're trespassing on our pack grounds."

"I want my sister, untied and unharmed. Let her go, Engle, you fucking *pendejo*, or I swear to God I'm gonna rip you apart." Diego's eyes were wolf gold in the moonlight but he was all alone this time and Engle knew it.

"Move along." He waved the gun in a menacing manner. "Or would you prefer to be shot? This gun is loaded with silver bullets—you'd never survive."

"My pack will take revenge if you dare," Diego warned.

Engle laughed. "No, they won't. Your pack master is very unhappy with you right now—he'd know you got what was coming to you."

I wanted to beg Diego to just go, to run as fast and as far as he could. If Engle said he would shoot, I had no doubt that he would. There was no way Diego could save me without backup and there was no sense in him being killed to save me from a fate I seemed doomed to endure.

But before I could say anything, Diego took a deep breath. "Pack Master Engle," he said in an official tone I had never heard him use before. "I offer you formal challenge for the rights to my sister, Luz Velez."

"Diego, no!" I gasped, having finally found my voice. But neither man paid any attention to me.

"Formal challenge, hmmm?" Engle frowned. "You're really a glutton for punishment, aren't you, cub?"

"Unless you're too chickenshit to accept." Diego bared his teeth in a silent growl.

Engle shrugged. "Formal challenge it is." He nodded at the alpha standing closest to him. "Darius, take him out."

I could barely stand to watch what followed. Darius, who was built like a Mack Truck, lumbered toward my much smaller brother. I was afraid he would bulldoze right over Diego but that didn't happen. At the last minute Diego stepped aside and stuck out a leg to trip him. The other alpha went down and then Diego was on his back. He grabbed the other male's head and twisted until a low cracking sound echoed through the forest around us.

It was only then, when my brother got up and turned to face Engle and the other alphas again, that it really hit home with me. This was a fight to the death and in order to free me, Diego was going to have to take on every one of the fifteen remaining alphas and Engle as well and kill them all. Even as fast and as deadly as he was, there was no way he could do it. He would get tired or injured and one of them would kill him instead.

"Please," I murmured to Engle, pitching my voice so that only he could hear. "Please, just let him go home. I...I'll give you what you want. I won't even struggle, I swear."

Engle uttered a harsh, barking laugh. "Stupid little bitch—don't you know the struggle is part of the fun? Besides, I think it'll be much more entertaining to fuck you after you watch your brother die trying to save you. This little family drama is really whetting my appetite."

"You cold-hearted bastard," I snarled but he only laughed again.

"You should have given it up back when I first took over the pack, Luz. Think how much pain and suffering you could have saved if you'd just shifted like you were supposed to and let me have you afterward. Now shut up and let me watch the fight."

I wanted to say more—to curse him and call him names. But just then he called another alpha out to fight Diego and I watched, my heart in my throat, to see what would happen.

This time Diego wasn't quite fast enough to avoid taking some punches. One of them landed squarely in his face and I was horrified to see his left eye begin to swell shut. Still, he finally managed to get the other male in a chokehold and after a horribly long time, the body stopped twitching and he dropped it in the grass beside the first alpha.

"Next." He glared at Engle with his one good eye. "Come on, you *hijo de puta*, why don't you face me yourself? Or are you so scared you have to hide behind your wolves?"

If he was hoping to shame Engle into fighting him right away instead of waiting until the last alpha of the Arm Gard pack was killed, he failed. Engle only laughed and sent another alpha up against him. And another and another.

Finally five bodies lay scattered in the grass at Diego's feet—five alphas who had died because Engle was determined to have what he wanted—me. Diego was bloody and bruised and barely able to stay on his feet but his face was still rigid with determination. I wanted to beg him to leave but it was far too late. If he ran now the other alphas would pursue him and tear him to bits.

My brother was going to die and it was all my fault.

Engle seemed to know that Diego was on his last legs because he turned to my brother-in-law and nodded. "Frank, finish him off."

Frank grinned and stepped out onto the bloody grass. "Come on, you little shit. I never liked you anyway."

"Right back at you, fucker." Diego spat blood to one side and began to circle warily. "You and Essie deserve each other. You're both assholes."

Frank yelled and charged forward, just as the first alpha had. Diego stepped out of the way but at the last moment, Frank changed course. I realized that he had been counting on Diego's move and Diego must have realized it too—a moment too late. He tried to get out of the way but a split second later Frank had him down on the ground with his teeth in Diego's throat.

"No!" I screamed as. And to my surprise, another, deeper voice echoed me.

"No. Let her go. Let *both* of them go."

I looked up to see Jude step out of the shadows of the trees and into the moonlight. He was shirtless too and the white skin of his broad chest gleamed like pure silver. His eyes were coal red and filled with a rage so frightening my blood ran cold. His

appearance must have frightened more than me because I heard a low murmur go through the ranks of the alphas behind me.

Frank sat up, his mouth covered in Diego's blood, and looked back at Engle uncertainly. "Pack master?"

"I know who you are." Engle took a step forward, looking at Jude. "You're the son of a bitch who skinned Jack Evans, the Clear Water pack master. What the fuck are you doing here?"

"The girl is mine. And I would not see her brother hurt either – she loves him." Jude lifted his head, his eyes glowing so brightly they actually cast shadows on the ground. "I will give you this one chance to keep your hide, Engle, though you deserve death many times over. Let Luz and her brother go now and I will spare your life."

Engle spat to one side, his eyes never leaving Jude's. "You're outnumbered and you have no power here. Fuck off."

"Very well, if that is your choice." Suddenly Jude was a blur. Everything happened so fast that I couldn't see what he was doing, only the results of his actions. I watched, unable to do anything, as the slaughter began.

Frank was the first to go. Jude pulled him off Diego and ripped out his throat but before he could even sink to his knees with the arterial blood pulsing out in spurts, another alpha was going down. And another and another.

All around there were strangled screams that turned into bloody gurgles. The men behind me tried to run or fight but I could see from the corner of my eye that they were dropping like flies. And then there was only Engle left.

Suddenly Jude was in front of him. His mouth and chin and chest were covered in blood but his eyes were cold. "Now," he told Engle. "You die."

"No, now *you* die, you fanged son of a bitch." Engle raised the gun he'd been holding concealed by his leg and fired at Jude at point-blank range.

I watched in horror as a large bloody hole opened on the left side of Jude's chest and the light in his eyes died, from red to his normal pale green.

"Luz..." He fell to his knees and looked up at me.

"Jude." I was crying and fighting the silver chains but I couldn't get free. "Jude, no!"

"Forgive me, beloved." He slumped over onto the ground and was silent.

"No! No!" I screamed. But it was useless—all my screaming couldn't bring Jude back. As powerful as he was, I knew a point-blank shot with a silver bullet was lethal to any vamp or were.

Engle poked Jude's body with one boot. "I guess that's the vamp you gave your virginity to. Too bad he didn't live to come back for seconds."

"You son of a bitch! I hate you!" I spat at him again but he just laughed.

"This is one hell of a mess we're gonna have to clean up," he said with disgust. "Having you has turned out to be harder than I thought. But it looks like I won in the end, didn't I?" He grinned and leaned over me.

My mind was in a whirl. Jude was dead and Diego probably was too. All the other alphas of the Arm Gard pack lay dead or dying and Engle, sick fuck that he was, still wanted to have sex with me.

"Get off me!" I screamed but just then something very strange happened. Engle's face went from looking satisfied to surprised and his eyes flew from my face down to his chest. I followed his gaze with my own and saw something I'd never seen before.

Sticking out of the center of Engle's chest was a bloody arm and in its hand was a still-beating heart. As I watched, the hand turned into a fist and crushed the bloody muscle to a dark and dripping pulp. Then Engle's eyes glazed over and he slumped to the ground.

Standing behind him was a vampire I had never seen before. He had pale skin and light brown hair and, of course, one very bloody hand and arm.

"Who are you?" I gasped as he went through Engle's pockets and found the key to my manacles.

"Gavin," he said shortly, unlocking the chains and going to work on the ropes that bound my feet. Apparently the knots frustrated him because he leaned down and just bit through them, his fangs working as quickly and neatly as a pair of shears.

"Gavin." I sat up looked at him in surprise. "Diego's vampire?"

He grinned, flashing his fangs. "Or you could call him my werewolf, I guess. Do you want to save him?"

I wasn't sure what he was talking about until I realized he was looking at Jude's body.

"Can I?" Jude had landed facedown and I leaned against his shoulder and grunted, trying to push him over on his back so I could get to him.

"There is still a spark of life—I can sense it. But it is dying fast." Gavin, who was already bending over Diego, looked up and frowned at me. "I ask you again, do you want to save him? I only ask because he could have killed me when he came looking for you tonight but he didn't."

"Yes," I said, knowing it was true. "Yes, I want to save him."

"No matter what the cost? He is a very powerful incubus and there is a bond between you that is more than half formed. You can be free of him and his influence forever if you wish."

"I don't want to be free of him." I started to cry. "Please...just tell me how to save him."

"Give him your blood." Gavin bit his own wrist and held it to Diego's mouth. My brother choked at first and then began to swallow. "It won't bond you to him unless you take some of his in exchange. But you will be close...very close to the final step."

Letting only one drop of his blood pass your lips after this will bind you to him for eternity."

"I don't care about that. Not now." Lifting my wrist to my teeth, I did as Gavin had and bit down hard, shredding the tender bracelet of veins beneath my skin. It hurt like hell since I was already silver burned but that couldn't be helped. I pressed my wounded wrist to Jude's mouth and prayed.

At first the blood ran out of the corners of his mouth and I cursed in frustration. "Jude," I whispered. "Jude, please...please drink. *Please.*"

Then, so faintly I was afraid I had imagined it, I felt his mouth move against my skin. It happened again and this time there was a faint suction at the place where I had bitten myself. I almost cried with happiness as I felt him draw my blood into his mouth. And slowly but surely the ragged hole in his chest began to close.

I don't know how long I fed him or how much he took but it must have been a lot because I started to see black spots dancing in front of my eyes. Then Gavin was suddenly by my side.

"Pull away. You're too small to completely replenish him—he'll kill you."

I tried but I was too weak or Jude's suction on my arm was too strong. Gavin seemed to see the problem.

"Incubus." He slapped Jude's cheek until Jude's eyelids fluttered up, revealing eyes that were a normal pale green. "You're killing her," Gavin said, glaring at the other vampire. "Let her go now or watch her die."

"Luz?" Jude stopped sucking and his eyes focused on mine. "Are you all right?"

"I think we both are." I was half laughing, half crying. I looked at Gavin. "Is Diego okay?"

"He will be fine. I will take him home and nurse him." He turned and looked over to where my brother was sitting up and rubbing his head like he was getting over a terrible headache. "Are you all right, lover?"

"Yeah, yeah." Diego staggered to his feet and shuffled over to us. "Mira, Gavin, don't call me that in front of my sister." He looked embarrassed.

"Forgive me, sweetheart." Gavin smiled at him and though Diego was scowling, I could tell he wasn't really mad.

"Luz?" he asked. "Are you okay?" He was trying to look me over for injuries without actually looking at me and I realized I was still nude.

I looked at Gavin appealingly. "Uh, I know I barely know you but do you think you could loan me your shirt? You're the only one wearing one."

"Never let it be said that I would not give the shirt off my back to a lady in need." He took off his shirt—which was a white poet-type deal with lace at the neck and flowing sleeves—and handed it to me. There was a pattern of blood drops sprayed across the front of it but I slipped it on gratefully anyway.

"Thanks. You're already an improvement over my last brother-in-law."

"Which one was that?" Jude asked, looking up at me.

"That would be Frank—the first one you killed." I blinked back sudden tears. Frank had been an asshole and Essie was a bitch but now their kids were fatherless. What a horrible night, and all because of me!

I didn't want to think about it. "Come on. Let's get you home," I told Jude. I tried to help him sit up but both of us were in pretty bad shape. In the end Gavin did most of the heavy lifting and then the four of us, Gavin, Diego, Jude and I, staggered out to Diego's car.

Gavin drove since he was in the best shape. He and Diego sat in the front and had a whispered argument while Jude and I slumped in the back.

"You shouldn't have come after me," Diego was telling his lover in a low voice. "I had it handled."

"I had to come. I couldn't let you go to certain death alone."

"Well, I for one am glad you showed up," Jude said to Gavin. "I am assuming you are the one who finished off that bastard, Engle?"

"He did—just in time. He, uh, crushed his heart." I shivered at the memory of Gavin's bloody arm with Engle's still-beating heart crushed in his fist.

"Good," Jude and Diego said at once.

Diego turned his head to grin at Jude. "Looks like you and I finally agree on something, *hermano*."

Jude smiled back. "I think you might be right. I am glad you were there to defend Luz—I would have been too late."

"And I'm glad you showed up when you did. You, uh, kinda saved my ass," Diego admitted. "I know I didn't care for you much in the past but you're all right with me, *'mano*."

"What? Why will you thank the incubus and not your own lover?" Gavin turned his head to glare at my brother who blushed dark red in the dim light of the dash.

"Damn it, Gavin, I told you don't call me that in front of my sister."

"It's okay, really." I reached over the seat and put a hand on Diego's arm. "And I want to thank all of you for saving me. I just wish...I just wish it hadn't been necessary in the first place." My voice was suddenly choked with tears and then Jude was pulling me into his arms.

"Luz," he murmured softly. "Luz, it's all right. It's over now."

"All that blood. All that violence. And it was my fault," I whispered. "All my fault."

"Don't talk like that, Luz," Diego said fiercely. "It was that *cabrón* Engle's fault. He's the one who started the whole mess."

"I know." I wiped at my eyes with the long sleeves of Gavin's shirt but the tears kept coming. "But if I had just shifted and let...let him have what he wanted all those years ago—"

"You were a child being abused." Jude stroked my hair. "It wasn't your fault. It was a burden too heavy for anyone to bear."

"Jude is right. Mom and Dad and Essie and Frank — the whole damn pack, really — have some fucked-up ideas." Diego shook his head. "I'm not going to talk to them or see them anymore, Luz, and I don't think you should either."

I took a deep breath and sat up. "Well, there go our plans for a big family Christmas." But my efforts at sarcasm only made me cry again because I started thinking of Essie's kids having their first Christmas without their dad.

"Come here." Jude pulled me to him and I nestled my face in his shoulder and let myself go, let the tears flow like a river down his bloodstained chest.

But even as he held me and whispered soothing things into my ear, I wondered if he was secretly enjoying the taste of my misery and that thought in itself made me even more miserable. I wept until I thought my heart would break and not only for the pain and bloodshed I had caused that night. I wept because despite everything that had happened, I still wasn't sure about Jude.

And I was very, very careful not to get any of his blood in my mouth.

Chapter Fourteen

Gavin and Diego dropped us off at Jude's house, even though I wanted to go back to my own apartment to think.

"You'll be safest here, Luz," Diego said reasonably when I tried to protest. "Just in case someone comes looking to retaliate—not that there are many males left in the Arm Gard pack at this point but you never can tell."

Gavin simply gave me a long look. "Remember what I told you," he said before they pulled away.

Jude looked at me. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing. Well...it was something he said after he asked if I wanted to save you, that's all."

"And what did you say?"

"I said of course I wanted to save you. How could I not?" I looked up at Jude, who looked much paler than usual if that was possible, and then back down to the sidewalk under my feet. "He...he said that if I gave you my blood to heal you I would have to be very careful. Because if I even took one drop of yours, the bond between us would be completed and I would never be free of you."

"Do you want to be free of me?" Jude tilted my chin up gently, forcing me to meet his eyes.

"I don't know. I can't tell you how grateful I am that you saved me tonight but...but I still have some problems with the way you lied to me and honestly, with what you are. God, that sounds terrible." I pulled away from his hand and sat down on his front porch steps, wrapping my arms around my knees. "I'm so tired," I whispered and it was true—now that the adrenaline rush of my horrible encounter had faded I was exhausted. The night was only half over but I felt like it had already lasted a million years.

"Now is not the time to talk about this." Jude offered me his hand. After a moment's hesitation I took it and let him help me up. "Stay here until you're rested," he said. "I will leave a note instructing Rosie to wake you before nightfall if you wish to avoid seeing me again."

"Oh, Jude—it's not that I don't want to see you again," I protested. "This last week and a half while we've been apart has been horrible. I just...I don't know."

"You need time. Time to heal and time to think." He waved a hand over the front doorknob and the door swung silently open. I would have exclaimed over the neat vampire trick but I was too tired to care if he turned the whole damn house upside down at that point.

"I guess so," I said. "That and a place to sleep. A hot shower would be nice too."

"You shall have everything you need and everything you desire," Jude promised. He looked so tired and beaten, standing there in front of me that I longed to put my arms around him and tell him everything was forgiven and that we were going to start fresh. But too much had happened to me that night and I was still unsure of what he'd gotten out of my pain and misery. He was right, I needed time to think. So I kept my hands to myself and followed him as he led me silently back to the guest bedroom I had used before.

"There are some of my shirts in the drawer," he said, nodding at the large oak dresser beside the bed. "Also some clothes in your size hanging in the closet. I had Rosie help me pick them out before...when I still hoped you were coming back."

"Oh, Jude..." I felt tears stinging my eyes and blinked them back with an effort. "Thank you," I said. "For everything."

"I will always love you," he said simply. "Rest well." Then he closed the door behind him and left me alone.

I stared at the closed door for a long while but finally I made myself go into the bathroom. I needed a hot shower before I passed out and I felt horribly soiled by the blood that had splattered on me when Gavin had killed Engle.

Stripping off the bloody poet shirt, I stepped under the steaming-hot spray and lathered myself up. I noticed that the shower had been stocked with all my favorite body washes and hair care products, which should have made me think how thoughtful Jude was. Instead, it reminded me that he'd lied to me about his telepathy as well as his need to feed on emotions in addition to drinking blood. Could I really be in a relationship with someone who had been so untruthful with me? I honestly didn't see how I could. What else hadn't he told me? It was just too much to handle, especially considering a bond between us would be forever and completely unbreakable.

By the time the shower was over and I was toweling off, I had pretty much decided that being with Jude was impossible. Still, when I went to get dressed for bed, I didn't take any of the lovely clothes in my size that were hanging neatly in the closet. Instead I got one of Jude's T-shirts from the drawer—a black one that hung down almost to my knees. It smelled faintly of him and I wondered if he'd put it on briefly before folding it and putting there in the drawer for me to find. If so, I was grateful. As always, his scent had a calming influence on me and when I snuggled down between the crisp, clean sheets, I was able to slip easily into a dreamless sleep.

"Miss Luz? Miss Luz, I'm sorry to wake you up but I have a note here from Mr. Jude that says I have to."

"Hmm?" I rolled over in bed and looked up to see Rosie staring down at me with concern. "What..." I cleared my throat. "What time is it?"

"Going on seven o'clock at night and you been sleeping all this time. I was hoping you'd wake up on your own but I couldn't wait anymore. Mr. Jude's note said to wake you while it's still light outside and you know the sun will be setting 'long about eight."

"Okay," I mumbled, sitting up and stretching. "I'm, uh, I'm getting up. Just give me a minute."

"All right. You find me in the kitchen when you're ready. I'll have some nice soup waiting for you."

I started to say I wasn't hungry but then my stomach growled. It wasn't surprising really, considering I'd slept almost the entire day away, but it was still embarrassing.

Rosie laughed. "All right. Hurry up now because it's my homemade potato soup and you want to get it while it's hot." My stomach growled again as if to answer her and she left the room, laughing as she went.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and forced myself to get out of bed. I was stiff and achy from sleeping so long and decided to take time for another quick shower. After standing under the hot water again I felt more like myself.

I went through the closet until I found a plain denim skirt that came almost to my knees and a dark red blouse made of some silky material with small gold buttons down the front. There were also some cute black kitten heels with a designer label that made my eyes pop. They were just my size and I slipped into them, thinking that Jude must have spent a fortune, just on the off chance that I would come back to him. There was no bra to be seen but someone, I was guessing Rosie, had purchased a pack of plain white cotton bikini panties in my size. I put on a pair, glad to feel covered.

I never wear much makeup but in rummaging through the top dresser drawer, I found my favorite brand of face powder and a sheer lip gloss I'd been wanting to try for ages but had never gotten around to buying. I made use of both items, wincing when the lip gloss stung my cut lip. Weres heal fast but my system was still depleted. The marks from the silver manacles were evident on my wrists too but there was nothing I could do about that. Also, the wrist I'd shredded with my teeth still looked and felt pretty raw but maybe it would start to heal along with my lip when I got some food in me. I fluffed my hair, making sure my curls weren't frizzy, and went to find Rosie.

She eyed my outfit appreciatively, lingering on the red blouse. "Well, well, don't you look nice? Mr. Jude said that color would suit you down to the ground and looks like he was right."

"Thank you." I sat down at the table, blushing a little, and picked up the spoon that was sitting by a big bowl of heavenly smelling soup. "Is all this for me?"

Rosie nodded. "You look like you can use it and don't tell me different, either. I'm guessing you and Mr. Jude had a rough night last night."

"You could say that," I said, dipping into the soup. It was, as promised, utterly delicious—creamy and buttery and perfect. For a few minutes I was completely absorbed in eating but finally I looked up and thanked Rosie for her wonderful cooking.

"It's a pleasure to cook for you, Miss Luz," she said gravely. "I just hope I get the chance to do it often. Are you moving back in with Mr. Jude now?"

"I-I don't think so." I looked down at my half-eaten bowl of soup, feeling my appetite abruptly disappear. "We seem to have some...irreconcilable differences."

"What? That he's a vamp and you're a were? Or is it because he's a white boy and you're Latina?"

"Neither one of those." I took another sip of soup even though I didn't want it. "I...it's hard to explain."

"Mr. Jude did say you felt like he'd done you wrong, not telling you all about himself right away. But I think he was just afraid to scare you off," Rosie offered gently.

I looked up from the aimless pattern I was drawing with my spoon on the surface of my soup. "How much do you know? Does he tell you everything?"

"No intimate details, if that's what you're worried about, missy," she said tartly. "But he's lonely and sometimes he needs someone to talk to. Besides, we're pretty close after what he did for me and my family."

"What *did* he do?" I asked curiously. I remembered her saying something vague—something about Jude getting her justice when no one else would or could—but I'd had no idea what she was talking about at the time and I still didn't.

Rosie heaved a sigh. "Well, it's a long story and it ain't very pretty but I guess you deserve to know, seeing as how I've had my nose all up in your and Mr. Jude's business. I have a granddaughter—about your age, maybe a little younger. She's a real independent girl and wanted to make it on her own. You know—get out in the world and do for herself instead of just marrying an alpha and settling down to have kids."

"That's very brave of her," I said quietly. "I know from experience it's not easy going against the way you were brought up to make it outside the pack."

Rosie nodded. "Oh yes—in my day it would have been unheard of. But today's girls are so much freer. Her parents disapproved of course but I told her to go for it and have some fun with her life. But then..." Her wrinkled face grew grim. "Then her pack got a new pack master—a real he-man type, you know what I mean?"

"Sounds like pretty much any alpha male I've ever met," I said, taking another bite of soup. "A lot of them have more testosterone than brains."

"Well, take that idea and double it and you'd have this clown." Rosie sounded angry. "Anyway, he demanded that every were in his territory show up and pay him tribute. My granddaughter didn't want to go but her parents pretty much made her—after all, they thought it was just going to be one night of kissing Mr. New Pack Master's behind and then they'd hear no more about it."

I swallowed hard, thinking of the ascension ceremony I myself had endured. "And what...what happened?"

"Well, you could say that things didn't exactly go according to plan. See, the new pack master took a shine to Belinda—that's my granddaughter. So he claimed her as his

mate and told her she would have to give up her life and come to live with him. Of course she refused—she had her own business she built from the ground up and she didn't want anything to do with him."

"I'm guessing he wouldn't take no for an answer," I said dryly.

Rosie nodded. "You'd be guessing right on that one, child. He sent his alphas over to burn down her shop and kidnap her. Then he moved her into his house and kept her chained up—no better than his prisoner! I don't even like to tell you what he was doing to her every chance he got."

I was pretty sure from the angry, hurt and disgusted look on her face that I could guess. Here was just another example of abuse within the pack—a pack master had too much power and too few rules to hold him back from doing anything he wanted. Really, it was no better than the feudal system humans had used during medieval times. The pack master was king and the alphas were knights but everyone else was just a serf. And women were even lower—just property the pack master could use any way he wanted to.

"Anyway," Rosie continued, breaking my train of thought. "He held her for two, three months and wouldn't let her go. She managed to call me once or twice and she was crying and crying. But no one would help her—they were all too afraid of that damn pack master to cross him." She sighed and ran a hand over her wrinkled face. "Well, so one night I was in here in the kitchen after she called me and of course, I was bawling my eyes out too. Belinda always was my favorite—my little lamb I used to call her—and I just couldn't bear to think of her being abused that way."

"So Jude heard you crying?" I asked.

She nodded. "Sure did. He came in here and got the whole story out of me—it wasn't hard because I was pretty upset. So he said that he would go and talk to that pack master and make him give back Belinda. But I said that wasn't enough—that he ought to be punished." Her bright old eyes flashed and I was suddenly glad we were on a friendly basis—Rosie was tough. "So, Mr. Jude asked me what did I want done to him. I was so angry at the way he had done my precious little lamb that I said, 'He ought to be skinned alive. Somebody needs to nail his hide to a damn tree!'" She chuckled and shook her head. "I should know better than to talk that way to a vampire—they take everything so literal."

I felt numb all over. "Rosie—your granddaughter Belinda, was she a member of the Clear Water pack?"

"Oh yes, that's where she lives." She nodded. "Anyway, when I found out Mr. Jude had taken me at my word and actually done it, I felt real sorry."

"You did?" I asked. "For the pack master?"

Rosie frowned. "Of course not! That nasty man got what he deserved. And let me tell you, Belinda is still recovering from what he did to her. They say he may never shift again but I say too damn bad. My little lamb may never be the same again either." She dabbed at her eyes with a folded napkin. "No, I felt bad for Mr. Jude. See, I don't know

if you know this, but he's a different kind of vampire. He doesn't just know things about people—he can kind of *taste* the way they're feeling. So when he does something like that, it affects him a lot more than it would you or me. Not that either one of us is up to taking on a pack master but you get what I mean."

"I get you," I said numbly. "So...you think Jude doesn't like the, uh, *taste* of someone else's pain when he hurts them?"

Rosie shook her head vehemently. "Oh no, child—that's like bitter medicine to him. Makes him sick and tired for a long time afterward, too. If I'd known he was really going to do what I said, I would have asked him to do something quick to that pack master instead."

I didn't like to think what forms of "quick" torture Rosie had in mind for the evil pack master but my mind wasn't really on that, anyway. I was remembering how Jude had admitted to skinning the leader of the Clear Water wolves and the way he'd assured me that he had a reason for everything he did. Well, I had just learned his reason and it didn't have anything to do with feeding on the pack master's pain at all. It seemed almost too good to be true but I needed to know for sure.

I looked at Rosie. "So you're *sure* Jude doesn't like the, uh, the taste of negative emotions?"

"He told me when he hired me it was because he liked my happiness," she said, smiling. "Of course, I didn't have any idea what he was talking about back then—back before I knew him. I thought he just meant I had a good attitude. But later on I found out, he really *did* like the way my feelings tasted."

"So...he feeds on you?" I asked uncertainly. It would certainly explain Jude's need to have a full-time maid when he was the only occupant of his house.

"Not in a nasty way," Rosie hastened to assure me. "And he doesn't take my blood—my goodness, certainly not. He doesn't need much of that anyway, even if he is a vampire. But he likes to sit and talk with me and when I'm feeling happy or contented or good, that sort of fills his tank. Do you see what I mean?"

"I do," I said. "I see what you mean." I saw a lot of other things too. Like the fact that I had been completely wrong about Jude for one thing. I'd assumed that he wanted to be near me because of my horrible past and my angst. Now I realized that I must be a pretty bitter pill for him to swallow whenever he was near me.

"What is it, child?" Rosie put her hand on mine. "You look like you're thinking hard and not liking whatever conclusion you're coming to."

I cleared my throat. "Well, I...to be honest I was wondering what Jude sees in me at all. I'm *not* a very happy person a lot of the time so it can't be very comfortable for him to be around me. What does he want with me anyway?"

"Child, he *loves* you." Rosie stroked my hand. "Don't you know that by now? I've never seen him look so low as since you left him. He's been moping around here looking like death warmed over and missing you 'til it most makes him sick. He needs you, Luz, and I'm guessing maybe you need him too."

"I don't know." I shook my head. "He lied to me. I just wonder...what else is there about him that I don't know?"

"Ask me anything and I swear I'll answer truthfully."

Chapter Fifteen

Jude's deep voice startled me. I turned to see him standing behind me with an unreadable expression on his face. I wasn't sure how long he'd been there—he might have heard the entire conversation as far as I could tell. Apparently while Rosie and I had been talking, the sun had set, releasing him from wherever he spent his daylight hours. Sure enough, when I looked out the kitchen window I saw the backyard was painted in the dusky purple tones of twilight.

Rosie got up from the table, taking my mostly empty soup bowl with her to the sink. "I think I need to be getting on home now."

"Thanks, Rosie," I said. "For everything."

She waved a hand at me. "Anytime, Miss Luz. You two just need to sit down and work this out now." She pointed sternly to the kitchen table, indicating Jude should sit beside me. Then she took a cracked leather pocketbook out of one of the bottom cupboards and left. As she walked down the hall I could hear her muttering to herself. "These young folks, I swear—think everything is the end of the world when all they need to do is just talk to each other."

"Well," I said, looking up at Jude. "Maybe we 'young folks' do need to talk."

He smiled as he took the seat beside me. "Actually, I am considerably older than Rosie is but I think she likes playing the mother hen."

"I sort of got that," I said dryly. "But it's nice—*she's* nice. A happy person to be around. Unlike some other people I could name." I pointed to myself and frowned. "Why didn't you tell me you only fed on positive emotions?"

"Because I don't," he said mildly. "Any kind of emotion will nourish me—the incubus part of me, I mean. But Rosie is right, I much *prefer* positive to negative emotions. And it does drain me to commit acts that directly cause negative emotions like pain or fear or horror."

"Yes, but you do it anyway," I said, remembering the gore-fest from the night before.

"Only when necessary and never because I enjoy it." His eyes flashed. "Although I must say I took great pleasure in eviscerating the men who were about to hurt you last night. I only wish I could have killed Engle myself."

"I wouldn't mind bringing him back so I could kill him again, myself," I said with a grim smile. "And normally I would say that the other males didn't deserve to die because they were only following his lead. But in this case, they were all...I mean, Engle had told them that after he was done with me..." I couldn't go on.

Jude reached out to cup my cheek and brushed away a tear with his thumb. "Let it out, Luz. I imagine it will be a long while before you're able to get over the events of last night."

"See?" I said sniffing. "You say you want to be with me but what about this?"

"What about what, beloved?" he said gently.

"This." I pointed at myself again, at my tears. "I'm a mess, Jude. I'm full of angst and anger and unhappiness—it must be like tasting castor oil every minute you're around me."

"It's not like that at all," he assured me. "I promise you it is not, Luz."

I wiped my eyes. "But I'll never be a happy all the time, glass-is-half-full kind of person. Don't you want to be with someone like that? Someone like Rosie?"

"I have someone like Rosie in my life—Rosie." He smiled. "All I want now—all I lack—is you."

"But I still don't see why you would even want me near you."

"Luz," he said quietly. "Do you think that sorrow and joy are the only kinds of emotions I subsist on? Think back to your mythology—what are incubi said to feed on the most?"

"Nightmares and fear," I said. "Or...humans believe they, uh, *you*, I mean, feed on...on sex?" I looked at him uncertainly and he nodded.

"The moment I touched you, that very first time I shook your hand at your old work, I knew," he said. "I felt all your anger and sorrow and fear but I also felt a tremendous buildup of sexual frustration. You had been given so little pleasure in your life, so little tenderness. I knew right then that I wanted to be your first, that I wanted to taste your desire and longing and release and know I was the only man who ever had."

I blushed at what he was revealing. "So all that stuff you said about the flavor of my blood being different, more powerful..."

"It wasn't your blood I was talking about." Jude lifted my hand and brushed my knuckles gently with his lips. He was looking into my eyes as he spoke and I felt a chill of pleasurable tension go down my spine. "Admit it, Luz," he murmured. "No one had ever made you come before I did—you had never had pleasure except by your own hand."

"That's true," I said, wishing my voice didn't sound so breathy.

"Do you have any idea how exquisite you taste when you come?" Jude leaned forward, his eyes never leaving mine. "You flood me with your pleasure, your overwhelming release. I could spend hours between your thighs, licking you, sucking you, fucking you..."

My breath caught in my throat. "Jude!"

He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling under the plain dark green T-shirt he was wearing. "I promised to tell you the whole and unblemished truth and there it is. I love

your taste—the taste of your blood, the taste of your sex, the taste of your pleasure. Your flavor is unequaled anywhere.”

“That’s nice to know,” I said, pulling my hand out of his and sitting back to avoid the temptation to grab him. “But...is that all I am to you? Just a snack bar?”

“Oh, Luz...” He sighed and shook his head. “Beloved, how can I convey this to you? You are so much more—the other half I’ve been searching for these many years. I knew when I had found you because we had so much in common.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What? Like you being a vamp and me being a were?”

“Both of us are outcasts from our people,” Jude said quietly. “Both estranged from our families.”

I frowned. “I thought you said your parents had passed away.”

“They did, but I neglected to give you the details.” He sighed. “When I was a child my parents suspected that something was wrong with me but they didn’t know what. Then I reached my between years—what humans and weres call adolescence—and my eyes began to glow red when I was angry or feeling other intense emotions. Of course they knew what I was then.”

“An incubus,” I said softly.

Jude nodded. “I cannot tell you the level of hatred and fear that is among my people for one such as me. We are stronger and faster than a normal vampire and they think us able to manipulate their minds as easily as a regular vampire manipulates a human’s mind.”

“Can you?” I asked, truly interested.

Jude shrugged. “Yes, if I wish, though most often I do not. But the others know I can and despise me for it. It isn’t easy to be so hated by your own people.”

“Tell me about it,” I said with a heartfelt sigh. “Or to be betrayed by them.”

“I know something about that,” Jude said quietly. “Once they found out what I was, my parents attempted to have me jailed in a facility that would have kept me drugged and chained with silver for as long as I lived.”

“That’s terrible.” I put a hand to my mouth. “But...there are drugs that work on vampires?”

“Certain poisons and toxins—horribly lethal to humans but they act as sedatives on us.” He ran a hand through his hair. “At any rate, I decided that I did not *want* to be drugged and chained for the rest of my life. I broke out of the facility, killing the director of it on my way out. I was full of rage and he was in the way.” Jude shrugged. “I regret it now but I was young and very angry. It was a great shame to my parents when the news got out—they had been trying to hide my condition from their friends and acquaintances. And of course, they had to pay a great deal in reparations to the victim’s family.”

“My folks never wanted anyone to know they had a non-shifter in the family either,” I said, sympathizing with him.

"Yes, but my parents were so shamed that they decided there was no help for us—our family name had been irrevocably stained. And so they...they..." For a moment Jude's throat worked and I realized that whatever he was about to reveal had hurt him deeply.

"Yes?" I said softly.

"They went to greet the sun," he said at last in a choked voice.

"But...doesn't the sun...?"

"Kill vampires? Yes. They were burnt to ashes, both of them." He sighed. "After that I was very angry for a long time. I took over the reins of my father's business and I drove it with a cruel hand." He laughed bitterly. "Ironically, those years of ruthlessness are what established my reputation. I suppose I decided that if my own people wanted to fear me, I would give them a good reason to do just that. And so I did."

"What happened?" I asked softly. "How...how did you get over it?"

"One never completely gets over something like that," Jude said. "But you can learn to live with it. That is how I knew you needed to talk about your past—only by sharing with another can the burden of your pain be made lighter."

"So you weren't just getting me to talk about it so you could, uh, taste the pain it caused when I told you what had happened to me?" I said.

"I think we have already established that I prefer the flavor of your other emotions much more," Jude said softly and took my hands again. He frowned. "Luz, you are wounded."

"What do you mean?" I looked down and saw that he was looking at my wrists. Rosie's potato soup had restored me a great deal and my natural healing powers were coming back but the marks of the silver manacles were still clearly visible and always would be—Engle hadn't just been looking to restrain me, he'd been trying to brand me when he used silver to chain me down. The wrist I'd bitten to feed Jude was still raw too but I was hoping it would be better in a day or two. If I kept getting enough rest and food, it would be.

Jude appeared to have other things in mind, though. "Let me heal you," he murmured, nodding at my wounded wrists.

"With...with your blood?" I asked uncertainly.

He shook his head. "I know you aren't ready for that and you may never be. I cannot tell you how much I regret keeping the truth about our growing bond from you—I fear you'll never trust me again."

"Trust has to be earned," I said, looking into his eyes. "But I think...at the very least I can give you a chance to earn it."

"That's very good." He lifted my right hand to his mouth and lapped gently at the sensitive underside of my wrist, making me shiver. His tongue was warm and wet and the slow, careful way he licked me reminded me inevitably of the way he had licked other parts of my anatomy. Sensitive parts that were currently throbbing with need.

"You're always so gentle," I whispered as he continued to circle my wrist with his tongue, being sure to get everywhere the silver manacle had burned me.

"You have had enough brutality in your life already. How else would I be?" he murmured, turning his attention to my other wrist—the one I had shredded to feed him. He shook his head at how mangled it was. "Your teeth are sharp enough but you need to learn how to bite through flesh effectively."

I started to laugh but the sound caught in my throat and turned into a sigh when he began that slow, steady licking again. "It's not a skill I expect to have to use often. You're pretty much the only person I've bitten since I was a kid fighting with my sister."

"Good. I could not bear to think of you biting anyone else but me." He licked me again, being especially tender around the ragged area. I could feel my skin tingling and knew that he was healing me.

"Do-do you like being bitten as much as you like biting?" I asked breathlessly, remembering that I had wondered about that earlier.

"That depends on who is doing the biting." His sensual lips curved up in that lazy smile that made everything below my waist feel tight and achy. "I very much enjoy it when you bite me, especially on the neck."

"Why the neck?" I asked as he resumed licking.

"It is a mark of possession and ownership, biting in a place where anyone may see it."

"But vamps heal so fast," I pointed out. "Even faster than weres. It's not like it leaves a mark."

"It would if we were bonded," he said quietly. "My body chemistry would alter itself to yours, somewhat in the way yours did to mine when you gave me your virginity. Just as other shifters were able to smell my scent on you, other vampires would be able to see the marks of your teeth on me."

"So they would know that you were what—off the market?" I asked, smiling.

"In a manner of speaking. Of course, I would display your marks with pride." He gave my wounded wrist, which was now almost completely healed, a last, lingering kiss. "There, all better."

"Thank you." I looked down at my hands. I hadn't liked the idea of always wearing Engle's marks of attempted ownership on my body and I was grateful that Jude had so effectively erased them.

"You have one more wound," he murmured.

"Where?" I looked up at him.

"Here." He cupped my cheek and brushed my split lower lip with his thumb.

"Oh. I almost forgot about that. It's where Engle hit me last night." I shook my head. Already the entire nightmarish incident was beginning to seem like it had

happened in another lifetime or to someone else. I was glad for the emotional distance but I wondered if I would pay for it later in flashbacks or panic attacks.

Jude's eyes glowed red. "Again, I wish I had been the one to kill him. I would have liked to take my time with him."

I pictured him skinning Engle alive as he had the Clear Water pack master and shivered. Some things didn't bear thinking about. Though he was extremely gentle with me, there was a definite dark side to Jude. If that was the only part of him he ever showed to the other vamps, it was no wonder they feared him.

"I'm all right, now," I said.

"You could be better. If you'd let me heal you." His eyes were glowing for a different reason now. Somehow I knew that if I took this step, that if I let him "heal" my lower lip, there would be no going back. I could talk to myself all I wanted about Jude's dark side but the fact was that it felt too good when he touched me, when he tasted me. Too good to stop.

"Yes," I murmured, leaning toward him. "Please."

Jude smiled and leaned forward to suck my bottom lip gently into his mouth. In the long, breathless kiss that followed my nipples hardened under the silky red blouse and my pussy began to get wet and hot. It had been a week and a half since we'd made love but my entire body ached for his. And since Jude was touching me, I knew that he knew it.

"I ache for you too, beloved," he murmured, kissing his way from my mouth to the sensitive spot beneath my ear. "Will you allow me to taste you again?"

I knew he wasn't talking about my mouth and desire flared along my nerve endings. "I don't know," I said, trying to think clearly while he was nibbling my neck. "Maybe...maybe we should take things slow."

"You promised you would allow me to earn back your trust," he pointed out, breathing the words in my ear. "There can be no position more trusting than opening yourself for me and allowing me to taste your pussy."

"God," I moaned as he began unbuttoning my blouse. "I don't know, Jude. It just seems like...like if we're not careful we'll—"

"Fall back in love?" He was on his knees now on the kitchen floor in front of me. "Luz, I never stopped loving you. Never stopped wanting you."

"I never stopped for you either," I admitted with a sigh as he spread the blouse apart, baring my breasts. "Even when I thought...when I had the wrong idea about you."

"I am happy to correct your misconceptions." He kissed the skin between my breasts and then nuzzled his face against me. "You're so soft here. I love the scent of your skin."

I moaned again as he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth and teased the other one by pinching it lightly. God, when he did that it felt like I had a direct circuit

connecting my breasts and my sex. It made me incredibly wet to look down and see my nipple disappearing into his mouth. I buried my fingers in his thick blond hair and pressed my breasts up and out, offering myself to him.

"Yes," he whispered, releasing one nipple and nuzzling the other. "I like when you think like that, Luz. I like the idea of you offering yourself to me."

Knowing that he could read my mind while we touched so intimately was a surprising turn-on. It certainly answered any questions I might have had about why he was such an excellent lover. He could tell immediately what was working for me and what wasn't.

"Attention to detail is important too," Jude murmured, releasing my other nipple. "And a great deal of patience."

I shook my head. "Don't you ever get tired of taking it slow with me? Don't you ever want to just fuck—hard and fast?"

Jude's eyes gleamed. "We may get to that eventually but why would I want to rush when your pleasure is also mine? I love to take my time, pushing you higher and higher until I feel you lose control." He pulled back and put his hands on my hips, urging me to stand. Then he turned me to face the kitchen table and reached around to unbutton my skirt.

I looked over my shoulder. "What...what are you doing?"

"What do you think?" He gave me a slow smile, his eyes hooded with lust as he helped me step out of the skirt and pulled down the plain cotton panties I'd been wearing. "Do you trust me, Luz?"

"Yes," I whispered, biting my bottom lip. "I mean, I think so."

"Good. Then lean over the table and spread your legs."

I did as he asked, my heart thundering in my ears. Jude stayed where he was on the floor behind me, his big, warm hands stroking over my ass and thighs in a slow, soothing caress. I had never imagined it this way but the feeling of him behind me, of his hands on my skin and his breath warm against my legs, was strangely erotic.

"Is this all right?" he murmured, kissing my inner thigh. "Your thoughts are chaotic. Do you mind being taken from behind?"

"I-I don't think so," I whispered as he kissed me again.

"Good," he said again. "Then I need you to trust me even more. Spread your legs wider and arch your back so I can reach you."

I did as he said, biting my lower lip as I felt his mouth higher on my thighs. I hadn't had a wax in a while and his warm breath stirred the sensitive curls that decorated my mound, making me shiver. I wondered if Jude liked me like this, more natural and less waxed within an inch of my life.

"Oh yes, I like it very much," he answered my thought. "I think you're more sensitive this way." He stroked my curls lightly with his fingertips and I gasped at the

ticklish sensation. "See?" he murmured. Then I felt his big hands on me, his thumbs gently spreading my pussy lips to bare my slippery inner folds.

It was different this time, maybe because of the unusual position. But after a few hot, open-mouthed kisses, Jude's fingers took the place of his lips. He circled my clit with a single fingertip, using a slow, infinitely patient rhythm that had me gasping in no time. I wondered where his mouth had gone but I didn't have to wait long to find out. I think I moaned his name as his tongue slipped inside me and then I was completely consumed by pleasure and couldn't think straight anymore.

Jude fucked me with his tongue for what felt like an eternity. And all the while his fingers were slipping over my swollen folds, teasing my throbbing clit until I thought I would explode. Was he trying to drive me crazy?

"Yes," I heard him murmur as he pulled away for a moment. "That is exactly what I am trying to do, Luz. I want to make you so hot you can't help coming for me. Can you do that? Can you come while I eat your sweet pussy?"

"God," I moaned, my hips moving uncontrollably. "Yes, just don't stop!"

"I won't stop until you come for me." He went back to tongue-fucking me and his fingers began to move in a faster rhythm. I balled my hands into fists, wishing there was something to hold on to but the tabletop was slick wood with nothing to grab. All I could do was try to brace myself for the orgasm I could feel building like a storm cloud inside me.

At last it came, drenching me in pleasure like a warm rain. I cried out, my hips bucking fiercely and knew that Jude could feel me contracting around him as the waves of sensation swept over me.

He stayed with me for the duration, lapping and sucking, swallowing my honey eagerly and no doubt feeding from my pleasure as well. Surprisingly, the thought didn't bother me in the least. Instead, I felt a warm kind of satisfaction knowing that the pleasure I felt was more than mine and that Jude was getting as much out of it as I was.

"As much and more," he murmured, stroking my thighs and giving me one last, lingering kiss. "Thank you for trusting me again, Luz."

"You're welcome. Although it seems like I ought to be thanking you." I turned around on shaky legs and almost fell. Quicker than thought, Jude caught me and settled into one of the high-backed kitchen chairs with me in his lap. Since I was straddling him, it reminded me of the time we'd spent together in my apartment. I wiggled against him, loving the feel of his hard shaft under the faded denim jeans he wore.

"Mmm." Jude kissed my mouth, sharing my flavor with me and making me hot all over again. "If you keep that up, I might ask you to trust me in a whole different way."

"What did you have in mind?" I knew we were getting in deeper and deeper but I couldn't seem to care. All I knew was that I was on fire for him, that I couldn't stop wanting him.

"I can't stop wanting you either," he murmured, looking into my eyes. "I want to be inside you, Luz. I want to feel you coming around my cock the way you just did around my tongue."

I loved the way he told me exactly what he wanted and the way his eyes captured mine and wouldn't let me go. "We shouldn't," I whispered, knowing that I wanted to anyway. "We have to be careful. The bond –"

"Won't be formed unless you take some of my blood," Jude assured me, kissing me again. "You don't have to worry, Luz. It's safe for me to come inside you."

"God." I bit my bottom lip again, feeling a surge of pure lust roll through me. I wanted him so badly! Too badly to say no.

"Then say yes, instead." Jude rolled his hips, pressing the hard ridge of his shaft up against my bare pussy. "Let me in, Luz. Or would you prefer to have me chained to the bed again?"

"No," I said in a shaky voice. "No, I think...I think this will be okay. As long as you're not on top of me."

"That's all right," Jude murmured as I reached down and began to work on the fastening to his jeans. "I prefer to have you on top anyway. I love to watch you ride me."

He kicked off his jeans and I said, "Shirt too," and helped him take it off. And then he lifted me by the hips and settled me carefully down on his cock.

I moaned softly as I felt him breach my entrance and slide slowly into me. We were having sex for only the second time but already my body seemed to know his and he entered me much more easily than during our previous encounter. Jude was still extremely careful though.

"Gently, beloved," he murmured, watching my face as he entered me. "Slowly. Let me fill you up slowly."

I threw back my head and moaned at the exquisite torture of him entering me, stretching me, inch by thick inch. "Jude," I gasped as he finally filled me to the hilt. "God, you feel so good inside me."

"I could say the same to you," he murmured, looking into my eyes. "I love the way you caress me, the way you're so tight and hot. And I especially love the way you get so wet for me."

"I can't help myself," I said as he began a slow, grinding rhythm, pressing up and into me in short, deep thrusts. "The way you talk to me...the things you say."

He smiled. "You like it when I talk dirty to you, Luz?"

"Yes," I admitted, closing my eyes and gripping his shoulders. "God, yes, I do."

"Open your eyes, beloved," he said, stroking up into me. "Look at me while I fill you with my cock."

I moaned softly and opened my eyes, meeting Jude's hooded gaze. His own eyes were as red as coals, glowing with a soft light I was beginning to find very beautiful.

His hands gripped my hips and he began to talk, telling me exactly what he liked to do to me and how good I felt wrapped around his shaft.

"I never want this to end," he murmured, looking into my eyes as he filled me. "I could stay inside you for hours, taking you right to the edge and then pulling back at the last moment. I love to watch your beautiful face while I make love to you, love to see your expression when I fill you with my cum."

"Everyone knew," I whispered, gripping his shoulders. "That it was a vamp who had taken my virginity. They...I guess they could smell you on me."

He growled approvingly. "That's very, very good. I want to mark you with my scent. I don't want anyone to doubt that you're mine."

"So now you own me?" I asked, gasping at a particularly deep thrust. It was surprising that I was able to keep up a conversation but the slow, steady rhythm Jude was using seemed meant to prolong our passion, not to drive it to the peak right away.

"If I do, then you own me as well," he answered softly. "We belong to each other—belong together."

"I like that idea," I admitted breathlessly. "Oh! God, that feels so *good*. Harder!"

"Like this?" He gripped my hips and pulled me down as he began to speed up. And then he was getting even deeper into me although it hardly seemed possible. "Is this how you like it, Luz?" he growled. "You want me to fuck you hard, to fill you up?"

"Yes...God, *yes*." His slight shift in posture had created a whole new delicious friction. I could feel him rubbing against my clit, pressing the sensitive little bud in just the right way. And suddenly the pleasure that had been building slowly but steadily came to a shattering peak. I gasped as the orgasm took me by surprise, slamming into me with the force of a runaway truck and making me moan and writhe against Jude shamelessly.

"That's right," he groaned, looking into my eyes. "Come for me. Come on my cock while I fill you up."

I felt the warm, wet pulsating sensation deep inside me and knew that he had allowed my orgasm to trigger his own and he was filling me with his cum. It was a delicious sensation and it came with the feeling of being owned but not just owned—loved and cherished too. I knew that as long as I was with Jude, he would always put my pleasure and comfort first. That he would protect and care for me and accept me for who I was—broken or not, he loved me.

And I loved him.

"I love you too, Luz," he murmured, looking into my eyes as our mutual pleasure ebbed. "I was half crazy with grief without you. Never leave me again."

"I won't," I said, and bit him hard on the neck.

He gasped and bucked under me as my mouth filled with the delicious *dulce de leche* taste of his blood. I felt a tingling like I had when he had healed me but it was all over my body, everywhere at once. And then I heard him, but not with my ears. *Love you so*

much, beloved. The feel of you, the taste of you, your cunt wrapped around my cock, your teeth in my throat. Yes, yes, yes. Forever...I want you forever.

I want to be with you forever too, I thought to him. And I knew I would be. The bond between us had been forged and it was something that could never be broken, something that would never fade or disappear. It was forever and that was exactly what I wanted with Jude.

Epilogue

It took a little while to get used to our new bond because every time I touched Jude, I could hear what he was thinking. At first it was really distracting but he promised to help me learn to control it—like turning the volume on a radio up or down, he said. It was a little confusing and chaotic but I didn't really mind because almost every time I touched him, he was thinking of how much he wanted me. So the result of my new touch-telepathy was a lot of incredibly hot sex.

For a while I felt like I was making up for lost time, for the years when I had longed to be touched but couldn't stand it. When I told Jude that, he agreed we should definitively make up for my years of self-imposed abstinence by making love as often as possible—not that I needed much convincing. He continued to let me chain him to the bed anytime I felt the least bit uncertain and in time it became a favorite kink for both of us for me to be in complete control of the situation. We never used the man-on-top position but other than that, sex was everything I had ever dreamed it could be and more.

Of course, not everything was perfect. Diego and Gavin went to pick up my car, which had been left at my parents' house. Learning that their only alpha son had fought against and helped decimate their home pack didn't endear him to my parents. And when he told them he was gay—and dating a vampire—they disowned him completely. As for me, my mother told me in a single, terse phone call that I was dead to her and my father. I had killed any chance they had of regaining their pack status and having a pack master in the family and they never wanted to see me or hear from me again.

Despite what my parents had done to me, I couldn't help feeling miserable after I hung up with the woman who no longer acknowledged herself as my mom. I felt like an orphan, with no family to go back to ever again. Jude held me and let me cry and told me that we would start our own family. Not by having kids—that was impossible between a vamp and a were—or at least so rare that no one had ever heard of it. And anyway, after my own screwed-up childhood, I didn't know what kind of a mother I would make. But Jude suggested that we start by having Diego and Gavin over to talk.

My little brother had accepted my choice to be with Jude but Gavin was still wary of being anywhere near an incubus. Jude, however, could be very charming when he wanted to be and by the end of the evening we had decided to spend the holidays together that year at a resort Jude owned in Kentucky. It had vast tracts of wilderness where Diego and I could shift and run together and light-tight accommodations for the vamps.

Diego and I were running together every full moon anyway because when the events at the Arm Gard pack grounds got out, he was kicked out of *Los Lobos*. He was upset at first—a lot of his identity had been tied up with the pack. But he realized that he couldn't have kept his status with them anyway, after his relationship with Gavin got out. Supernatural communities stick to their own kind and the idea of a were having a relationship with a vamp was repugnant to both our peoples.

Despite the resistance I was still hoping to add to our little family of friends. It was high time we came together and realized that weres and vamps could get along and even have relationships that didn't involve killing or maiming each other.

Slowly I began seeking out like-minded shifters—most of them females who were tired of the male hierarchy of the traditional pack. A very few were non-shifters but most of them were just modern women who wanted to be treated as equals instead of property. And say what you want about vamps, they *do* respect their women. The first one I befriended was Belinda, Rosie's granddaughter. She became a close and dear friend because we had so much in common and before long she and I were hosting weekly get-togethers where vamps and shifters could meet without bloodshed.

The shifters came easily but the vamp side of things was a little harder to manage. Finally, though, Gavin persuaded a few friends that Jude really wasn't the big bad boogiemer he'd been made out to be and a few of them came to our parties. At first the vamps and weres were reluctant to mingle and our living room looked like a dance at a middle school with the boys on one end and the girls on the other. But after a while the two groups started talking—mostly, I think, because as Jude said, "That which is forbidden is desirable." I circulated and made introductions and it was always fun to see that little spark of interest jump between a vamp and a were when their hands touched and their eyes met.

It made me happy to see that our little "family" was growing but I still cried the day I got the notice that I had, indeed, passed the Bar exam. I wanted to call my mom and tell her, even though I knew the hard-won accomplishment wouldn't mean anything to her. Jude held me for a long time that night and made slow, gentle love to me, whispering through our bond how proud he was and how much it meant to him that I could share my achievement with him.

"I will never stop loving you," he murmured as I rested, warm and content in his arms. As I drifted off to sleep with my head pillowed against his chest, I thought how lucky I was to have my own personal incubus to love and care for me. Now that we were bonded, Jude and I would be together forever—or at least as long as he lived. And since vampires were practically immortal, we had a long, long lifetime of love to look forward to.

The deal I had made with the devil that sultry August night had turned out to be the best bargain of my life and I would be forever grateful for that.

The End

About the Author

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that says “I’d rather be writing.” Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try to get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

Evangeline welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by **Evangeline Anderson**

A Spanking for Valentine

Broken Boundaries

Ceremony of Three

Charlie's Bargain

Defiled

For Her Pleasure

Full Exposure *with Lena Matthews*

Kidnapped for Christmas

Kristen's Addiction

Madeline's Mates

Masks

Planet X

Pledge Slave

Punishing Tabitha

Red and the Wolf

Season's Spankings

Secret Thirst

Sex with Strangers

Sin Eater

Taming the Beast

The Man in the Black Leather Mask

Willing Submission



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com