



Unforgiven

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Blurb

The problem with fighting evil is it often comes in a very attractive package.

Orphaned when vampires massacred her family, Jade has been trained as an elite Haven's Warrior. She is pure, untouched and focused on revenge. Sheltered in a remote mountain temple, Jade has known nothing but discipline her entire life.

Dillon is as undisciplined as they come, a rogue vampire with rock-star style and a cowboy's whisky-kissed drawl. He also has a penchant for nicotine, vodka and women—especially women. He's found a certain tedium to immortality until he tastes Jade's lips. He's been through hell more than once in his two hundred and fifty years, but this is the cruelest blow of all—to become a monster who craves a woman's trust.

Life's a bitch and then you don't die.

Prologue

2006: Henan Province, China

Summertime and the livin' was easy ... or not.

Sweat ran in steady rivulets down Jade's straining muscles to soak the tunic belted loosely at her waist. The sun, slipping past its noonday zenith, was unsoftened by a harshly blue and cloudless sky.

Trembling had begun, first in the joints of her knees and elbows, then arching from those strained points through all of her muscle tissue. The ripples underneath her skin shifted and rolled like a stormy sea.

And still, she stood.

Every hour a fellow initiate exited the temple at her back and walked with slow, quiet footfalls to the mound of ancient rock spheres that also lay behind her. Every hour the scraping of rock against rock sounded more ominous as a stone was added to the pile she supported on a scarred wooden platform above her head.

Her trial had begun at midnight. With confidence buoyed by the cool, crisp night, she had hefted her burden. More than twelve hours had passed. If the stones were five pounds apiece, that would mean she supported sixty pounds of rock plus the weight of the thick platform, but she knew from experience that some of the stones were heavier.

Foolish to count, her master would say. Better to center herself and meditate through the pain. She had lost the ability to focus on anything other than the weight above her head three stones ago.

Would she ever be ready?

As an initiate, she had seen other warriors go through this trial. She had placed the cursed stones herself above their heads in an act of obedience to the cause. In spite of her excellence in all other areas of training, she had yet to reach twenty-four hours—that magical, illusive goal that would prove she was ready. She was too proud, too passionate, too focused on achieving the goal for personal reasons.

Jade poked her tongue out to soothe her sweat-bathed lips. It was an effort not to bite the tip of it as her teeth clicked back together.

Her master hadn't told her to give up. He allowed her to try, year after year.

High in the mountains of Henan Province, Haven was small, a temple within a temple, hidden inside the Shaolin Temple on Yufeng Peak. Not mere monks, the warriors had been fighting evil for centuries. Unlike their famous Shaolin neighbors, the monks of Haven were not celebrities. Instead, they selected the best of the best from Shaolin to create an unequaled fighting force.

Other, carefully selected initiates were brought to the monastery. However, Jade hadn't been chosen; she'd been found bathed in her parents' blood. She had been the only one spared during a vampire feast interrupted by Haven's warriors. Jade hadn't been chosen, unless fate made its choice by sparing her that day.

Found, rescued, raised from a babe by men who had pledged their lives to Haven, Jade chose to honor those that had pulled her from the carnage. She would repay them. She would prove she was ready and join the warriors' ranks.

But, not this day.

Her sixteen-year-old legs gave out as Jade sank to her knees. Tears of relief and shame joined the moisture of sweat on her face. She heard the familiar metallic clank as the centuries-old safety mechanism clamped down to hold the weight of the platform she was no longer able to support.

Not this day, but one day.

She would pass this final trial. She would earn her master's approval to hunt and kill.

What did she know about any other way of life?

Chapter One

Nineteen-years-old. For some that meant college, sex, keg parties or moving away from home, but not for Jade. Though she'd lived a stark life, a warrior of Haven had to learn about the outside world. She would live in it, walk its roads, meet its people, but she would remain separate and apart.

Jade sat calmly in the lotus position and sipped mint tea. This was her home: bamboo mats and sliding partitions made of rice paper screens, meditation and training morning, noon and night. A warrior was cold and peaceful and, above all, had a single-minded dedication to the cause.

She had passed the final test.

A long soak in a hot bath had cleansed away the sweat and eased her sore muscles. The tea and meditation eased her spirit.

She had passed, and now she would leave Haven several years earlier than most. Her master was not pleased. She could hear his displeasure in the slap of his sandaled feet on the polished wood floor. With her eyes closed, she could still hear his frustrated sighs, sounds that spoke surprisingly of his loss of control over his emotions.

Calmly, without breaking the steady in and out pattern of careful breathing she had been taught, Jade opened her eyes.

"I am ready, Master." It wasn't an argument. She would not dishonor him in that way. It was merely an assurance, a statement of fact.

"You are too young." Again, in spite of his sighs, it wasn't an argument. He only stated what he saw as fact.

"The final trial has been passed, Master. There is no other obstacle. I am one of Haven's warriors."

She tilted her chin to look up at the man who had been her only father from her earliest days. Her eyes widened, and she lost some of the calm she had achieved when she saw the look in his eyes. Those deep brown orbs were not resigned. In fact, they held a challenge. So many times, she had seen such a look. It always signaled one more wall to climb, one more riddle to solve, one more, one more, one more...

"Master?" she questioned. All the triumph of her earlier accomplishment faded to the barely noticeable pulse of muscle fatigue.

"There is a provision—an option—left up to the discretion of the Masters should we feel the trial by stone is not enough."

Jade rose to her feet. No protest fell from her lips about the unfairness of it all though her stomach clenched at the thought of any test above and beyond the one she'd just passed.

"There is no room for miscalculation. Sending an initiate out to fight before they are ready would mean certain death and possible dishonor. If you aren't ready, your life and training would be forfeited. Your failure would be a chink in the armor of this house."

She was ready. She would do whatever was required to prove it. Heels together, palm gripped by palm in front of her pelvis, head down—she waited to prove her worthiness.

A slide of paper and wood caused her to raise her eyes. What she saw sent a shock of

icy adrenaline racing to her knees.

The Angel of Death.

He was the most legendary of all Haven's warriors. Some said the god's had given him immortality in order to even the odds against the immortal vampires they fought. Some dared to say he'd been tainted by centuries of bathing in the blood of his enemies.

Jade could find nothing to say at all.

Here was a power greater and older than any she'd ever faced. He moved into the room with an easy glide of muscle and sinew. In one hand, he held the weight of a wicked looking staff; in the other, a glimmering golden whip made of bronze. He twitched it like a tiger's tail with every step. He was taller than she was by a foot or more. He was heavier than she was by fifty pounds.

He didn't speak. He wouldn't. She was a mere student, not worth his time. Surely only duty, his honor bound obedience to the Masters of Haven, had brought him here. She could see her insignificance in his black eyes. Her muscles, much abused this day, were revitalized by a sudden thrust of fury.

Why must she face the Angel of Death? In all of her years at the monastery, she'd never heard of another initiate having to do so. Her mind gave her the answer.

Because I am a foundling.

The answer only strengthened her resolve.

A springing back flip brought her to within grasp of the wall of weapons. She chose a longer staff than the one he held, plucking it from its brackets without turning her attention from her opponent. The proper spin of it should provide a shield from his metallic whip. She began the rotation as he stalked toward her. She couldn't help but admire the way his lean muscle was highlighted by candlelight. He wore nothing but a loose drape of cloth at his loins. He looked savage, all gleaming black hair and even blacker eyes. She wondered if he could possibly be as old as the stories claimed. Then, she wondered if she would survive as he suddenly attacked with a stinging slash of whip that easily found its way past the whirling shield of her staff to slice a bloody path down her left cheek.

Jade responded by using the spin of his own whip's momentum to wrap it around the tip of her staff. Using her staff as a lever, she plied her weight, purposefully dropping to the floor against the other end of the wooden pole, to pry the whip from his fingers.

She heard the rattle as the whip hit the opposite wall, but she didn't turn her face away from Death to celebrate.

...Mostly because his face was inches from hers.

He had followed the pull to land on top of her and pin her down. He gripped her wrist so she couldn't bring her staff against him. She gasped as she strained against his strength. The scent of spicy incense on his skin teased her nose. His long, straight hair fell in a curtain around their faces until it seemed they were in a private world created by black waves of silk.

"Evil is seductive, Little One. It isn't the strength of it you have to fight against. It's the allure. Never let them get this close."

His lips were inches from hers.

Jade had never been on a date. She'd never stolen kisses or daydreamed about the boys she'd trained beside night and day. She had fought with them. She had competed with them. She had never felt a man's breath on her lips like a mint-scented promise.

She allowed herself one deep, steadying breath. She allowed her tongue to slip out and moisten her un-kissed lips. The rise and fall of her breasts beneath his chest seemed to ease his weight. Was the great Angel of Death distracted by cleavage? He flicked his eyes to follow the movement of her tongue. Then he closed them ... just long enough for her to topple the table beside them with a fierce kick. Candles fell, raining hot melted wax on his bare back. Enough drops stung her face for Jade to admire the way he stifled his shout as he rolled away, leaving smears of rapidly cooling wax on the floor in his wake.

She rose quickly, staff in hand, and brought it down on the back of his head.

Death slipped into unconsciousness with surprise etched on his fierce features and blisters rising on his back.

Jade touched the cut on her cheek with the back of her hand as her Master stepped forward to bow. When she brought her hand away from her face, it was smeared bright red.

Blood.

A reminder of the prize she had just earned.

* * * *

Dillon Raveneaux tossed back another swallow of vodka. The clear, clean color of the sloshing fluid in the bottle mocked him, as did the artificial burn of the alcohol as it slid down his throat.

He remembered a richer, hotter, more intoxicating burn.

He closed his eyes against the scarlet memory and took a drag from the cigarette in his other hand. If the alcohol wouldn't cleanse away the phantom taste of blood, then maybe smoke would. His first pack of the night had already added a trickle of ash to a pile reminiscent of his worst nightmare and still his tongue craved the forbidden taste of something it couldn't have.

Someone it couldn't have.

His hands shook, and more ash joined the pile at his feet. Some of it still resembled bones.

He didn't know what made Raveneaux genes resistant to the madness that claimed most vampires. His Maker, his queen, had seen it as a mark of honor. A product of southern aristocracy, she had turned hundreds if not thousands of Raveneaux either directly, as she had him, or indirectly using him and others. One such vampire, a scrap of a girl he had turned, had killed the queen. He'd felt the weight of the life he had stolen from Holly on his shoulders even as he'd craved the taste of her blood.

Even now, when he was free from the queen, his body quaked for what it couldn't have. No matter how many nights he resisted the siren call of Holly Spinnaker's blood, there was yet another night to face. He wandered far from her Virginia home but never far enough.

On the one hand, being released from the thrall of the wicked queen vamp who had made him was salvation. He was his own man again ... mostly ... if you discounted that he wasn't a man but a monster. He punctuated that thought by setting down his bottle long enough to slide a wooden match stick from the box never far from his fingers. He shut the box and rattled it a few times to reassure himself that there were plenty of matches left. He put the box in his pocket and struck the match against the heel of his boot to light a new cigarette. On the other hand, suddenly developing a conscience after

two hundred years of wallowing in blood, sex and fear was pure damnation.

Dillon dragged deep. He could almost imagine his lungs hardening and rejecting any lasting effect that the bitter, moistened smoke would have had on an actual man.

Not human but no longer what he had been for over two hundred years. He had been the queen's puppet, but he had enjoyed it. He had gloried in it every minute of every night ... more often than not.

Life's a bitch and then you don't die.

Broken Bow, Oklahoma, had changed. He hadn't expected to find it the same. Since he'd been free, he'd wandered over pathways that should have been familiar, but trails had become asphalt, and the prairie where he'd once taken part in cattle drives had given way to shopping malls and fast food restaurants.

Dillon emptied the rest of the vodka over the vampyric remains at his feet. No matter how many ravening beasts he exterminated, he could never atone. As he stood and walked away, he lit another match and tossed it over his shoulder onto the spreading pool of vodka. The room began to burn. Peripherally, he caught the gleam, first, in a flash of blue-tinged white, then warming to a rich yellowish-orange.

He didn't look back at the flames, but he felt their heat licking at his heels.

Chapter Two

Dillon watched as the petite girl stalked around the edges of the vampire hive he'd discovered last night near the border of Arkansas. He'd lived long enough to know size wasn't everything. She was obviously young. She was obviously outnumbered. She was obviously a killer of the highest caliber.

He could see it in the steel-muscled glide of her movements. His vampire eyes had no trouble zeroing in on that slide beneath her skin ... particularly when she wore nothing but a tank and low-slung jeans. For a brief second, he was distracted by whatever providence had allowed him to live long enough to see hip-hugger fashions again, by that sweet curve of a female's back just above her bottom and below her waist. When he'd been alive, it had taken all of fifteen or twenty minutes to get through petticoats, corset, bustle and bloomers to have a gander at that curve. Now, he could go to any mall at midnight and see hundreds of versions of it from pale to tan to Nubian.

The proliferation didn't make this particular spot on this particular girl any less alluring. Neither did her stalking.

Dillon swallowed. Like calls to like, and he found his own predatory instincts rising. He tamped them down to a controllable burn. If he was right, this hive was a big one. His heart felt the call of a powerful queen, and though he found himself immune to any other queen's thrall—thus far—her call did sing in his veins.

This girl looked strong. She looked like she knew what she was doing. Still, if she could have heard the queen as he did, she'd be looking around for back up.

Dillon flicked away the useless butt of a burned out cigarette and rose from his observatory crouch. He wasn't exactly the Lone Ranger. He'd never worn a white hat, not even when he'd been alive. He was no hero, but, he figured, beggars couldn't be choosers. This young woman would be begging for help before the night was done if he didn't help her ... and maybe even if he did.

*

Jade's first purchase after stepping foot on American soil had been an I-pod. Her master had allowed music, and she had grown to love it at a very early age. Now, she pared ancient fighting techniques with the rhythm of emo-punk blaring in her ears, and it was good.

Though her hands, face, arms and legs were soon coated with grimy, sticky ash, the music was a buffer. It dulled their screams. It muffled their cries. Seeing the writhing, dissolving, disintegrating corpses was enough. Feeling their remains settle on her skin, threatening to soak into her pores, was enough. She didn't need to hear their final calls. She didn't want to.

She cranked the volume louder as she spun to meet the next wave only to catch herself with an odd stutter-step that would have made a wading crane look graceful, knobby knees and all.

He was a blur of black leather, worn jeans and hair so blond that it looked almost white in the moonlight. He took down the attacking vampires with a dance more fluid and deadly than any she'd ever seen. She blinked and strained her eyes to catch glimpses of him between his blurs of movement. There, then there, it was as if he staged a dramatic

pause here, then there, then there again, in order to introduce himself to her straining senses.

And, it was dramatic.

Like a matador striking a pose after a particularly violent pass of the bull, he would take a vampire out in a blur, and then his body would pause faster than humanly possible. His coat swirled around his hips because the fabric couldn't stop its momentum.

Jade watched, stunned, as he took the rest of the hive in that way. Blur-stop-swirl, blur-stop-swirl... until, no creature was left standing save for him and her.

Now, she had the benefit of a longer pause to examine her unmasked foe. He stood in the moonlight, straight, tall and proud. She could see the pride in the way he squared his shoulders, in the way he planted his feet and placed his hands on his hips. He had taken down twenty vampires in less than five minutes. He should be proud.

Except, he was a vampire himself.

She knew it even though she saw sparkling sanity in his eyes. No human could move that fast. No human had such perfect porcelain skin. For that matter, she'd never seen a human male stalk toward her with such a predatory stride.

Jade didn't have time to act on the revelation because more vampires began to flow from the loading docks of the abandoned factory. As if she had stirred a giant anthill with a stick, more and more deathly pale monsters poured forth. Tens turned to hundreds, and even though her uninvited assistant began dusting them right and left with more speed and less panache, she knew the tide had turned.

Her stakes, all her hard-earned skills, couldn't possibly take out so many.

Just then, a flicker of light caught her attention. The factory was on fire. She had to turn away too quickly to see more. In a blur, she took down several vampires using her stakes to pierce three long-dead hearts. As she whirled to face more fiends, she saw the flames had grown but not enough. An inferno would be necessary to annihilate the army of vampires that still flowed from the building in a steady stream.

She didn't know how the fire had started. Surely, the vampire helping her hadn't...

She didn't know how it had started, but she did know they needed it to be much, much hotter. They would need a firestorm to cleanse this cursed ground, an explosion.

Several hundred yards away, her jeep sat with two large canisters of gasoline strapped to its luggage rack. She had intended to use them later, for clean up after the killing.

Jade didn't stop to think. She simply ran. Feet light, knees high, arms pumping—the vampires would have been faster, but they were becoming crazed and disoriented by the flames, by the sight of their refuge burning down.

She only had to kill two on her way to the jeep. Then, she was behind the wheel. She cranked the engine, hard and fast, and released the brake. She slammed her entire weight on the gas as if one hundred and ten pounds of muscle and sinew would help the vehicle go faster.

Her ear buds had long since fallen around her neck. She doubted if even heavy metal would have drowned out the screams, thuds and cracking glass as she drove through dozens of vampires to get the gas within reach of the hungry flames.

Using an old loading ramp, she drove ... no, she flew up and into the factory as all four tires left the ground. She only knew she'd been air born when the jeep came back down, painfully jarring every bone in her body with the impact.

She didn't have time for pain.

Before the jeep rolled to a stop, she was out the door, running for the only break she could see in the wall of fire surrounding her.

The "whump" came much sooner than she'd expected. She hadn't run far when the explosion knocked her off her feet. The heat of it caused her skin to feel tingling and tight. She got back to her feet and ran further, putting more distance between herself and the conflagration.

Very few vampires remained, and they didn't stand a chance.

He took them out as she caught her breath. Easy, quick, graceful, he became a star once more. Jade breathed in and out, steady breaths, as the last vampire fell, or almost the last one.

One still stood.

In the nights to come, she would look back on this moment and wonder why she didn't stake him. She would wonder even though secret whispers in her heart of hearts already knew the answer. Those whispers would murmur "moonlight," "handsome devil" and "spellbound" in private moments, in hidden dreams when she couldn't guard against them.

For now, she only knew that, when his lips moved, she didn't place her stake in his heart. Instead, she placed her hand on the volume control of her Mp3 player to mute the faint buzz of music rising from the fallen buds.

"I could ask 'What's a girl like you doing in a hell hole like this', but I already know the answer to that." His gaze went from hers to her stakes and back again, quick, coy and flirtatious. Did he want to be staked? Did he flirt with her or her killing wood?

Jade dropped back and crouched down, bringing two stakes up at the ready prepared for his attack, but he didn't.

He didn't attack, but he didn't pause again either. He continued to stalk toward her, and the moonlight was his spotlight. Its pale glow caressed the shadows and planes of his perfectly angular face, and it illuminated his eyes. His eyes were predatory and hungry, but they weren't mad. She saw the glitter of reason in their pale blue depths, and it was more frightening to face than madness.

He was a monster, and he knew it.

Yet, he approached her with a smile beginning to tilt his lips.

She was so struck by the look in his eyes and by the smoky, rich tones in his voice that she didn't realize he had continued to move forward until one of her stakes was pressed between his chest and hers.

Never let them get this close, the Angel of Death had said.

As she tilted her chin to meet the vampire's gaze, she understood Death's warning. This was too close. He was too close, and he knew she thought so. One pale, blond brow crooked over one wicked eye as if he enjoyed the suspense of wondering what she would do about it. Was he courting her or her stakes?

For the first time, Jade thought her master might have been right. Perhaps she was too young and too inexperienced to leave Haven. This vampire's game was making her skin flush, her heart beat faster, and her breath come quicker across her slightly parted lips.

Just as she moistened them, his gaze dropped, and he tilted his head as if the pink flash of her tongue fascinated him.

"It's obvious you know your business," he continued, looking from her lips to her eyes to her cheeks to her hair as if he took in everything about her with his perusal as he spoke. "I watched you ash ten or twelve before I joined in."

"Why?" Jade asked, though she should have been fighting him not having a conversation with a monster lit by moonlight.

His laughter rang out, filling the stillness around them and keeping the shadows at bay. It was as rich as his voice, and the vibrato of it sent tremors to her toes.

"Why did I watch you, or why did I join in? Darlin', I've not met a man in my entire existence who wouldn't want to watch you. You move as if life was a dance, all rolling hips and graceful curves. I could watch you 'til the sun came up and then risk the burn to watch you some more."

He was smiling again, and only a hint of white fang kept her focused on what he was. The singsong drawl of his compliment soaked easily into ears unused to any sort of compliments at all.

"As for my joining in, I know my business as well. This is what I do." He motioned to the disintegrating forms around their feet.

Jade struggled to regain her equilibrium. She was practically standing in a vampire's arms, and parts of her were actually enjoying it. He wasn't just sentient. He was a silver-tongued devil, and she knew his charm was as much of a threat as his fangs, if not more. She didn't understand this game he played or why he chose to play it with her.

Fangs she could fight and had many times. The glitter in his eyes, the wicked smile on his lips, the charm, she'd never been trained to face those weapons.

"Why are you different—rational," she punctuated her question with the tip of her stake between them. It pierced his flesh easily, an inch or maybe two, slipping between the ribs just over his heart. It wasn't fatal, not yet.

He tensed and caught his breath. His eyes closed, and his head tilted back. His body went rigid against hers. Then he brought his chin back down and opened his eyes once more. Her movement had brought her closer to his face. Their lips were a breath apart with only the piercing stake keeping their embrace from being a lovers' hug. As it was, even with the stake piercing his chest, their embrace was intimate.

They stood so close, so very close. He was in pain. She could tell from his tenseness, from the way he held his breath. Yet, he smiled with those lips so close to hers. He smiled, and he didn't pull away.

"Don't be fooled. I'm not rational. Haven't been for two hundred years. I'm just more aware of the madness than those damned souls."

His voice was more gravely than before. She looked from his lips to his eyes. There was pain in them, but suddenly she wasn't sure if the darker midnight within the sky blue of his irises came from her stake or from somewhere else, maybe thousands of somewheres. Past sins? Past hurts? Past despair?

"All vampires are mad. Some of us are just cursed to fight the madness."

It was she who moved. She pulled the stake out of his chest. He gasped as it slid free, but this time he didn't close his eyes. He watched her face. She didn't know what he saw there, but he watched as if fascinated.

"There are no sentient vampires," she insisted, finally backing up to stand away from him.

He quirked one brow even higher in response, but he let her move away. He let her

claim the space she needed between them before tapping his finger to his forehead as if he tipped an imaginary hat.

"Welcome to America, Darlin'."

Chapter Three

"Welcome," he'd said. "Welcome." The problem wasn't that he'd said it, but that he'd meant it. The impossible monster, the vampire-that-couldn't-exist, was glad to see her.

She knew how to fight men. She knew how to use their size, strength and arrogance from being larger and stronger to her advantage. It had been a part of her training. But, this? She didn't know how to fight a vampire with a wicked smile and cool blue eyes that welcomed her warmly into his crazy world.

At a loss, she allowed herself to follow him as the burning continued. He walked around the abandoned factory that had become a funeral pyre as if he was taking a nice stroll in the park. A nice casual stroll—except he took each step with a hint of rock-star flair.

Jade had been to three concerts since she'd arrived in the United States. All three times had been business mixed with pleasure. Vampires were known to love the chaos of churning crowds and pounding music. She'd managed to kill half a dozen monsters, but it hadn't stopped her from noticing how the singers took the stage. All eyes on them, hungry to give and to receive the heightened emotions erupting from their fans, they were driven by the beat of drums and the scream of guitar.

She saw that same hunger in this vampire's movements, that same addiction to emotion. He knew humans were drawn to watch him, so each move he made was masculine, graceful and smooth. Each move was just a little bit calculated, just a little bit too striking and perfect, super human.

Recognizing his showmanship didn't make it any less mesmerizing. Jade couldn't look away from the powerful grace in front of her. She looked from his shoulders to his hips to his lean, long legs encased in worn denim again and again. "Welcome to America" indeed.

They didn't go far. They came to a spot sheltered by large evergreens but so close to the flames that ash and embers rained down in sparks from the sky.

He stopped, turned and made the gallant gesture of sweeping his arm to the side as if he was opening a non-existent door for her. She went forward without thinking.

That was her first mistake. Her second was pausing as her body brushed his. The contact was slight. Her elbow grazed his hard abdomen, but it still stopped her in her tracks. She stopped and looked up like a forest deer startled by a hunter.

Even shadowed by the pine thicket, his eyes shone. She didn't know how they could gleam so bright and light a blue in the dark, but they did. Maybe it was because she was more used to dark eyes, from chestnut to agate, or maybe it was something all vampire eyes did, and she'd never seen them animate long enough to notice.

Whatever the reason, his were truly striking, and she got lost in them for a long, long second that would have proven fatal if he'd chosen to make it so.

He didn't.

He did reach up with one hand and brush across her forehead with one finger. The skin there was pulled taut by the ceremonial braid that hung long and heavy down her back. His finger brushed across her skin cool and quick, but before she could protest, he turned away, ending the curious caress almost before it had begun.

So, why did his brief touch make her catch her breath? Fear? Yes, fear had arched through her sudden and fierce like a viper's strike, but it had been fear of the man not the monster. She had never been touched, not in that way. Of course, she'd touched fellow initiates in training, in fighting, even in camaraderie, but she'd never been touched because a man simply wanted the tactile sensation of touching her warm skin. She had seen that desire in his eyes or thought she had, the desire to touch her skin, such a simple desire for a fiend to have.

Innocently now, he leaned against the hood of a derelict cargo truck as if his eyes didn't burn the skin he had touched when his finger could not.

She should have killed him minutes ago when one of her stakes was near its mark. She should kill him seconds from now, the amount of time she needed to leap over the glowing embers he had begun to nudge with a deadfall stick. She should but didn't.

She couldn't. He represented a mystery too dangerous to ignore. He was sentient. She could no longer deny it. She had seen his difference from the start.

Being sent to America had been an insult to her pride. For centuries, the prevailing mission of Haven had been to seek "The Source" of vampirism in the hope of eradicating it. America had always been seen as a safe proving ground for new warriors—nothing more and nothing less. The country was far too young to hold any useful clues to a mystery eons old.

Now, Jade knew they'd been wrong. Here was a clue, a swaggering, flirting, dangerous clue, only a few steps away. She couldn't turn him to ash. She had to find out why and how he was different. First. Then she could kill him, after his secrets were revealed.

*

At first, he liked her staring. After two hundred years of practice, he knew when a woman liked what she saw. He could pinpoint the exact second when she went from admiration to speculation because he went from feeling like a long, tall drink of water after a drought to feeling like a bug under a magnifying glass.

She narrowed her eyes. She set her jaw. She even put both palms on the stakes she wore at her waist as if they were six shooters and she was fixin' to draw.

The stakes she brandished might fascinate the monster in him. The man in him might just like to toy with idea of finding respite, of being released from torment by one quick, final penetration. Combine the two, the man and the monster, and he figured he'd rather flirt than fry ... for now. Truthfully, her very presence made him almost forget his matches.

"So, who sent you to America? I don't see any tattoo or insignia that would give it away. Knights Templar? The Vatican?"

She was a mystery. What manner of woman would dispatch vamp after vamp with a smooth killing dance only to wildly drive her car into a wall of flames soon after?

She didn't reply, but her hands did move from her weapons.

It was pure sweet frustration to realize the sound of his voice made her heart beat faster. Was she afraid he would guess her secrets, or did she find herself liking his interest more than she should?

She stood there, illuminated by the dancing flames he'd stoked to life, looking exotic and deadly, yet somehow innocent and vulnerable. It was an intriguing combination. He knew her petite size disguised strength and ferocity. He'd seen it. She'd been a disciplined

killer but a killer all the same. He also knew a virgin when he touched one. The startled blink, the indrawn breath, the scent of youth on her skin...

Ah, man meet monster. Monster meet man. So rarely absent one from the other.

When he again opened his eyes after he'd held the thirst at bay, the woman had drawn both of her stakes once more. Fierce? Deadly? She was purpose on two shapely legs, and it was obvious her purpose was to kill him.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Darlin'," he promised, but he couldn't keep his voice from sounding strained and low.

"I won't promise the same," she replied.

*

Jade waited for his attack, but it never came.

He crossed his legs at the ankles, crossed his arms over his chest and let his eyelids go lazy and low. He watched her as she watched him, and she again moved first. She stepped closer to the embers that had become a fire and sank to her haunches, keeping the flickering flames between them. In that second, she realized she was cold. A shiver actually tracked down her spine.

"We seek 'The Source,'" she murmured to the flames. The phrase lacked the power it had in the echoing hallways of the monastery where it was repeated in a continuous mantra, day and night. She spoke it to the flames in a country that suddenly seemed large and mysterious, and the words were light, almost meaningless, a sigh on the breeze.

No warrior from Haven had ever signaled for help. A warrior's journey was a solitary one of many, many individuals branching out all over the world. Had she earned the right to participate in that journey only to worry over the first obstacle she faced? The vampire watched her with hooded eyes.

"Well, I can't help you there, Darlin'. I'm only two-hundred-and-fifty, give or take a year or two," the vampire offered. She felt his gaze on her, and she lifted her eyes to meet it without consciously choosing to do so. She saw his leather duster, his denim and his boots. She placed the drawl that had pleased her ears even as she'd tried not to let it.

Music had been her first love from the outside world, but she enjoyed other things: books, television, movies... She had managed to find some time to explore the mysteries of the world even if she would never truly be a part of it.

John Wayne. Clint Eastwood. Viggo Morrison. The names were exotic even though she'd learned English before she'd learned to walk.

This vampire was a cowboy.

She could almost hear the jingle of spurs punctuating that revelation.

She had killed older monsters, but she had never taken the time to feel their age. Here, by a fire much like those he must have used during his lifetime, the history that must have played out before his light blue eyes caught her imagination.

Young?

Every single one of her nineteen years seemed to shrink in on itself until she felt incredibly fresh and new sitting across from his age and experience. The Angel of Death had been much, much older, and she'd defeated him. That thought soothed her.

As did her stakes. She placed her hands on them again. Her muscles reassured her. She shifted her legs beneath her, and she felt the hard-earned strength ready should she need it. She had fought the Angel of Death, and she had won. She ignored the niggling doubts inside that insisted Death had not met her with the full force of his power.

If the vampire noticed her movements, he didn't show it, not by his expression or his words.

"'The Source.' 'We' seek 'The Source,' " he repeated. Then, he made a show of looking around and lifting one brow. "The only 'we' I see is you and me." He looked back at her, and their gazes met and locked.

She couldn't look away.

"Seeking 'The Source' doesn't sound like a safely solitary sport, Darlin'." He had started playful, but his tones slid into seriousness as she tensed in reaction to his apparent offer.

Did he offer to help her? A vampire helping a warrior from Haven?

She couldn't stake him ... yet. He was a mystery, a mystery she couldn't afford to reduce to ashes, but she wouldn't accept camaraderie with the devil as the alternative.

"There is only one reason you are not burning, right here, right now. I let you live because you're different. I need you to exist to discover why, to understand how this could be so."

Jade rose, and he mirrored her movements. She saw his jaw go stiff and his fists clench then release as if he prepared to draw a weapon he no longer wore on his hip. For a long moment, it was a stand off. Then, knowing they had come to some sort of temporary understanding, Jade turned away.

*

He watched her walk away knowing she wouldn't go far.

"Need," she'd said, among other things.

She needed him.

At first, it caused every muscle he possessed to tense, but then he forced the tension away. Inch by inch from his ankles upward, he ordered his muscles to relax. Gradually, he even regained the curve of a smile he wore more often than not.

The young woman did need him. In ways she knew and in ways she would never admit, she needed him.

The fire was blazing and hot near his feet, but it was that thought that warmed him to his dark, cold core.

Chapter Four

The motor inn she'd chosen for her daily rest was only two miles away from the deserted factory that now sent black clouds of smoke up into the brightening sky. She jogged the distance as soon as she was out of the cowboy's sight. He would follow. She knew it as surely as she knew synthesizer driven pop was dead.

She also knew the instinctive tingling between her shoulder blades was a warning. Having him at her back was dangerous. Unfortunately, a very feminine part of her knew it was even more dangerous to have him by her side.

She showered quickly using plain soap and a rough cloth to wipe away every trace of moistened ash. She didn't unbind her hair. There wasn't time. The braiding ritual could wait. Bound and out of her way, her hair usually made it through the fray clean. She only had to rub the wet cloth over the portions of her hair near her face.

In less than ten minutes, she stepped out of the tub, fresh and clean, and not alone.

The cowboy vampire leaned against the doorjamb of the bathroom as if he often watched women bathe. Not bored—his eyes were too intense for that—just relaxed and comfortable. But, was he a voyeur who was used to a warm welcome or a useless resistance?

Jade's stakes were nearby. She was young not stupid. Pity "near" wasn't "clasped in her fists." The stakes were one, maybe two, steps away on the tiny vanity, too far. They may as well have been back in China.

He must have seen her gaze flick toward the stakes and back to him. If possible, his smile grew, as did the gleam in his eyes.

Once more, a stand off: she, frozen mid-towel-wrap; he, lounging but no longer quite as relaxed as before.

"You know I could drain you before you could stake me," he finally said, breaking the silence but not easing the tension.

As the steam from her shower dissipated, rolling out the door he'd opened, the room grew cooler and deadlier. The gooseflesh that rose on her arms was in response to the look in his eyes as much as from the chill in the air. He was sentient. That hadn't been a mistaken assumption she'd made because of fickle moonlight. Problem was, sentient or not, he was a monster. The look in his eyes betrayed the fact that he was consciously deciding whether to feed now or later.

Never wouldn't be an option, not for a vampire.

"You could try," Jade replied, giving up on the towel in order to assume a defensive stance. The rough, white cotton fell to her feet in a useless, scratchy puddle.

Nude didn't matter. The way his eyes widened and flared in seeming appreciation didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was making it out of the bathroom alive.

He was no longer leaning. He had straightened, and his crossed arms had come down to hang at his sides. He was no longer relaxed, no longer smiling. In fact, he no longer looked as if feeding or staking was on his mind.

He looked ... stricken, as if her sudden nudity pained him. Before she could explore that notion or try to blink and re-evaluate the expression in his light blue eyes, he moved, quicker than quick, to grab the leather harness holding her stakes and threw it her way.

Instinctively, she grabbed it, forced to hold it tight against her breasts by the sudden toss.

"There are some temptations even a monster shouldn't be expected to resist," he said as he turned away, and his drawl didn't sound smooth, amused or teasing.

Jade was left alone, clutching her stakes to her heart.

*

He found an old, unused gardening shed out behind the rural motel. It was dusty, and it smelled of old gasoline and new mouse droppings, but it was also cold, dark and silent. Considering the grass hadn't been cut in a month of Sundays and the lawnmower he found in the shed was missing two tires, he felt it safe to bed down for the day.

As his heartbeat slowed and his eyelids grew heavy, he hoped he wouldn't dream of the lithe, naked form he'd just seen. There were many other forms in his memory to choose from, some writhing in pleasure, some cringing in pain and some—many—bleeding and crying as he bled them some more.

Why had he been so affected by the petite warrior's nudity?

She had stood there with her fists raised. Her lovely, pink skin had been flushed from the heat of her shower, and her nipples had peaked while the steam that had caressed her skin rolled over him.

He'd been struck, not by the determination to fight him that he'd seen in her eyes nor by the beauty of her athletic but softly rounded figure. He was struck by the fear, the vulnerability, the certainty that he was there to hurt her. He had suddenly wanted, needed, to prove her wrong, more than he'd wanted her body and more than he'd needed her blood. That had turned him on his heels. That was the cruelest blow he'd ever been dealt. He'd become a monster who craved a woman's trust.

*

Jade slept. It wasn't a miracle. It was rigid conditioning. Certainly, it took longer than usual for her dawn meditation to calm her.

The vampire was out there, and she would have to deal with him. Eventually, mystery or not, she would have to kill him. Why should that thought cause her discomfort? He had seen her at her most discomposed. She should be shamed by that. She should be embarrassed that he had caught her by surprise too far from her stakes and much too far from her clothing.

And, she was, truly, embarrassed and ashamed.

But, she was also in her heart of hearts secretly pleased by the way his eyes had tracked from her eyes to her breasts to...

She meditated the inappropriate pleasure away until nothing but cool composure followed her into her dreams.

Cool.

His arms.

His hands.

His touch.

His lips.

Would be cool. Inhuman. No longer alive.

She had to remind herself of that as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Five

No one could control every dream. Jade refused to feel guilty when she rose for the night's work. It was an understandable reaction to the creature's sensuality considering her inexperience with all things sensual. Her subconscious thoughts about the vampire were an unexpected challenge, but she would face them the way she'd faced every challenge she'd ever had to face.

With discipline.

Thankfully, when the vampire materialized out of the evening's shadows, he wasn't as enticing as he'd been in her dreams. He was all too real. The occasional glimpse of fang was whiter and sharper. The experience in his eyes was more intimidating. The way he moved, so quick and graceful and smooth, was obviously preternatural.

The instincts that rose in response to his presence were ones of self-preservation not sexual curiosity. Her instinctive reaction as prey to predator kept desire at bay. His reality was far too dangerous to titillate ... much.

Plus, the motorcycle drew her attention instead.

It was red, dark red, a red so deep it was almost black except where it was chrome. The streetlights that illuminated the motel parking lot caused the silver chrome to wink and flash as she walked around the metal beast. She had known this cowboy vampire for less than eight hours, yet she wasn't surprised to find that he didn't drive a nondescript sedan.

"She doesn't bite," the vampire's drawl interrupted her cautious examination of the vehicle he expected her to mount.

Jade looked from the motorcycle to the vampire and back again. It matched its owner perfectly, so perfectly she wouldn't have been surprised if the cycle was capable of flashing a fang.

"I can't possibly..." she began, not sure how to protest. It wasn't riding a bike she minded. In fact, a little thrill curled deep in the pit of her stomach at the very thought of trying the experience for the first time. Rather, she protested the way in which she would have to ride it, pressed too close to the vampire, holding him, clasping him between her thighs...

No. She couldn't.

Her hesitation drew him like a hawk to a quivering mouse. Who was the hunted, and who was the hunter?

He moved toward her, and the streetlights glittered in the blue of his irises, echoing the gleaming chrome of his bike. She had thought last night's moonlight a spotlight kissing his face. The artificial glare of the streetlights was even more like the glare that would highlight a star on stage, and in its bright glow he looked even more perfect, even more dangerously alluring.

"Try it, you might like it," he encouraged. He came to stand far too close to her. She had to tilt her chin not just to see his face but to keep her forehead from brushing his chest.

She refused to back away. Foolishness or necessary bravado? She met his intense gaze with her own, not sure if she would ever know the answer.

"We ... I can find another car," she proposed.

His smile quirked higher. She was relieved for several seconds as his eyes left hers to glance around at the other cars in the parking lot, but they returned all too soon.

"Do warriors really drive minivans, or are you just afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of your flashy bike," Jade proclaimed before realizing that in specifying what she wasn't afraid of she might be confessing as well.

"Hmmm, well, what then?" She saw that his lightening quick perceptions noticed more than she'd like them to see. She saw his eyes track across her tense face down to her tense shoulders and further down to her fisted hands. Then, suddenly, his gaze was back on hers, too knowing, too certain.

"I do bite," he amended, having ascertained that it was him and not the bike she was resisting. "But, not when I'm driving a motorcycle down the Interstate at seventy miles an hour."

Jade's tension eased. He was perceptive but not all knowing. He thought she feared his fangs. She relented before he could figure out he was wrong.

She was a warrior. She refused to be afraid of this vampire, not of his fangs or his charm.

"At the next town I will purchase alternate transportation," she said, but her voice was already muffled.

The "safety" helmet was heavy, and it blocked her peripheral vision as well as making the world seem distant and hazy through its scratched polycarbonate visor. It also held the cowboy's scent, evergreen, slightly tangy and slightly sweet. Her nose crinkled against its pleasantness because an undead monster should smell like moldering graveyard dirt not a fresh winter forest with a hint of decadent smoke.

Before she could step away, he raised his hands to buckle the strap under her chin. She imagined other men could have nuzzled her neck less intimately than the way he brushed her skin as he tightened the strap. His fingers were cool. Her skin burned. Even with his eyes shuttered by lowered lids, he saw too much.

She felt relieved when he turned away to mount the motorcycle. She would have been more so if she hadn't been expected to climb on behind him.

Her balance was impeccable, a gift from years of training, but she had never balanced on top of something that roared to life between her legs. The motorcycle jumped forward to fly out of the parking lot with an arc of gravel flying out behind its rear tire in a wave. She grabbed for the nearest anchor, the vampire, and his laughter rang out because he'd driven recklessly to get her to do just that.

Right away, the hum of the highway beneath their tires and the rumble of the bike's motor wrapped them in sound. The wind rushing past her borrowed helmet and the shadowy landscapes they passed created a blur. The vampire in her arms became her world as the noise and rushing scenery isolated them. There was the world rushing by, and then there was the two of them, together.

At first, she couldn't decide where to place her hands. Chest? Hips? Stomach? All, far too intimate choices. Though he was cool to the touch beneath his clothes, each place she put her hands seemed to burn shortly thereafter. Finally, she held as lightly as she could to his sides, thankful for the bunched leather of his coat, a buffer from his skin.

However, she could do nothing about her thighs. She was forced to endure the feeling of his lean form warming between her legs, and their jeans did little to buffer that.

While she was on her own in America, she maintained constant contact with a liaison that provided her with information and kept track of her movements for Haven's records. The factory she and the vampire had destroyed last night had been a mission, an assignment she'd received in one of many e-mail briefings. The vampires she'd killed at concerts, shopping malls or dance clubs were her own finds, duly dispatched and reported.

She couldn't report the vampire she held, not yet. She had to learn more first. The risk of that decision and the rebellion it signified caused a hot knot to settle in the pit of her stomach. She had always unfailingly obeyed her master.

Now, for the first time in her life, she was truly on her own.

* * * *

His flight wasn't crowded.

He took his seat in a row that held only one other passenger, an elderly woman who looked out the window at the runway rather than meet his dark gaze. Others openly stared, including a child about six, who stood up on his seat to turn around and peer at the man behind him with wide eyes. The boy's mother pulled him back down onto his seat, forcing him to look away.

She wasn't concerned with manners. He could tell by the way her eyes tracked nervously over his unusual features and the way her lips tightened into a nervous, fearful smile.

The monks called him the Angel of Death. Cizin knew nothing of angels, but he had been closely acquainted with death for centuries.

The sparsely populated airplane didn't concern him. He would have stood out even in a crowd and not because of his height or his attire. At one time, his six-foot tall frame had made him a giant. Now, it was barely above average. His conservative business suit was simple and gray. No, his face, with its high cheekbones, prominent nose and high forehead turned heads, as well as his bronze-colored skin and long black hair that fell halfway down his back. This he told himself even though he knew it was much, much more.

When he entered a room, the light left it. People shivered, struck suddenly by a chill that left their skin pimpled with bumps and their breath caught in their throats. When he left, those same people sighed, crossed themselves or quickly took out their cell phones to call a loved one, just in case.

Cizin absorbed the stares with stoicism. He settled into his seat and buckled his seat belt as if he was just another ordinary businessman on his way home to America. Perhaps he was on his way home, but his business was far from ordinary.

He had been born in the southern lowlands of the Yucatan in 880 A.D. His features were so unusual and striking because Maya blood had since been diluted by Spanish conquerors and blended with neighboring tribes of Putan Maya from Mexico. Cizin was the last pure Maya Priest to walk the earth.

Of course, "pure" only applied to his lineage. He, himself, was tainted. He had walked the earth for a thousand years bathed in the blood of monsters. He had killed so many and so often that even the monks kept no count. They had recorded much of the history he'd lived through with conscientious diligence, first on vellum, then paper, and then later still on floppy disk and cd, but not his deeds. No one kept count, but he felt the

weight of all that death on his shoulders like a grim, dark mantle.

Angel of Death? Perhaps the moniker wasn't far off the mark, after all. Yet, one girl had bested him.

He could still feel her slight form beneath him. Could still see the nervous way she had moistened lips that had never known a kiss with her tongue. He had thought himself beyond the emotions he'd felt in his youth. His passion, fervor and recklessness had burned itself out in one intense moment of dark revelation. It was reason enough to become cold, reason enough to allow passion only during battle.

A flight attendant came down the center aisle to make sure all the passengers were settled before take off. She handed him a pillow from the overhead compartment, and he was impressed by her calm professionalism. She didn't linger near him, but she didn't rush away either. One found courage in unexpected places. Even a man who had lived longer than he should have could be surprised.

The girl had defeated him. The monks had accepted her as a full-fledged warrior. Even now, she roamed far from the safety of the temple because of his weakness.

She wasn't ready.

The plane taxied down the runway, faster and faster, until he felt the pull of gravity deep in his gut as its wheels left the ground. Cizin closed his eyes and rested his head against the cool, snowy white pillow.

He could still see the startled attraction in her eyes. She had felt the need to touch and be touched, the desire to know something beyond the existence she knew. He recognized her yearning, had felt it in his own youth. For a split second when he'd held her and seen it in her eyes, he had felt it again himself.

She wasn't like the other warriors of Haven who completely subjugated their passion for their cause. She burned. She hungered. She longed for another life.

He had followed her to America because she wasn't ready to accept that blood and ash were the only two things that would matter to her for the rest of her life. He had to find her before it was too late.

Evil was attracted to the passionate above all others. Didn't he know this from personal experience? He had burned. He had hungered. His passion had only led to darkness.

He would deliver her back to the temple. He would make the monks see reason. The girl wasn't ready; she would never be ready. She had defeated him but not in battle. Her vulnerable heart had taken him off guard.

* * * *

As Jade and the vampire came to the next town—a place called Freesboro, Arkansas—she doubted this night would prove fruitful. There were less than a half a dozen buildings on Main Street, and the gas station that the vampire pulled into was preparing to close for the night ... at nine forty-five.

She asked the owner about buying a car while the vampire bought a bottle of wine and a carton of cigarettes.

"Stanley Horton had to go into Little Rock for knee surgery. His wife has been running their car lot. She'll be there tomorrow. Usually keeps it open about a half a day."

The man bagged their purchases with a tentative smile. She doubted very many Asian women rode into town on the back of screaming motorcycles driven by sexy

vampires. His friendliness was slightly forced but genuine nonetheless. She was thankful her companion kept his smile small and fang-free.

"There's a bed-and-breakfast right outside of town if you folks need a place to stay. It's called The Grove. Real nice place."

"Sounds cozy," the vampire commented. "Bed and breakfast, two of my favorite things."

He was in the process of lighting a matchstick against the side of the box from which he'd pulled it. He held the flame to the tip of a fresh cigarette and inhaled. His comment sounded casual, too casual. Stranded in the middle of nowhere with a vampire she had decided not to ash wasn't "cozy," it was suicidal.

"Thank you," Jade told the man, ignoring when the vampire's attention left his cigarette and came to her. She felt his gaze on her face. "Perhaps we could use your phone to see if a room is available?"

They had hours before dawn. The night was still young, and Jade didn't want to spend the rest of the night pressed to the vampire's back like a groupie. She had to have a car before tomorrow night. She needed to establish boundaries between herself and the vampire. She needed to take charge of a risky situation.

As they sped off again into the night, Jade held on to the vampire for dear life, feeling anything but safe and in control.

Chapter Six

Jade had been raised surrounded by the beauty of China: the majestic mountains, the craggy hills, and the music of clear rushing streams. She didn't expect to find such beauty in America, the land of cheeseburgers and plasma televisions, but The Grove proved her wrong. Nestled in a valley, ringed on all sides by rolling hills, the pristine white Victorian mansion stood out by the light of the rising moon. It must have been a welcoming sight to many weary travelers.

She didn't know if it was the warm and happy glow from its windows or the quiet hush of the valley, but even the vampire let off on the throttle of his bike as they approached, letting the roar of the beast beneath them ease to a rumble.

The door opened, and the hostess stepped out onto the wide veranda. A tall, willowy woman dressed in jeans and a belted sweater, Meg Browning looked exactly as she had sounded on the phone, sophisticated but friendly, mature but not aged beyond the point of enjoying unusual guests on a Wednesday night.

A light rain had begun to fall, and Browning motioned them forward.

"Come in, come in, before it starts to pour."

Jade shot a warning glance toward the vampire, but he was already taking the woman's outstretched hand.

"Imagine finding you when we needed you most," he murmured in his usual whisky-kissed drawl.

Not *your home*, he'd said, *you*.

Jade wasn't surprised when the woman allowed the vampire to keep her hand and even offered him her other one. She was surprised when Meg Browning seemed to lose at least ten years as the vampire's hands held hers. Her face softened as wrinkles eased around her eyes. Her mouth curved rounder and sweeter. She suddenly had the look of a young woman who had just welcomed her lover home after a long separation.

From the first moment, Jade would have called their hostess attractive. Following the vampire's touch, Meg Browning became stunningly beautiful.

Surely, it was a trick of moonlight. Even as drizzle fell, clouds flowed away from the moon allowing beams to hit the woman facing them in an unusual way. Moonlight, that was all. It caused a white aura around her long unbound hair. Its glow must have caused the softening of her face.

"We'll need two rooms," Jade reiterated. She wanted to distance herself from the vampire and break the illusion of a "spell" all at the same time.

Meg Browning blinked her eyes several times and seemed reluctant to pull her hands back from the vampire's touch. As the clouds shifted once more, bathing the other woman in shadows, she still looked mesmerized by the long-dead cowboy at Jade's side. If not a trick of moonlight, then what was causing Browning to seem so enthralled?

"Of course, I made up the beds after you called. Follow me," their hostess encouraged but with a breathless quality to her voice that hadn't been there before.

"Pleasure," the vampire replied, tucking one of Browning's hands into the crook of his arm like a fine gentleman.

Somehow, it seemed like a polite reply and a promise all at the same time.

* * * *

Jade was "flying blind". She'd heard the expression, but she'd never experienced it first hand before tonight. She couldn't allow the vampire to harm their hostess.

He was obviously sentient. He had fought by her side. He had yet to try to drink from her. In fact, Meg Browning and the dead cowboy had something more than instant attraction between them, some kind of understanding. If Meg desired a moonlight tryst with a monster, who was she to interfere?

She was Haven's warrior, sworn to kill all vampires. She had brought the vampire here. If his charm was a spell that their hostess couldn't resist, then she would be to blame.

That thought brought Jade from her room, dressed and ready. Ready for what, she wasn't sure. The woman had seemed to want the vampire's touch. She'd seemed to thrive under it.

The rain had stopped, but the air was still moist. The heavy chill of it embraced her in its hush as she left the house and entered the back gardens. She had found nothing but empty rooms inside.

Outside, she saw no one, but the night wasn't empty. She could sense anticipation, expectancy, almost as if the world held its breath to see what she would do next.

Step by step, she walked across wet grass that was slick under her boots. She found a rose bush hedge and followed it, not liking the cloyingly sweet scent of the rain-washed flowers that enveloped her.

Her stakes were in her hands. Recriminations echoed in her ears, sounding strangely as if they were spoken by her master's voice.

Couldn't. Shouldn't. Wouldn't.

Then, she heard a murmur from around the corner. Its source was hidden by the thick green leaves of the rose bushes.

A murmur. A gasp. A sigh. A name.

Dillon.

It was said in passion not pain.

Jade didn't hesitate though she wanted to. The young, inexperienced girl in her wanted to blush redder than the roses and back away before she was seen. In fact, she thought she might have an awkward, stumbling run-for-cover in her waiting to come out. Her warrior's training overwhelmed the girlish impulse and propelled her forward to a sparser patch of bushes grown long and leggy with age.

Though the leaves she saw the vampire, Dillon, embracing their hostess.

She did freeze then, mesmerized as the vampire who made her think too much about kissing and touching and...

She froze to see him holding a woman in his arms.

Obviously, Meg Browning wasn't resisting. In a passionate swoon with her hands buried deep in the white gold of Dillon's hair, the woman begged for his touch, his kiss, with his name uttered low and urgent again and again.

Jade couldn't act. Her feet wouldn't move. Her fingers were numb around the shafts of her stakes.

In that moment, she envied the other woman. Her nipples hardened. Her lips went dry as her breath quickened. She began to ache in a more intimate way than she ever had before.

She watched as Dillon nuzzled the woman's breasts. Meg Browning's sweater and jeans were gone, replaced by a simple satin nightgown, white and plain. The moon painted it with a glow that made it much lovelier than it would have been in daylight. She was lovely, stunning, transformed from an attractive, aging innkeeper to a seductive lover by Dillon's touch.

He crooned sweet, soft, true words about Meg's beauty, her softness ... her taste.

Jade blinked and griped her stakes tighter. Bad enough to find herself a voyeur, but she would not stand transfixed, as gone as Dillon's victim, while he drained their hostess dry.

His fangs found their way into Browning's flesh just as Jade leapt forward. No cry, no protest, no fight came from the woman he held. Fortunately, Jade had enough fight in her for both of them.

Her kick dislodged the vampire's fangs from Meg's neck, but he didn't let the woman go. He fell to his knees taking Meg with him, but he didn't let her go. He looked up at Jade, and he was no longer the charming, sexy cowboy who had teased her with his charisma. His mouth was too dark against his perfect pale skin. His eyes seemed dazed, no longer glittering and sane.

Jade kicked again, knocking him back so that their hostess could fall away from his arms. Her nightgown was no longer white and plain. It was now streaked with splashes of black that would have looked scarlet in the sun.

The amount of blood, its stark stain against the pristine white gown, took Jade by surprise. It held her attention several seconds too long.

Suddenly, Dillon was back on his feet, and his eyes were no longer glazed.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked as if they'd met over a glass of warm milk in the kitchen.

"Couldn't stand back and let you kill," Jade replied.

She had put herself between him and his midnight snack. He glanced behind her. Even in the dark of night, she could see the glitter was back in his eyes.

"That was only a taste, Darlin'. She offered. I took. We both enjoyed."

Jade ignored the sleepy smile on Meg Browning's face. It was easier to focus on the blood. She'd known he was dangerous. She'd known he was a monster.

"You didn't look like you'd stop at a taste. You didn't look capable of stopping at all," she accused.

He was on her before she expected it, so fast that her stakes were pressed length-wise and ineffectually between them by the time the momentum of his rush pushed her back against the nearest rose bush. Green wet leaves soaked through her shirt at her back and all around her sides as he pressed against her. Sodden petals brushed the side of her face.

He held her tight just as he'd held Meg moments before, but she didn't moan, and he didn't croon. He did talk though, and it was low, urgent and for her ears alone.

"I've killed. For two hundred and fifty years, I've killed. I've taken blood from the willing and the unwilling, and I've taken it past the point of no return more often than not, often enough to know the difference. I was not going to kill her. I was sustaining myself and pleasuring us both, but I would have stopped."

"Would you? I don't think you would believe your own words if you'd seen yourself at that moment. I've seen that look, Dillon, hundreds of times, just before it turns to ash."

His hold loosened, but she didn't pull away. There was something in his shadowed expression that she hadn't ever seen before in a vampire's eyes. Remorse? Fear? Pain?

It changed before she had a chance to label it.

He tightened his hands once more and pulled her closer than she'd ever been held in her life. His night-chilled, muscular form pressed to her body from her chest to her thighs. His legs threatened to tangle with hers. She turned her face up toward his, tilting her chin because she knew it would be pointless to try to keep her neck from his fangs. She needed to see the expression in his eyes as it morphed to something infinitely colder than it had been moments before. So cold, so calculated, the blue hid as clouds shifted over the moon until his irises were as black as the night around them.

"When I can't stop, you'll be the first to know," he warned just before he pushed back from her and let her go.

In an instant, he was gone and so was their hostess. He had swept her up in his arms too quickly for Jade to do anything about it.

She felt the chill of tears on her cheeks, but she was too numb to analyze why she cried. Better to blame the moisture on wet roses. Better to forget being bested because something about the vampire ... something about Dillon ... challenged everything she'd ever been taught, everything she'd ever believed about good and evil. She simply let the cool wetness flow down her cheeks as she allowed her feet to carry her back into the empty mansion.

Chapter Seven

The next morning dawned too bright and too sunny. Jade's life was a nocturnal one, but that wasn't why she found herself blinking against the sun on this dazzling day.

She couldn't give herself the luxury of shadows. She had to face the world. Warriors of Haven didn't "call in sick." The idea of facing the occurrences of the night before in the bright light of morning was daunting, but she would truly fail only if she didn't prepare herself and meet her obligations. This, Jade told herself before breakfast. When breakfast was served by a yawning but smiling Meg Browning, Jade had to repeat the sentiment several times like a newly adopted mantra.

The other woman looked slightly pale and a little sleepy, but she also looked happy. A yellow turtleneck sweater and jeans had replaced her white night gown. She talked with several guests who had arrived in time for breakfast, and she sounded normal and friendly.

Dillon had stopped.

Jade wasn't the only one who watched Browning. A solitary man sat to the side drinking coffee and eating a hearty breakfast: eggs, pancakes, and bacon. He didn't laugh and talk with the others, but he was obviously a local. Big, handsome and muscular, he was dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt with its sleeves rolled up. He had taken off a hat that read "Eames Construction" before sitting down to eat. He seemed almost as uncomfortable as Jade, both at ease with his routine and not, all at the same time, as if he came here every morning for breakfast, but he'd like something more.

Jade noticed him watching Meg. She noticed when the other woman realized the big man's eyes were on her. Meg's cheeks flushed, and her hand went to fuss with her turtleneck. She sloshed the coffee she was pouring, and the man reached to still her frantic efforts to wipe it up.

"Don't worry about it, Meg," he urged, and his voice was low and husky.

Meg nodded, still flustered in spite of the man's consideration.

He rose to his feet quickly, but Meg was already rushing from the room. She was so unlike the moonlit wanton of last night.

Jade swallowed the last bite of her breakfast.

Visions of how the vampire might have caused such a nervous mood in their hostess threatened. She pushed those thoughts away. Dillon would be lost to sleep all day, a sleep just barely this side of death.

Now was the perfect time for her to find another car and another notebook computer to replace the one she had lost when she'd had to use her jeep like a weapon. She could be back before dusk, back by the vampire's side.

It had been hard enough before last night. With their confrontation and Meg's smile and the memory of him pleasuring the other woman ... Jade willed away the heat on her cheeks, but rather than cooling, it spread.

She heard Meg's light laughter, and she suddenly envied the woman's ability to embrace Dillon's darkness in the shadows and return to normalcy in the sunlit breakfast room. Jade hadn't been bitten. She hadn't felt Dillon's mouth on her breasts or her neck. He hadn't crooned sweetness to her by the light of the moon. She had only seen him

doing all that to another woman, and the heat of the tableau had followed her into the day.

Jade was glad she kept several invaluable plastic cards in the pocket of whatever pants she was wearing. She had lost some belongings in the factory blaze, but she still had the necessary identification and credit she would need to replace them.

After eating her breakfast, she borrowed a car from Meg and drove into town. She went first to the car dealership the man had told her about the night before. If the owner was surprised at how quickly Jade chose a blue Mustang from the surprisingly varied inventory, she didn't show it. Friendly and efficient, she had all the necessary paperwork completed by the time Jade got back from the nearest super-sized department store.

Of course, Jade hadn't been as quick buying her computer as she had been in choosing a car. The inventory at the store was even more varied and enticing, truly, a foreign world considering her background. The colorful rows upon rows of merchandise threatened to sidetrack her for hours every time she had to shop for supplies. She hurried, truly she did, but the sun was already sinking in the afternoon sky by the time she picked up the Mustang.

Her shopping trip hadn't soothed her nerves. In fact, as she drove her new prized possession out of town, she felt the tension of the coming night engulf her. She had a new computer, a new cell phone and several bags of new clothes. What she didn't have was a plan. She couldn't travel with a vampire who was going to feed off women wherever they stopped, even if the women were willing. Browning might be alive and well—better than well—today, but that didn't negate what the vampire had done. Dillon wasn't the same mindless monster she'd been trained to fight, and yet he was deadly dangerous in his own unique way.

She was blazing new territory. There was fear in that, but there was also a strange exhilaration. As she watched the sun set, she couldn't separate the two.

* * * *

She was on the internet using her computer to check e-mail when he came into her room. She was reaching out to the familiar, comforting presence of Haven from very, very far away. She could have been on another planet, so alien was this new world she found herself a part of. Dillon's presence filled the small intimate space around her. She had an instinctual prey reaction to the predator behind her. Her respiration quickened. The pace of her heartbeat increased. The vampire's presence made the chime of mail in her box less soothing than it would have been otherwise.

She ignored him. Her cheeks burned as did her memories of the night before, but she opened her mail rather than face him or them.

"Stakes and cyberspace. Interesting combination," Dillon said.

She still didn't acknowledge him but with good reasons. One, she had a new mission from Haven. Two, she didn't want to see his eyes.

She could feel him move forward even though he strode silently across the plush, ivory carpet. The force of his personality was too powerful to ignore. The air behind her was charged with it as if the very molecules of matter he passed through rushed, bumped and pushed against each other to hurry out of his way as he moved. She could almost hear the very atoms of time and space whispering "vampire" to proclaim his arrival.

A hint of his scent, pine and tobacco, teased into her nose as he came closer, and the

molecules of her own body responded. Down to her very cells, those molecules whispered "vampire", but unfortunately, they also whispered other things, traitorous things: *want, need, heat, desire...*

"Jade." Dillon contemplated as he looked over her shoulder at the computer screen, so close, too close. Why did his cool presence heat the air around her? "The name doesn't suit you. What were they thinking? It's too brittle. Too hard."

"You do not know me," Jade replied. She was pleased that her voice sounded hard and brittle.

He was silent as she snapped the computer closed, but even quiet, he distracted. From the corner of her eye, she watched him move to lean back against the wall. He was always so deceptively casual. She knew the retreat wasn't as it appeared to be. He wasn't put off by her words. On the contrary, his gaze followed her movements as if he was entirely too intrigued.

She had already packed her clothes into the trunk of the car. She only had to slip the computer into its satchel, and she was ready to leave.

As his gaze tracked her, he fiddled with his ever-present box of matches. He turned it in the fingers of his left hand and the matchsticks produced a faint rhythmic rattle. His movements were always so casual and yet never casual at all. She knew how quickly he could flow into action, and some instinctive part of her waited and watched for the sudden eruption.

Being near Dillon was like taking a scenic stroll near a dormant volcano. She knew the potential for destruction was there. She just didn't know when.

Silently, he followed her out of the room, down the long-shadowed hallway and down the stairs. The potential for deadly danger walked behind her with gliding confidence in his steps.

Though The Grove now held several other guests, the house was still and hushed around them. Jade was relieved when Browning didn't make an appearance to see them off. She didn't examine her relief too closely. It was just there and almost as threatening as Dillon himself.

Her vampire companion didn't speak again until they left the house and moved toward the driveway. There, her gleaming purchase sat in the light of the rising moon. Under the bright white security light, the blue of the Mustang was lustrous, a pale wash of pastel blue standing out against the darkness around it.

"Well now, no minivan, after all," Dillon had crossed to the passenger side, and he ran his hands over the top of her car in an appreciative caress. He looked thoughtfully from the car to her, and suddenly Jade stopped in her tracks.

His eyes were luminous in the moonlight, and their blue gleam perfectly matched the Mustang's paint. They were just as striking against his pale skin as the Mustang was against the darkness.

She couldn't help the pause. She was frozen as their gazes met and a dangerous swirl of dizziness threatened to suck her down into the black hole of a newly recognized and suddenly acknowledged attraction.

Jade forced herself forward, putting one foot in front of the other as if she hadn't had an unasked-for glimpse into her secret soul.

"Course, if you drive it like a minivan, I'm going to be disappointed," Dillon continued.

She ignored his words and his glittering gaze. That she couldn't ignore him and her body's reaction to him was a problem, but she wouldn't let it freeze her again. She sank down into the driver's seat and tossed her satchel into the back. The car roared to life as the vampire sat down beside her. She'd turned the key. She'd manned the wheel. It felt like a triumph that she could move at all.

In its own way, the cockpit of the Mustang was almost as intimate as the motorcycle. They were enclosed, surrounded by the decadent scent of polished leather, illuminated only by the faint glow of the instrument panel.

"Darlin', this car was made for you," Dillon commented.

Jade let off the brake and pressed her foot on the gas harder than necessary. The car jumped forward, but even as it picked up speed beneath her foot and hands, she knew no matter how fast she drove, she couldn't escape the vampire at her side or her persistently growing fascination with him.

Chapter Eight

Fewer than fifty vampires were in the hive she'd been told to destroy. The pay-for-storage facility they had claimed as a refuge had so many units to check that it took hours to make sure every last monster was dead.

Correction, every last monster except the one who fought by her side.

Even with her I-pod cranked as high as it would go and even with ninety-nine percent of her senses focused on slashing, whirling, kicking and staking, the one percent of her senses focused on Dillon plagued her.

He slashed; he whirled. It seemed as if he could hear the music that flooded her ears because he was killing in sync with the beat. They killed, together, as if they danced, together, in the shadows, in the moonlight, in the ash and smoke that drifted around them, making the world hazy and soft. Soon, nothing seemed real save for her own stakes and the vampire by her side, at her back, defending her, helping her.

Dillon was so real, so solid, in the midst of the sooty chaos.

Finally, they wound up back to back as the fog around them turned to dust and settled to the ground. She accepted the support of his strong back against hers as she fought to catch her breath. The night sharpened and came back into focus as the ash found its way to the ground. As her perceptions cleared and the world came back into view once more, she realized their bodies were touching.

Jade moved to put distance between them, but in one of his sudden blurs of movement, Dillon was in front of her, blocking her retreat. His move was so sudden that she stepped into his arms even as she tried to get further away.

"Don't I know you, Mei gui?" Beauty on a monster's tongue, the Chinese word for rose found its way to her heart and fit there easily as if it was her true name, long lost but now found by this vampire. "I know moonlight loves to dance on your skin," he continued. "I know you crave speed, sound and all the experiences you've been taught to resist. I know your face is softer than rose petals, your stakes are like thorns, and your heart is full of passion you've been forced to deny."

He used her earlier claim that he didn't know her against her, uttering a net of truths that seemed to wrap around her in seductive folds of perception. His face was so close to hers. His body pressed so near. His hands, suddenly on her arms before she could step away.

Jade was forced to stand while his whisky-kissed tones flowed over her. She was forced to meet the blue-eyed gaze that obviously followed her everywhere even into the day. When she was alone and his eyes were closed, she was still influenced by their glittering beauty.

"And," Dillon whispered, tilting his face even nearer to hers. "I know you've never been kissed."

She gasped at the intimacy of his deduction, but the gasp was a mistake, better to have remained stiff and unresponsive. He took advantage of her slightly open, vulnerable lips, took advantage by taking them.

His mouth was suddenly, startlingly cool against hers. His lips were firm and demanding but shockingly smooth and gentle. He didn't bruise or dominate; that she

could have fought. Instead, he seduced. With a rhythmic, soft brushing, with a slide of his lips and with a hint, here, there, of tongue, he took the warmth from her response and made it his.

And, she did respond.

She tilted her chin and moved her own lips, her own tongue. She offered her heat, without thinking, without pausing, and a sudden stab of forbidden desire was her reward. His lips grew instantly warmer and then warmer still.

She warmed him.

Her lips.

Her tongue.

She realized this warmth she caused in him was in its own way more powerful than the death she could cause with her stakes.

She reached for him, both to pull him closer and to keep herself steady. The two needs were mutually exclusive. The world whirled ever faster the closer their bodies came. The anchor of his impossibly hard shoulders kept her on her feet and destroyed her equilibrium at the same time.

She'd said he didn't know her, but somehow he did, all too well. He knew too many of the secrets she kept buried so deep she didn't even acknowledge them herself. His beautiful eyes saw too much, too often, too deep.

Jade held the deadly vampire in her arms, and though she'd never been kissed, she knew no man would feel like this to her. She had moved her hands underneath the lapel of his leather jacket, and there she felt the lean, hard planes of his chest, so hard, so immovable. He was dangerous, powerful and hungry.

He saw her secrets, but she thought she sensed some of his as well. Dillon wanted. He wanted so much more than she could or would offer him.

She didn't have to fight herself free. He let her break the kiss. He let her step away, and step away she did, even though her lips mourned the loss of his the instant that the cool night air flowed between them.

She should have kept her eyes closed, but she didn't. She should have turned and run into the night until its coolness made her forget. She didn't. Her gaze was drawn to him, and she didn't fight the compulsion. She could end the kiss, but she couldn't end the magnetic pull he seemed to have on her senses.

He stood only a few steps away, and he was the same deadly, dangerous vampire who had walked up behind her earlier in the night, but he was also somehow changed. As he stood looking back at her, he had lost even the appearance of "casual." The heat she'd shared with him flushed his pale cheeks. His lips were also flushed and swollen. She had rumbled his jacket with her grasping hands, and he didn't move to straighten the leather or the cotton of his shirt. He was devastating by moonlight as he had always been. In fact, he was gorgeous, painfully so, but he was even more seductive in this moment, so soon after the kiss, because he wasn't trying to hide what the kiss had done to him. He showed an unexpected vulnerability in his pose, in his eyes, in the sweet, swollen curve of his lips that caused a hot curl of lust to flare in her, sudden and shocking. Crazy that it was so, but the hint of one white incisor indenting his lower lip only increased the heat of her response.

"I know you. Better than you know yourself," he sounded certain but slightly raw, as if the knowing shocked him more than it did her.

"It doesn't matter," Jade insisted. Her lips tingled. Her body burned. Some newly discovered predator in her own nature wanted to carry him off into the night and continue what they had started, but it didn't matter. "Because I know you. I know what you are, Dillon, and it doesn't matter if your words are sweet and your kisses are sweeter. It doesn't matter that there's some remnant of the man you were left beneath the monster you've become because there will always be your bite, waiting in the shadows."

They were suddenly toe-to-toe in the night, and she didn't know who had moved, him or her. She did know the move was a mistake whoever had made it. They were too close, and his eyes darkened even though the sky was cloudless above them.

"The trouble for you, Jade, is that my bite is the sweetest temptation of all."

He was gone then with his usual blur, and Jade was left alone thinking of what Meg Browning's moans and the glimpse of one sharp fang had done to her.

* * * *

The night was cool, dark and silent. He found a place to sit in the crook of a pine bough in the top of a tree that rose taller than all the rest. From his seat, he could look out over the shadowy forest, and he could allow his body to be rocked by the night wind. The late spring breeze caused the top of the pine tree to sway, to and fro, to and fro. He often sought that soothing rhythm, indulging until his skin was chilled to stone and his heart slowed to a lethargic pulse. But, tonight the movement didn't soothe. Tonight the cool breeze couldn't possibly chill him enough.

She had kissed him. He could still feel her passionate response against his lips. He could still taste her, could still feel the slide of her tongue against his. There had been no blood, no bite, and in spite of what he'd said to her, the kiss had been enough. He hadn't wanted anything more. Well, nothing monstrous anyway. Of course, he desired more, but it was more of what any hot-blooded man would desire. Never mind that his blood would never be hot again.

He wanted to ease her clothes out of his way so that his hands could explore her skin. He wanted to cup her warm breasts in the palms of his hands and feel her response as her nipples peaked. He wanted to unfasten her jeans and slide them off her hips so that he could press his sex to hers. He wanted to tease her, tempt her and pleasure her beyond anything she'd ever known.

He was hungry for her in many ways but not the one way she feared. For the first time in over two hundred years, he didn't want blood. He wanted her as a man not a monster.

More importantly, she wanted him. He had felt it in the hunger of her kiss. What he was had caused her to pull back, but it didn't stop her from desiring him.

He'd been desired before. Even as a monster, women desired his darkness. They desired the thrill, the escape, the forbidden pleasure and pain he could give them, which was all well and good and hot at midnight.

Jade seemed to want and need something beyond his fangs. She seemed to see some measure of the man he'd been even when he wasn't quite sure who that was anymore.

Wanted.

It had been a long time since he'd been wanted, maybe never.

She denied it, of course. She had pulled back from the kiss. She feared his fangs or her desire or both, but she looked into his eyes more often than she looked at his fangs.

He just didn't know what she found in them.

He was stained—there was no denying it—stained and beyond redemption. Still, as they had stood there panting from the shared exertion of killing, he had felt a glimmer of ... hope? Possibility? Camaraderie?

The tree continued to sway beneath him, and the large expanse of black above him seemed to open up even larger than it had ever been in all his years. He felt more man than monster.

Jade wasn't the perfect untouchable warrior. Her hair had come loose until strands blew all about her face. Her beautiful, warm skin had been smudged, and her golden brown eyes, wide. In those eyes, he'd seen shades of horror and regret only he would recognize. She didn't like to kill even though she did it well.

He recognized in her a kindred spirit. She was being used as he had been used. She wasn't the woman she longed to be. He had seen the gold in her eyes fade after the kiss as if she'd forced away her true warmth to embrace the cold emptiness Haven expected of her. If he lived for another two hundred years—for an eternity—he would never forget the pang he'd felt when the gold was gone.

Chapter Nine

Jade couldn't drive for hours searching for a hotel. Besides, the cool night air called to her, soothing in its empty chill as a warm, people-filled atmosphere would not. She needed darkness, quiet and cool, cool water. The road that had taken her to the storage facility continued out of town to become a rural, winding curl up a hillside. She found the perfect spot not far from a bridge, which rumbled and shook as she drove over it.

She pulled the Mustang onto the shoulder and locked its doors. She took a backpack from the trunk. Beside the bridge, an overgrown path led down to the water. She followed it.

The flow of the river was deceptively lazy. When she shed her clothes and walked into the water, the current was strong against her legs. She knelt and let it wash over her. Its rivulets and currents took the ash from her skin and carried it far, far away downstream.

By the time she had loosened the braid of her hair and washed its thick mass, she was shivering. She ignored the clicking of her teeth. A ritual cleansing wasn't supposed to be comfortable and luxurious. It was good that her extremities tingled and her nipples peaked, taunt and almost painful, good that her breath showed in the moonlight.

She came dripping from the river on numb legs, but she knelt by the fire she had built beforehand without pausing to dry off. Near the fire, she had already placed the ivory comb and the scented oil. As intended, the ritual blocked out all thought, all fear, and all feeling. Her brain was more numb than her fingers. She embraced the numbness, and practiced movements took control.

Rhythmically, she pulled the comb through her hair, using the oil to tame, straighten and smooth the tangles. She combed until her arms grew fatigued but didn't stop until the entire mass was dry.

Then and only then did she lay the comb aside. Now came a different rhythm, one of twisting, intertwining and coiling until a tight, new braid was formed. When she stood, it fell to her hips, perfectly tamed, perfectly bound, and perfectly calm.

She was a warrior of Haven. Not some weak naive girl who would allow herself to desire the devil—no matter how sweet he tasted or what wild temptation he offered.

*

He watched her sleep.

She lay curled into a ball on the cold, hard ground as if in penance. Yet, she looked completely comfortable and peaceful. The gentle rise and fall of her chest, so very different from the passionate panting he'd seen earlier.

Part of him wanted to go to her and destroy that peace; it was a lie, a disguise, a shield. Yet, the cold perfection of it kept him in place.

He had resisted the allure of her vulnerable nudity because of that coldness. He had understood her actions, from the icy bath she'd taken in the river, to the way she had lingered over binding her hair. Rejection. A wise man only toyed with rejection if he didn't care one way or the other.

Dillon cared.

Her coldness made him ache.

So, he only watched as the moon passed its zenith. He stood, a pale, hard, frozen statue as clouds came and went, as the river flowed, as the world continued without him. He lived as Jade breathed in and died as she breathed out, on and on throughout the cold dark night.

Chapter Ten

For once, Jade traveled during the day. Dillon would find her. He would follow. She couldn't have left him behind even if she'd wanted to. Her duty to Haven wouldn't allow her to run away, and even if it had, she knew that Dillon wouldn't allow it. Somehow, she was connected to the vampire though he hadn't tasted one drop of her blood. He had somehow found his way beneath her hard warrior's exterior to the vulnerable heart of the girl she couldn't be. Perhaps she couldn't leave him behind, but she could distance herself from her shame. She could leave the spot where she'd been weak far behind even though the cause of her weakness would follow her.

Night found her in Memphis, Tennessee. The city immediately charmed her. The winding Mississippi River caressed its border. Beautiful paddlewheel boats floated majestically up and down filled with guests. From their decks, lights twinkled gaily, and laughter floated all the way to the shore.

She was relieved when she checked her e-mail to find her in-box empty. Then, she was immediately ashamed. She wasn't a tourist to be charmed, entertained and soothed by the lazy kiss of an atmosphere filled with the historic flavor of bygone days. She had a job to do whether Haven sent a specific mission her way or not.

Dillon found her in the third nightclub she'd visited. She scanned the crowd while she sipped a frothy concoction that was far too sweet.

Suddenly, he was there, as always, so quick and larger than life. There were several hundred people in this particular club, dancing and singing, clinking glasses and shouting conversations over the music. Yet, when Dillon arrived, the rest of the room seemed to dim into a blur, a buzz of movement that meant nothing in his presence.

Jade blinked to fight that odd perception, but it wouldn't go away. The world was Dillon's stage, and all else was backdrop, a colorful kaleidoscope of color to highlight his pale perfection.

"You aren't dancing," he observed, sliding close to her side.

He whispered into her ear. Was that so she could hear him or just so his cool lips brushing the sensitive skin would cause her to shiver? She'd heard the term "personal space" in a movie. Dillon made space very, very personal indeed.

"I'm hunting," Jade informed him, prim and proper, and proud that she could be so on the outside, because on the inside, his lips against the sensitive shell of her ear made her stomach flutter.

"Believe me, Mei gui, it's possible to do both at the same time," he returned, wicked, low and so far removed from prim and proper that it made her cheeks burn.

Before she realized what was happening, Dillon had urged her onto the crowded dance floor with the press of his body against her back.

The band had begun a new song. The sound of it filled the air around them and seemed to press them even closer together. It throbbed, steady, rhythmic and slow, as the lead singer crooned lyrics about her lonely heart. The drumbeat mimicked a heartbeat, and the sound filled Jade's ears and tingled against her skin. Vibrations soaked up into her feet from the polished wooden floor, heating them and urging them to move.

And, Dillon.

Dillon moved to the beat, swaying against her like a rock god suddenly taken over by a super hot ballad. The music, the beat, Dillon's seductive movements, they were all impossible to resist.

Jade didn't want to resist.

For as long as she could remember, she'd had music. It was her only luxury. Listening to it, her only release. Here, now, cocooned by the crowd who worshipped the beat by giving their bodies over to it, Jade couldn't be the only one left standing straight, stiff and unmoved, not when the beat did speak to her so strongly. It vibrated through skin, muscle and bone until it reached the very heart of her.

It was nothing and everything to set her body free. She moved her feet, her hips, and her arms. She knew her years of physical training had given her grace, flexibility and perfect balance, and somehow it had all been for this, this moment, so she could dance with Dillon. All of her efforts had only been so she could join him in a sensuous glide around the floor that had many of the other dancers stopping to drop back and watch with shocked, appreciative eyes.

Dillon didn't stop.

He appreciated with much more than his eyes. He used his body to echo her movements, to compliment them. His hands ran along her skin, never holding, never slowing her down, but always there, a cool, delicious slide.

It was insanity.

It was dangerous.

It was wrong.

For once, Jade allowed herself not to care that what she wanted wasn't what Haven would have her to do. The dance was all that mattered. Loosing herself in it and to it and sharing that abandon with her sultry, sexy partner was her entire world for long, long moments. Never mind that he was ultimately her prey. Never mind that his monstrosity only magnified his grace, sensuality and the perfect, pale glow of his blue eyes. It didn't matter that he was a vampire, not at all. Yet, his being a vampire made the moment of abandon that much more potent and empowering. She danced with his danger instead of fighting it. Unlike her frequent killing dances, this dance was all about embracing heat and energy, passion and life.

Then, the music stopped, and she found herself with her arms high above her head and Dillon kneeling at her feet. His arms were around her hips, and she had leaned into him, instinctively wanting his rock hard support. He'd pressed his face to the swell of her breasts as they rose and fell in an exhilarated pant. He looked up at her as she struggled to catch her breath and regain her equilibrium. He still seemed cool, pale and perfect even as drops of perspiration threatened to trickle into her eyes. Suddenly, without warning, he pressed his lips to her skin, flicking his tongue out to taste the salty moisture there. While their gazes locked and held, while every other part of them was frozen, his tongue slid teasingly over the swell of her left breast.

The chill didn't cause her to shiver. She shivered because of the arc of need that shot straight to the most intimate heart of her.

Desire.

Pure, fierce, hot wanting claimed her entire body with an almost painful force until she trembled in reaction.

Surprisingly, Dillon's wicked eyes went soft. She couldn't hide how overwhelmed

she was by the intense new feelings rocketing through her. His eyes went soft, and then he rose up straight and tall and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her in a steadying embrace.

She didn't think the embrace was meant to be seductive. He offered her support. He gave her the strength of his steely touch as a brace and an anchor while she recovered.

Gradually, she cooled as he seemed to soak up her warmth. Her breathing eased, and her heartbeat slowed.

A new song had begun, but Jade couldn't dance. She hardly knew if she could move. As if he sensed her dilemma, Dillon loosened his hold to take her hand and lead her off the dance floor.

They passed a waitress, and Dillon snagged a glass off her tray so quickly and smoothly that she didn't even notice it was gone as she moved through the crowd. He offered Jade the drink, and she took it, gratefully swallowing down gulps of the same frothy sweetness she'd been forcing herself to sip earlier.

"I cannot dance and hunt at the same time," she noted ruefully to the foam left in the bottom of her glass.

"Darlin', you don't have to hunt. With those moves, all you have to do is wait."

Jade looked up and followed his gaze, here and there. There were several vampires stalking them, her. No doubt, they were hoping that Dillon was going to share.

"I don't think they're going to ask me to dance," she concluded, setting her glass down with an empty clink. Was it possible to pine for another dance when she'd already decided she would never, ever risk dancing with Dillon or anyone else again?

"You'll give 'em a dance, Mei gui. Just not the kind they're lookin' for."

Dillon didn't smile. His face was more serious than she'd ever seen it. Did he perceive that she would rather dance than kill? She'd only allowed herself to discover that truth moments ago.

"They will follow us," Jade said, getting to her feet.

Though if not, she would lie in wait for them, outside, for as long as it took, forever and a day. It was her purpose, her only purpose. Music might call to her, but death was her calling.

"After you." Dillon rose and motioned for Jade to precede him toward the door.

The rush of fresh night air was brisk against her moist skin. Gooseflesh rose, and Jade shivered, but she ignored the cold.

"Come here," Dillon ordered, suddenly pulling her into a dark, refuse-strewn alley and pressing her against the wall.

Jade caught her breath against the hard press of his body against hers and the unexpected intimacy of his face nuzzled into the crook of her neck. The change in him was sudden and terrifying. In the club, he'd been sexy and charming, even considerate. Here, in the dark, he was all demanding vampire. She couldn't push him away. She couldn't go for her stakes.

He held her, helpless, against the wall with the tight grip of his hands on her wrists. He lifted her arms high with that grip in a parody of her earlier stance on the dance floor. All too easily, he could have sunk his fangs right where his tongue had tasted her skin earlier.

Even though she began to pant in dread and struggle to break free, a part of her noted the fresh pine scent of his skin and the way his lean-muscled chest slid against her

breasts. Her blood must call to him. She could feel the throbbing of her heart, pumping it through the veins just beneath her skin, beneath his lips. So easy. Effortless. Would she moan? In pleasure, pain or both?

"This is supposed to be for their benefit, not ours. But, if you go any hotter, I'm going to carry you off and forget all about what we're supposed to be doing here," Dillon whispered against the swell of her breast. His words were a warning as well as a seductive offer, a hot promise, even hotter because she knew he meant it.

The problem with secretly desiring a vampire was that there was nothing secret about it. He could feel her heat, hear her heartbeat.

"I thought you were going to kill me," Jade confessed, and she had thought it, but her fear had been mixed with other emotions.

"Never," Dillon proclaimed, and he kissed her chastely on her vulnerable neck before whirling to take out one of the incoming vamps with a powerful kick that broke its neck with an audible, wet pop.

Jade's stakes were in her hands before the first vampire fell. She took the second by stabbing it through the heart from the front and the back until, as it dissolved into ash in front of her, the deadly tips of her stakes were touching. There was no time to marvel at her precision because even as the ash became airborne on the night breeze, the last vampire was on her.

Literally.

It took her to the ground with its weight, knocking her to her knees with the force of its tackle.

Jade was able to throw her arms wide to save her own chest from the wicked stakes she gripped in her fists, but that move only served to allow her body to slam the rest of the way to the ground. She turned her face, saving her chin even as she sacrificed a cheek. The dirty pavement scoured her skin as loose gravel bit into her face.

Then, before she could struggle, before the vampire could feed, his weight was suddenly gone. There was no time to be dazed and confused. Jade was up and pivoting on the balls of her feet as soon as she was freed.

However, she'd resumed a fighting stance for no reason at all.

Her dance partner, the man who had promised never to kill her, had made no such promise to the fiend he now held in his arms. There was nothing seductive or gentle about the embrace. Jade had seen him be both with Meg Browning. She had felt him be both with her. Now she saw him, unrestrained.

There was blood, so much blood.

It was blacker than black against the pale perfection of his face, chest and hands, those hands that had held her and slid along her skin with a cool caress.

The world stopped. It seemed to fall back, gray and meaningless, out of focus, until all she could see was Dillon with his fangs buried deep in the vampire's neck.

Feeding.

The moment stretched on until she was suddenly startled as the vampire ached in Dillon's hands as if it had been staked. One second, it was there, a drained shell of the man it used to be and the monster it had become. The next second, it was nothing but particles, thousands upon thousands of particles, exploding outward to disintegrate on the breeze.

Only then did Dillon look at her and only then did she move. She blinked. She

slipped her stakes into their leather sheathes. She rolled her shoulders. She looked away.

But, Dillon wouldn't be ignored.

He came to her side as quickly as ever and placed his hands on her shoulders.

They were wet with blood.

"Don't fool yourself, Mei gui. Don't be fooled by me. I'm a vampire. I have to drink blood to survive. Sometimes it's offered. Sometimes it's ... not. But it's always there, a need I can't deny."

"I know," Jade replied. She knew what he was. She knew better than most. The reason she couldn't meet his eyes had nothing to do with his vampirism. She looked at his chin as he held her instead of meeting his bright blue gaze because she did see him, finally, with startling clarity: his monstrosity, his savagery, and his hunger.

Yet, she still longed for another dance.

She was going to end his existence. She was going to pierce his evil heart and send him straight to hell. She didn't meet his eyes because she was afraid that he would see the banked embers of desire still lingering there. She was going to kill him, but even faced with the graphic evidence of why she must, she still desired him.

She pulled back from his stained hands, knowing he'd transferred some of those stains to her skin.

"I've always known what you are, Dillon," she said.

What she hadn't known was that she would come to dread having to kill him.

He let her go.

He let her turn.

He let her walk away.

And, never once did she meet his penetrating blue gaze.

Chapter Eleven

Meditation was supposed to help bring about enlightenment. Its purpose was to join one with the natural world and help discover one's true purpose. Of course, Kung Fu was supposed to be about self-defense.

Jade cleaned her stakes rather than look at her heart too closely. She tended and maintained her weapons as if they were an extension of her own body. The beautiful pale Gingko wood was already becoming darker. The blood of each vampire she killed would permanently stain the stakes until they were as black as a lacquered screen.

She had seen the weapons of the Old Ones. Those warriors who had come before her had left their weapons, and now Haven proudly displayed those weapons in a special temple to honor the warriors who had used them. A part of them, left behind.

Her beloved Master had placed her own stakes in her hands before her seventh birthday. She had no memory of her parents. Her Master was everything and everyone to her: her spiritual guide, her trainer and all she knew of close personal relationships. He had pressed the stakes into her hands hard that day until the natural bumps and curves of their handles had left marks on her palms. This he had done to show her that her weapons must become a part of her.

Jade cleaned and polished her stakes far longer than necessary that night. When a hint of rosy dawn appeared on the horizon, she set them aside to crawl under the sheets of her hotel room bed.

Stained.

Her stakes were stained, and they would only get darker and darker as time went by.

* * * *

Cizin had been to America many times over the course of his long existence. Yet he was always surprised by how strong the pull from his homeland was when he stepped foot on American soil. South, he felt the need to travel south.

As he walked through the milling throng of departing and arriving passengers in the bustling airport, he wondered if any of them felt such a pull toward the place of their birth. Or, were darker forces at play in him?

He went through the motions of modern life. He retrieved his checked suitcase from the conveyor belt. He followed the signs to the rental car kiosk. He even smiled at the bored young woman who handed him the keys because he couldn't help being amused at how quickly she went from bored to nervous when her hand brushed his. All this he did with ease as he had for centuries. He constantly adapted, decade after decade, as the world had changed around him.

Still, always, a hidden part of him dwelled in the jungle. He hoped it was that seed within himself that was pulled toward what it recognized as home. He hoped the pull was only a natural yearning for his birthplace.

Cizin climbed into the stuffy, cramped shuttle that would take him to his rental car. He stood, holding on to the aluminum bar that ran the length of the small bus so that the young mother and child who had sat in front of him on the plane could take the only two

remaining seats. The woman acknowledged his politeness with a protective hand on top of her rounded belly. On the plane, he hadn't realized she was pregnant because the seats had blocked her stomach from view. He looked from her hand to her averted eyes and back again before looking away.

The little boy who had stared at him on the plane was again staring at him with wide-open eyes. Cizin knew nothing of angels, but children often knew more and saw more than their elders. Perhaps that was because they still believed in magic, in angels or fairies, or even in Santa Claus. Adults had an instinctive reaction to him wherever he went, but the children watched him as if he would suddenly sprout horns and carry them away.

Cizin ignored the boy and the desire to get on another plane that would take him home.

The shuttle stopped near a row of cars, and he exited without looking toward the young woman and her son. He took his suitcase and wheeled it to the trunk of a white sedan parked in the numbered space that corresponded to the number indicated on his receipt.

He would not go south. It didn't matter if it was the jungle or a darker force that beckoned for him. He had a purpose. He knew it, and others sensed it. Cizin carried death with him, and he would until the day that the darkness he'd lived with for a thousand years finally consumed him.

* * * *

Dillon was in her hotel room when she woke from her lucid dreams. He sat on an uncomfortable looking straight-backed chair looking more comfortable than he had any right to be. His body was relaxed into a slouch and one long, blue jean-covered leg was draped over an arm of the chair.

She had heard the rattle of his matchbox even before she opened her eyes. Now, she saw him tapping one end of it absent-mindedly on his knee before twirling it to tap the other end. The movement was repetitive but not impatient. It was lazy, slow and meditative in its rhythm.

"Thought you might sleep the night away," he greeted her, teasing as always, but his eyes didn't match his tone.

Only the steady burn of a neon sign outside the window lighted his face. His eyes were dark and serious in the shadows.

She blinked and sat up, resisting the urge to rub her eyes like a sleepy child. How long had he watched her while she slept? She couldn't stop her hand from reaching for her stakes. Though she kept her gaze locked on his, she moved her fingers to search for and find the holster right where she'd left it, near her pillow.

He arched his left brow higher as she moved as if to innocently say, "Who me?" However, his fingers stopped toying with the matchbox, and his relaxed body seemed to stiffen.

"Why not?" Jade couldn't help but ask.

Her question was a soft whisper, but the room was so quiet that her voice seemed louder and more demanding than she had intended.

He stood in response and moved closer to the bed. She didn't pull her stakes free from their sheathes only because there wasn't time. He was suddenly kneeling on one

knee beside the bed. His face tilted inches from hers.

"Why not bite you or why not kiss you?"

His voice was intimate and low. It set off an ache in her that seemed to start as a vibration near her heart and then radiate outward until it filled her chest, then her stomach, then lower still. There was that deep warm hum, but there was also a fearful flutter as her heartbeat kicked up a notch or two.

The real trouble was she couldn't match the response to the question. She didn't know if she desired his kiss and feared his bite or vice versa. Her confusion made her hand pause just after it instinctively tightened on a stake.

"Why not both?"

The question came from some place deeper within herself than even the most dedicated meditation had ever reached. It revealed some hunger, some desire, some need that had never seen the light of day ... or the dark of night.

Her words shocked him. He went more still than any living creature could have managed. He was suddenly turned to stone, an unblinking, unbreathing, achingly beautiful statue, kneeling by her bed.

She kept her left hand on her stake, but she lifted her right hand and brushed her fingers against one of his pale, perfect cheeks. She expected it to be icy, but she didn't expect him to warm immediately beneath her touch. She didn't expect his frozen face to become animate in an instant as if the brush of her fingers gifted him, a cold hard statue, with life.

But, he did warm, and his face did soften. He closed his eyes as if he found the slight touch of her hand on his cheek an exquisite sensation to be savored.

"There is a part of me that knows your blood would be sweet," Dillon whispered with his eyes still closed, "So very sweet."

Her heart pumped the blood that he spoke of faster and faster through her veins, but she didn't lift her stake. Instead, she cupped his jaw with her trembling fingers. His eyes opened, and the startling, vivid blue against the darker lashes and his white, white skin dazzled her, as it always did even if she'd only had the respite of a blink.

"There's another part of me that holds out for a sweeter taste," he teased.

His gaze went to her lips to her eyes and back again. The intensity of his attention on her mouth made it begin to tingle and burn.

"I'm only waiting for you to decide which you desire, Mei gui. My bite or my kiss? When you're sure of the answer, let me know. I'll either oblige or disappoint, and at that moment you'll understand why I do nothing now."

Neither of them moved for long moments as Jade found herself even holding her breath lest time should continue onward and the meaning of his words should soak in. It did no good of course. She couldn't take back the offer. She couldn't undo his rejection, and his meaning was perfectly clear; he didn't intend to have with her what he had with women like Meg Browning.

Jade felt the burn on her lips transfer itself to her cheeks. She had all but offered to be his breakfast, and he had refused. She pulled her hand back from his face as if she'd been caught reaching for an extra dumpling.

Again, he moved as she blinked so that he was across the room before her blush had time to be cooled by the breeze his movement generated. What did he want from her if not that? If not her blood, then what did he desire?

A steady rain fell, and they didn't speak again; the pattering raindrops filled the hotel room with their soft thunder. She rose, dressed and checked her e-mail. He stood at the window and looked out at the sodden parking lot. Neither of them commented on the wet weather.

They left the hotel and climbed into the chilled interior of the Mustang. Jade turned the key and pressed the gas. The engine responded with its predictable roar. Surprisingly, Dillon manipulated the controls of the heater. She shivered as a blast of cold hit her face and glanced at him in gratitude as he turned the dial down until it had time to heat up.

She had received instructions to go to Nashville. It was three hours drive to the east. With the vampires that waited there, she would know what to do even if she didn't have a clue what to do with the vampire by her side.

She had dreamed of kissing his cool lips. She had wanted to feel their press against hers less than half an hour ago. She had wanted to taste him and warm him, to forget death and killing for a time in his embrace, and ... she had wanted the swoon he had given Meg Browning.

For some reason, he wanted more.

It was bad enough to betray Haven with dark drugged desire and impossible even to consider caring for a monster. Yet, wasn't that what he had asked for as he knelt by her bed? Not her blood or her lips, he wanted her heart.

Jade drove on toward Nashville and the night's bloody work while the air blowing from the vents grew warmer and warmer. She tried not to notice the seductive scent of leather mixed with pine. She tried to forget the taste and feel of Dillon's lips on hers.

* * * *

She had made him an offer he never refused.

Often he encountered women who gave him what he needed in return for what they got: ecstasy, bliss, a few hours of floating pleasure with only a tender neck, or wrist, or thigh, the next day as a sharp reminder of their decadent evening escapade. Since he'd escaped the Queen's thrall, he had avoided the one woman's blood that sang to him with a siren's call, but he hadn't quit cold turkey, not when there were ready and willing substitutes.

It took a long time for his hands and feet to grow warmer even though the heater's air was finally hot. He didn't look at the young woman behind the wheel. She was embarrassed, and truth be told, so was he. He'd all but asked for her affection when he could have spent several hours wallowing in sex, blood and mutual pleasure.

Why?

Because Jade—Mei gui—was no substitute.

She would be sweet, fresh and young and sweet, but even dwelling on that didn't make him change his mind. He didn't want her blood, damn it; he wanted so much more.

Chapter Twelve

They arrived in Nashville early, only 11:00 p.m.

Jade carefully navigated the unfamiliar streets, following the map she'd memorized before deleting the e-mail from Haven. She found the condemned apartment complex with relative ease and pulled the Mustang to the curb a block away. From here, she could already see one of the major challenges they were about to face. Vagrants shuffled along the sidewalk and gathered in groups. Prostitutes hawked their wares on a street corner. Cars, some much nicer and more expensive than her own, cruised slowly up and down the street.

"You're wondering how we're going to separate the wheat from the chaff," Dillon surmised. He looked at her, and then he looked out the window. A man on the sidewalk ignored the newly arrived Mustang to pass openly a clear plastic bag filled with what looked like grungy white rocks to another man. "One day you'll realize that we're all chaff."

Dillon opened the door and got out of the car. Jade followed. They came together on the sidewalk, and suddenly the people on the street no longer ignored them. People disappeared into shadowed doorways, through overgrown bushes, into cars that had stopped to pick them up.

"Who turned on the lights?" Dillon murmured.

They walked toward the deserted building Haven had flagged as a hive. Only, it wasn't deserted. Jade was sure there would be people inside. She dreaded her stake piercing a living heart.

Dillon paused to grind a discarded syringe beneath the heel of his boot. The pop and crunch sounded loud, as the street had grown quiet around them.

"I've been an addict for over two hundred years. Just like these poor souls. Heroin. Crack. Whiskey. Blood. It's all the same." He reached out a hand to touch her arm so that she would stop, too. It wasn't necessary. His sudden seriousness had captured her full attention. Gone was the rock-star, and in his place stood a man who had seen too much. "I found myself in a harsh life I couldn't control, and I turned to the blood to forget."

Suddenly, she realized he wasn't only talking about the people who had disappeared from the street or his own past. *A harsh life I couldn't control*, didn't that describe her own life as well?

"I don't want to be your drug, Mei gui. I don't want to be for you what the blood has been for me."

She couldn't speak. She was afraid the movement of her lips would jar loose the moisture pooling heavy in her eyes. She didn't know if she cried for his pain or hers. Maybe she had offered her blood to him to forget for a time that she would soon be forced to kill him.

Dillon looked away. He took his hand from her arm, and she watched as he reclaimed his swagger. He rolled his neck and loosened his shoulders. He stepped away from her, and when he lifted his chin to meet her gaze once more, the twinkle was back in his eyes.

Again, she appreciated what the glow of a streetlight did to his skin, gifting it with a

near translucent shimmer and kissing his eyes with a glitter and gleam. He was a drug to her senses. She couldn't deny that she had wanted to forget her dark work by surrendering all in his arms.

Dillon had lived a very long time. She could see the knowledge of her motivations in his eyes. She could see him knowing her and noting her desire. His lips tilted into the mocking half-smile that was becoming so familiar. Only now, she knew he mocked himself as well as her; he mocked their common weakness and the shadowed world that made them live with those weaknesses night after night after night.

"Ladies first," Dillon offered, sweeping his hand wide to give her the run of the sidewalk.

Jade looked into his eyes. For several long seconds, she ignored the way that the wicked flash of blue made her pulse quicken, and she tried to see beyond the bad boy sheen to the real man beneath. He held the pose and resumed his cool as she searched. His only reaction was to arch one brow and quirk his smile higher.

"Only vampires," Jade finally declared, giving up and moving ahead of him in the direction of the building that was the more immediate hell they had to face.

He responded to her warning with a sharp chuckle.

"There's only one bite-worthy neck in sight, Darlin' and it's safe from me ... for tonight."

Jade didn't argue or reach up to touch her jugular that now tingled with a mix of the anticipation and fear of future nights when Dillon's intentions might change.

"None of these poor bastards makes me feel peckish," he continued as they walked by a man sound asleep or passed out under a bench. "But, I'm thinkin' there are gonna be some strong, well-fed vamps in the neighborhood."

Jade agreed. Many potential victims wandered near the building that was supposed to house the hive. The vampires here would be at their best. She drew her stakes and readied them in her fists.

"Call me loco, but damned if you're not hot when you do that."

"You want me to choose between your kiss and your fangs, and yet my stakes get you hot," Jade said, pointing out the obvious similarity between her pointy weapons and his pointy teeth.

Dillon laughed again. This time the sound was a low, honest burr straight from his gut.

"I never said I was offering to be the high school to your musical, Darlin'. I am a vampire."

Jade glanced back at him. He was certainly that. No one would ever mistake him for a shiny happy teen idol. Even without the hint of fang indenting his full lower lip, he was all Lost Boys and no Disney Channel, for sure.

"I'm not planning to start singing," Jade said. Many afternoons of cable television in an endless string of motel rooms enabled her to get his reference.

"You're not the singer. You're the song," Dillon replied, again more serious than she was used to.

Before she could argue, she had to grapple with a vampire who had jumped from behind the broken security gate of a nearby deserted storefront. He was strong and fast, but he seemed unsure of how to handle a meal that knew martial arts. Jade had a stake in position and penetrating before Dillon was there to help her. One second, his hands

grasped the attacking vampire's shoulders, and the next, he held nothing but disintegrating ash.

"They're used to easy pickin's," he noted.

He brought his hands together to dust off the dead vampire's remains with several sliding claps.

"It won't be easy for any of us once we go inside," Jade said grimly.

She was already walking up the stairs that led into the apartment building's foyer. Dillon followed. She was surprised by how right it felt to have him, strong and solid, at her back.

The double glass doors were smeared with mud and heaven knew what else until they were opaque. She pushed one open and stepped into a refuse-strewn entryway. Beer bottles, old stained newspapers and piles of rags vied for floor space. She tried not to look too closely at the detritus. The sour smell of urine, cheap wine and mold assailed her nostrils. Something scurried away from them and down a hallway that branched off to the left. Rat? Feral cat? Worse? What had once been a doorman's podium was smashed and tilted on its side. Several overstuffed chairs were ripped and slashed until their stuffing, gone gray with filth, poured forth from the torn upholstery like a fluffy disembowelment.

Jade walked forward knowing that a night's worth of searching room-by-room lay ahead of them.

"We should torch the place," Dillon suggested.

"There might be people," Jade replied.

"Collateral damage?"

She didn't acknowledge his jest. Instead, she stepped into the yawning black hole of the hallway.

"Riding to the rescue was never my style," he sighed, but she felt him behind her in spite of his words.

"I'm beginning to realize your style doesn't match your substance," Jade whispered.

Then, she closed her lips and vowed not to open them again. A horrible odor had wafted against her face like a sick, wet wall. Unwashed bodies, urine, feces, decomposition and underlying it all, the thick reek of spilt, coagulating blood.

"You can rest easy now, love. I've lost my appetite for the next hundred years," Dillon choked out behind her.

She imagined the stench was much worse for him. His senses were more sensitive than hers were, and she fought back nausea with every breath.

Moving forward wasn't easy when every cell in her body rebelled against proceeding into the foul darkness. She had to force one foot in front of the other, and even then, she flinched as each footfall made contact with unidentifiable refuse beneath their feet. It crunched. It squished. At one point, it yowled, and a dark shadow detached itself from the floor to skitter away. So, it had been a feral cat, after all.

Jade had to stop and calm herself. The feline scream had found its way beneath her skin, raising goose bumps and trembles in its wake.

Dillon placed a cool hand on the small of her back.

"There are four doors on the right and five on the left. After the fifth door, the corridor branches off to the right." He spoke, and his voice was calm and matter of fact as if he'd been in places such as this before.

"Thank you," Jade responded. She was grateful to have his vampyric vision working

for her and not against her.

How many eyes were ahead of them, able to see their approach in the gloom while she was virtually blind?

"Draw your stakes, Darlin'. They're coming," Dillon warned, and suddenly his hand was gone.

What followed was a blood-drenched battle unlike anything that could have risen from the depths of the devil's own imagination. Jade had seen her share of blood, ash and death, but she had never heard it, felt it, like this. With her vision taken out of the equation, her other senses peaked to compensate. The ash was hot on her skin, and it stung her face, burning her nose because she couldn't avoid inhaling it. Blood was warm, wet and sticky on her hands because her stakes couldn't be aimed directly at the attacking vamps' hearts in the pitch-black hallway. There was more blood than usual. The smell of it joined the hot dust in her nose, choking her with its metallic sweetness.

This battle wasn't graceful. There was no rhythm, no dance. It was a frantic wrestling match with stinking shadows who snapped, cried and snarled in a frenzy of protest as their filthy redoubt was breached.

Jade had no idea how many she killed or how many fled. She did feel a flash of relief when she realized no human would willingly swim into the morass of straining flesh to join the fray. No human, except for a Haven's Warrior who had no other choice.

It lasted for an eternity. The muscles in her flailing arms throbbed, and her teeth ached from the fierce set of her jaw. They made it past the nine doorways, down the branching corridor and back around to the entryway. Then, they continued up dank stairwells to the upper floors. Gradually, the initial stinking pandemonium gave way to fleeing bunches and groups until finally they found only stragglers to dispatch.

It was over, but would it ever end?

Jade stumbled down the back stairway and out the rear exit. The alley she found was like heaven compared to what she'd left behind. Even an overflowing dumpster didn't stop her from taking in huge gulps of relatively fresh air to try to cleanse her lungs.

Dillon came up behind her. She sensed his presence though he didn't touch her or speak. He simply stood near her while her heartbeat slowed and her breathing eased.

Then, clouds rolled back from the moon, and she saw herself, her hands, her arms, her shoes, her legs—her entire body. She hadn't left the ash and blood behind. It was on her skin. It was in her hair and gunked into the corners of her eyes. She had breathed it into her lungs. Suddenly, she couldn't stop shaking. She let the horrified reaction claim her until her teeth clicked together and her knees threatened to give way.

"It's over," Dillon murmured into her ear. No longer silent, he had moved to press his body against her back. He wrapped his arms around her. She continued to tremble as if an arctic blast were buffeting her. While she shook, he held her. "It's over," he repeated, again and again.

It was a lie, of course, but who better to croon sweet, sweet lies than a seductive vampire like Dillon? She didn't believe him, but she didn't argue. Craving his solace, she didn't push him away in spite of what she would have to do soon, very soon, before she reached the point that she couldn't raise her stakes against him.

Chapter Thirteen

Nashville was a city of music.

The irony wasn't lost on her as Jade soaped away the last physical traces of the worst battle she'd ever fought. For her, it was a city of death, but weren't they all?

She was too numb to cry. What would tears accomplish? Thankfully, Dillon had disappeared. She didn't want to be near him, not now, when every nerve ending she possessed seemed raw and vulnerable.

She would have died tonight. Of that, she was certain. Without Dillon's superhuman strength and speed and preternatural vision, the vampire-infested apartment building would have been her tomb. Never another song and no time for another dance, all opportunity to be someone other than a heartless warrior would have been lost forever.

She had faced mortality tonight, and she hadn't liked what she'd seen of the ever after. Who would grieve for her when she was gone? Her master? He had dozens of initiates to claim his time and attention. He would always have another and another after that. Warriors honored the fallen, but they had no time for tears. When she died, her stakes would be placed beside the weapons of all those that had died before her. Would they be stained with Dillon's blood?

Jade dried her skin and slipped into the pale pink, satin pajamas she'd bought while shopping for a new computer. Rather than regretting her frivolous purchase, tonight she sighed as the material slid softly against her skin. She had enjoyed very little softness in her life. It soothed her now. The fabric was a simple pleasure, a safe indulgence.

Unlike Dillon.

All alone, away from the eyes of Haven, Jade pulled a forbidden treat from the pocket of her backpack and sat down on the bed to savor it. The chocolate bar was harmless. The lack of control it represented, less so. The paper crinkled in her fingers and the lush scent of the candy rose up to chase away the memory of less pleasant smells from earlier in the night. Her mouth watered as she broke off the first square and brought it to her lips. Jade bit into the chocolate, and its rich, intoxicating flavor melted across her tongue.

Dillon wasn't harmless. He wasn't throbbing house music or a powerful muscle car. He wasn't daytime television or sweet, sweet chocolate. If she sampled Dillon, there would be repercussions, a piper to pay. He was pure temptation, and if she succumbed, her life would be forever changed.

Indulgence.

Jade chewed and swallowed the first chocolate square and then another. The chocolate was a forbidden treat. Dillon was sin-walking. The difference in degree was staggering.

She wanted to be more than stained stakes left behind to hear the prayers of those poor souls who came after. Dillon saw her as more; she was sure of it. In her silky, satin pajamas, Jade continued to eat her chocolate even when salty tears began to mix with its sweetness.

She wanted someone to cry for her when she was gone just as she still cried for the parents and the life she'd lost. She was honor bound to kill the one living creature she'd

ever known who saw her as something other than a killer.

* * * *

Dillon went back alone to finish what they had started. Dawn was hours away, time enough to torch the worst hellhole he'd ever had the misfortune to encounter. He'd thought the moldering Raveneaux mansion was bad. The deserted apartment building made his former home seem like Shangri-freakin'-la.

Fury griped him tonight; it burned hot, needing to be set free. Jade shouldn't have been ordered into that filth. She was fierce and strong. She'd had to be to survive the hand life had dealt her. Still, when the battle had been over and she'd stumbled outside, he's seen a stain on her eyes much like the one he saw behind his own eyelids every time he blinked.

He had gone with her to find a hotel. He had checked her in, knowing the job wouldn't be finished without a cleansing fire. Even shell-shocked and suffering, Jade would have fought him before she'd let him start the blaze. She would have championed the lost souls, the prostitutes and transients, that might get hurt. Dillon knew some souls were too far gone to save.

This time, the neighborhood was still, more quiet than even a respectable suburb where someone's dog might bark or television might play. The silence was unnatural. The atmosphere seemed bruised by all it had witnessed earlier in the night.

He slowed to a walk. No telling how many vampires had fled the scene only to creep back just before him. He slowed further and tilted his nose into the breeze, calling all his senses to alert.

The incense was cloyingly sweet and out of place.

Dillon closed his eyes and breathed in the heavy scent of spice. With his eyes still closed, he allowed the fragrance to direct his movements. He turned his body. He pivoted on his heels. Then, he opened his eyes as another scent joined the first. Indefinable, the second elusive scent followed the first warmer fragrance like a shadow flowing over the sun. The second scent, though subtle, defined its source more than the first, and it chilled even his cold bones to the marrow. *Death.*

"Prepare yourself. I send you back to Xbalba."

A dark shadow detached itself from the murky recesses of the nearest alley he faced. It came toward Dillon slowly so that he knew it a revelation at a time. First, he saw its large muscular build, then the glint of its black eyes, and finally the weapons it—he held in his hands, a gleaming whip and a staff tipped with lethal, pointed wood. It was a man but not a human; the subtle scent of death reached out to Dillon as if it was a questing alien aura looking for a new body to engulf.

"Can't go back to a place I've never been, Compadre," he told the man even as his instincts tingled, preparing for a fight.

"An evil hunger lives inside of you. It controls. Corrupts. It must be returned to where it belongs."

"And, how do you reckon on doin' that?" Dillon asked slipping even further into the drawl he'd had when he'd been alive. He was sure he wasn't going to like the answer, and he generally faced danger with a twang and a smile to cover the ferocity that would follow.

"You must die," the man proclaimed.

"Now, there I've been. No shindig, let me tell ya'." Dillon loosened his joints and prepared to meet the attack. "You won't take offense if I say 'no' to any plan that starts with me dyin'."

The man was on him faster than he expected. Even knowing his opponent wasn't human hadn't prepared him to meet a vampire's strength and speed in a warm-blooded package. Suddenly, he was tackled by a supernatural linebacker with steel for a skeleton and muscles made of granite.

Dillon didn't go down. He steeled his own spine and tightened his muscles at the moment of impact so that his attacker's momentum could only propel his stiffened body back three feet. The slide left black streaks on the sidewalk as it peeled some of the sole from his boots. They slid long enough for Dillon to look into the coal black depths of the man's eyes and see ash in his near future.

He didn't wait to see more. He went for what should have been weak points: the hollow "soft" spot just beneath the sternum, the "tender" points above each kidney, the neck, and the knees. His fists flew. His kicks were vicious.

The man was not invulnerable. His skin gave and bruised beneath Dillon's knuckles. Blood welled up from the corner of his mouth. Yet, a lesser man would have hit the pavement by the second blow and a vampire's neck would have cracked with the first well-placed kick.

Disbelief flared beneath Dillon's skin as the man took his attack, blow for blow, without going down. Then, the man flashed his whip, and Dillon's skin was sliced open, again and again, so that bright splashes of disbelief spilled free to trickle down over muscles that strained to resist.

His attacker didn't plunge forward to bury his pointed staff in Dillon's heart. They continued to circle like boxers in a ring. Dillon continued to land blows that would have felled most men. This man didn't fall. Instead, he lashed out with his whip, over and over again, until it became nothing but a stinging blur painting fire across Dillon's skin.

The whip hissed through the still night air repeatedly, but only when Dillon stumbled did he realize that his skin was being flayed from his bones faster than even a vampire could regenerate. His vision blurred into a white haze, and his knees went weak. The realization had come too late.

The whip continued its hissing even as Dillon fell. He was burning. The horrible agonizing fire of his injuries claimed him so fiercely that he thought he might already be disintegrating into ash.

Still, the sting of the whip penetrated his pain. Constant now, like a pit full of vipers consuming his flesh. He couldn't move, couldn't fight. He could only wait for the blessed, mindless release of the dust that was sure to come soon.

He thought of her then, his Rose. Her face and only her face swam before his eyes. Her smile. Her grace. Her dance. Her dark flashing eyes. Mei gui. Jade. For a long time, he'd thought dust was what he desired. Ash. Release. Now that the moment was upon him, he knew he desired something, someone, else entirely.

* * * *

Holly Spinnaker carefully arranged dew-damped wildflowers in a gracefully curved vase. Their brilliant colors were muted in the candlelight, but their fragrance was green and fresh. It reminded her of sunshine. She breathed the scent in deeply regretting that

her mother still cringed away from any light harsher than a candle. She doubted the glare of an electric lamp would have done the flowers justice either, but she would have liked to try.

Her mother's transition from woman to vampire had been even more traumatic than her own had been. Kidnapped by her Maker, their Maker, and given over to his insane queen, Dana Spinnaker had spent a week in hell before her daughter had saved her.

Dillon, their Maker.

He was the reason Holly stood in a dark kitchen at midnight longing for the sun and her lover, Jarvis Winters, a cop-turned-vampire hunter with one particular rogue on his mind, could barely stop hunting long enough to live.

Holly sighed, fingering the slightly curled petals of a daisy. She had picked these flowers herself, gathering them in the moonlight even as she reached out into distant shadows with her heightened awareness. She watched. She wondered. But, she no longer expected her Maker to appear every second of every long night.

Dillon had teased Jarvis for months with bunches of wildflowers left for Holly to find. He was wicked through and through, even freed from the evil queen's influence. Holly knew that, but she wasn't afraid of him anymore.

She'd tried to explain to Jarvis that she and her mother were safe. The flowers were meant to torment a former rival for her affections, but they were also an offering, an apology, a thank you.

Only when they began to show up less frequently did she doubt her assessment. Fewer and fewer bunches were left until finally weeks had gone by without so much as a wilted dandelion on the back porch. Had he been trying to woo her, after all? Had he finally accepted that she loved Jarvis with her whole heart even though it physically adjusted to match the rhythmic beats of Dillon's whenever he was around?

Instead of calming Jarvis, the sudden cessation of flower offerings sent him into a more driven search. Night after night, he hunted for Dillon. Sometimes, he was gone for a week before he returned, grim, tired and more determined to find the rogue vampire than ever.

A song came from the living room, breathy, quiet and low, like a child who wasn't sure she had the lyrics right. Her mother was happy, safe and calm and happy. She kept a nightly vigil by the big picture window as if she watched and waited for something, but she also kept a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye.

It was almost story time. Each night, her mother enjoyed reminiscing about the husband and daughter she'd lost. Holly indulged her. The stories were often funny, and with Jarvis absent, she could use the laughter to keep the shadows at bay.

She stepped back from her handiwork, admiring the effort. Perhaps she should have left the bundle on the porch as Dillon often did. If Jarvis came home tonight and saw them there, he might calm down and hunt closer to home.

No, they had been through too much to start playing such games now.

Holly turned to walk into the living room, but her steps faltered.

A sharp pang pinched her chest, no, not her chest, her heart. For one long, painful moment, it stopped. Not a pause, not a readjustment of its rhythm, it just stopped. Nevertheless, she looked around frantically to see if Dillon had swaggered into the room.

She saw only dancing shadows caused by candlelight.

Her heart started again, slow and steady. Yet, the pinch was still there, digging and

reaching deep into her very cells.

Holly reached for the back of a chair to steady herself. She closed her eyes against the pinch, but she couldn't shut out the sounds echoing in her mind. In those moments when her heart had died, she could have sworn she heard her Maker call out in pain.

*

Jade finished her chocolate in bed while watching a black and white musical on the television across the room. She even hummed along a few times, happy to recognize songs she'd learned long ago and far away. Music had allowed her to escape the temple and float in imaginary worlds where song and dance replaced meditation and training.

Her tears had dried.

She couldn't cry and sing at the same time. The familiar music calmed her. She was so lulled that she didn't notice the goose bumps when they first rose on her skin. Without thinking, she reached for the blanket, but as soon as her attention turned from the lovely, old-fashioned dress whirling on the television screen, she knew her chill for what it was. The air around her was suddenly cooler as if kissed by an icy breeze though no air flowed around her.

Jade rose. A sickening sense of foreboding claimed her. It turned the cheery singing on the edge of her perceptions into an eerie background accompaniment to the beat of her heart.

How had he known? How had he found her when she hadn't told her Haven liaison her exact location?

Chocolate and movie forgotten, Jade padded for the door of her room. She had time to wish for a suit of armor to replace the frivolous satin pajamas. The deadbolt released with a click that set her teeth on edge. The door responded to her touch as doors do, opening on its hinges with a smooth, fluid motion that nevertheless seemed to take an eternity. Inch by inch, the outside night was revealed and with it, her unexpected guest.

The blood didn't mar the Angel of Death's dark perfection.

Jade faced the silent warrior with fists clenched and every muscle in her body tensed, but her outer strength belied the trembling that took over her insides. Violent waves of denial radiated outward with every beat of her heart.

Whose blood?

Not his. Not his...

The mantra whirred in her ears as the pressure of her pulse increased.

Death didn't speak. He didn't have to. Had he ever needed words to convey his dark purpose? It followed him in a chilling aura wherever he appeared.

Not his. Not his...

The mantra continued in time with each beat of her heart, but she knew it lied.

Dillon's blood was painted on the Angel of Death's skin with a heavy brush until very little smooth, brown pigment showed beneath its covering of scarlet.

Why had he come here? After. Why confront her now?

Jade's eyes flicked to the golden whip coiled and clipped on a belt at his lean waist. No longer golden, it was dark and wet.

Still wet.

Behind her, the musical's grand finale swelled in a positive crescendo; a soprano and a tenor complimented the orchestra with a duet about falling in love. The sound spilled out around her into the night, but it didn't touch her with its warmth. It was as if the

vibrating waves avoided the chilly tableau of two warriors in a face-off, one soaked in blood.

The sweetness of her chocolate treat had gone bitter in her mouth and the satin she wore was like ice on her skin.

"Dillon." The moan came from somewhere deep inside, a secret reservoir for passion and pain, desire and need, want and heat that had long been hidden even from herself.

Death didn't reach for her when she pushed past him and started to run. He didn't grab her or stop her.

If he had, she would have fought her way free like an animal caught in a net made of a cold, harsh duty she'd never fully claimed. She would have bitten and clawed with her heart ready to explode before she gave up on the compulsion to try turning back what Death had done, the duty she would never truly have been able to do herself.

The trail was easy to follow. Red stood dark on the asphalt, then the grass, then the leaves on the forest floor.

So much red. Too much.

But, no dust. Please, please, no dust.

* * * *

It had been so long.

He no longer remembered the way the jungle heat had matched the fiery devotion in his heart. He knew it had, but the knowledge was in his head, not throbbing beneath his skin. He'd been a Mayan priest, tapped into secrets as no one, before or since, had been.

Blood was the key.

He and the other priests had known it and used it, and they had learned so much.

We are not alone.

It was a fact all religions claimed in one way or another, but the Mayans—he—he had proven it.

No. He no longer remembered the way he'd felt. It had been so very, very long. Jungle heat no longer touched him, nor icy rain, nor soft, cold snow. He moved among men, but he hadn't been a mere man for a thousand years.

...Which was one of the reasons the candle wax had taken him by surprise. He was used to being numb. When he'd held the fierce feminine warrior beneath him, something about her had almost made him feel human once more.

He'd been all too human once, filled with greed and a limitless hunger to manipulate and control powers that only the gods should wield.

Blood.

So much blood.

The blood he remembered, probably because he bathed in it still.

Their slaves had built pyramids that tourists now visited with cameras and children. They had performed hundreds upon hundreds of gruesome sacrifices. He, himself, had held many still beating hearts in his hand. All to open a portal into Xbalba, their afterlife, their purgatory, the place they believed all spirits went to dwell after death. They should have built a barricade against it instead.

He didn't know why he had been spared. Perhaps as the doorway opened, his greed had turned to fear and rejection sooner than the others had.

...Because what poured forth from the other side had not been knowledge or the

secrets to eternal life. It had not been their departed loved ones, happy to be freed, not in any recognizable form, at least. It had been hunger, a stinking, black cloud of hunger.

There were some who would call the portal a window into hell and those that came through it Legion. Cizin wasn't a Christian. He had lived too long to believe in fairy tales. He'd looked into the roiling morass made up of entities like none found on this plane of existence, and he'd known them for what they were. Other, alien, they were invaders from another time and place, more than willing to cross the breach from their world into this one ... to feed.

He'd watched, horrified, as the cloud had enveloped his fellow priests. Rolling and churning, like a black hurricane, and then finding entry, it had poured into noses, ears and mouths as they'd dropped, fell and writhed in agony. The hurricane had disappeared into the priests who initially had welcomed it, and when they'd stopped writhing, they'd rose to their feet as hosts for the hunger.

He had run. Very few others had run fast enough.

Apocalypse. No other word encompassed the slaughter that took place in the following hours and days. Modern man wondered and hypothesized about what had become of the Maya civilization. He knew, and he carried the black stain of responsibility on his soul.

Now, he let the girl run into the forest. Cizin stood, wet with blood, feeling the beginnings of hope stir within him for the first time in a thousand years.

Chapter Fourteen

The night was silent around Jade as she ran. Only her footfalls made a sound. They beat out a desperate staccato rhythm on the packed dirt of the path that wound through the dark forest. Trees crowded close on either side of her, but she didn't flinch or pause when their scratchy, finger-like branches plucked at her shirt and trailed along her skin. It seemed as if the tree limbs reached for her, trying to hold her back, begging her to slow down.

She didn't heed the imagined entreaty; she didn't slow her pace.

Blood.

So much blood.

The Angel of Death had worn it like paint decorating his dark skin.

Dillon, done and dusted?

Jade's feet flew, barely touching the ground as she came around a shadowy curve to find herself spilling out into a small clearing. Twilight's dew sparkled on the wildflowers that swayed in the soft moonlight filtering down through the canopy of leaves created by the surrounding woods.

Here, in this peaceful, hidden meadow, she found him.

He lay crumpled among the flowers. His body, cast down like a beautiful forgotten doll. His legs were bent at the knees and curled to the side. One arm was thrown wide. The other was across his eyes as if he hid from the light of the moon that gently illuminated his face.

Not dust. Not yet.

Suddenly, her speed deserted her, and she stumbled the last few strides to his side on legs stiffened by fear and shock.

Still, so beautiful, but...

Jade dropped to her knees on the damp grass, and she knew more than dew soaked through her jeans.

Dillon's pale skin was no longer perfect. Death had shredded it with his golden whip, cutting through leather, denim and cotton to the hard flesh beneath and finding it not hard enough to repel his wicked chain.

Dillon's clothes had been slashed and torn until they were nothing but ribbons. His skin gleamed, white and vulnerable, here and there, but mostly it was black with blood and flayed open in dark gashes that would have been crimson in the light of day.

At first, for a long moment, she held her breath and held her hands back. She didn't touch him. She didn't wait and watch for signs of life. She simply stopped because one more breath or one finger brushing against his lifeless face would have brought forth the scream that was churning, trapped in her chest, wrapped around her heart.

Then, she couldn't help gasping his name and reaching for him, something she'd never had the courage to do before now.

He didn't stir, not at the sound of his name or at the touch of her fingers. She ran all five pads of her right hand down his face along the hairline to the lean angle of his jaw. His head was thrown back. When he didn't move, his vulnerability hit her, stealing her breath once more.

Surely, he'd lost every last drop of blood his body needed to survive. He was alabaster white in the few places that his skin was undamaged and untouched. Her fingers found those places: his right cheek, the curve of his jaw. She captured a lock of his silvery blond hair in her fingers. So much of him was too hurt to touch. There was hardly any part of him left whole.

A keening cry disturbed the hush in the meadow. It took her a moment to realize what shock and grief had done to the scream that had built in her chest until she couldn't prevent it from spilling out through her lips.

Suddenly, she knew she'd heard the sound from her own lips once before. She'd been a tiny child on her knees in puddles of her parents' blood. She had cried as the blood had cooled against her skin, and it was in those nightmarish moments that one life, that of a treasured and happy daughter, had ended, and another life, that of a disciple of Death, had begun.

She couldn't see Dillon's eyes—his bloody arm covered them—but she remembered them. She had carried the brilliant blue with her every second of every day and night since he'd first flashed their wicked gleam in her direction. A monster had brought color and brilliance back into her life after too many years of nothing but blood and darkness.

The day the monks had found her crying and lost while her parents' bodies grew cold beside her, she had been too young to do anything but place her hand in her master's palm and follow him wherever he led her. Even if that meant turning her back on who she had been to become what he would have her become. She hadn't died that day, but Death had claimed her. Since that time, she'd been groomed, trained and molded into an instrument of destruction.

Jade looked at her fingers on Dillon's skin. She saw how they naturally avoided the blood. The petals of a nearby flower had been disturbed by his fall. Mostly they were crushed beneath him, but one lay soft on his cheek.

Here, kneeling in puddles of a vampire's blood, Jade experienced enlightenment, her Chan. She remembered her mother's garden, how they had sung songs together as her mother taught her to tend the plants. She could almost hear gentle laughter on the breeze.

Mei gui, Dillon had called her Rose.

She had kept the love of song her mother had bequeathed to her, but she had lost her love of life, until now.

Jade lifted her hand from Dillon's cheek. With her other hand, she pulled a stake from its sheath and quickly slid its sharpened tip across her raised wrist. Blood welled up and began to drip. Only this time, this blood, meant life not death. Dillon had brought her back to life. Now, she offered that life to his pale, freezing lips.

She pressed her wrist against his mouth. When her warm blood didn't inspire him to move, despair tightened its hold on her.

"Please," she whispered, praying that the Universe hadn't given her Dillon only to take him from her too soon. "Please."

Were his lips warmer? Had they softened against her skin?

She put her stake back in its sheath and used her free hand to squeeze her forearm. More, he had to have more, but did her entire body hold enough to save him? She kept her eyes on his mouth, refusing to allow herself to look at his broken and bloodied body again. All that mattered was his lips. She willed them to move. Then, she begged.

"Open your eyes, Cowboy. Come back to me. You were right. It's your kisses I want.

I want to dance with you again. I want to feel your body grow warm because of my touch."

Suddenly, his lips trembled on her wrist, the slightest tickle of movement.

"Dillon?" Tears had coated her cheeks to spill down onto her mouth. She tasted their salt as she spoke, and she blinked away the moisture in her eyelashes that threatened to make Dillon's face a blur.

Thankfully, she didn't need clear vision to feel his lips open further, soften and fasten on her skin. She didn't need her eyes to feel heat begin to build where his mouth touched her wrist. He suckled now, taking the blood she offered, and in spite of his injuries and her fear, the feel of his tongue on her wrist made her nipples peak. Even at the point of death, he was sensuality personified.

He didn't pierce her flesh with his fangs. He gently, slowly took only what her shallow scratch offered without hurting her to take more. Even though he must be in an agony of thirst, even though he must need so much more, he remained gentle.

Jade reached for her stake again. She was willing to do whatever it took to bring him back. Before she could draw it, Dillon's arm moved from his eyes to stop her. He took her hand in his and held it as he continued to drink from her wrist. His eyes didn't open. He didn't make a sound, but she couldn't pull her hand free from his to draw her stake.

"I want to help you," Jade whispered, and his fingers tightened in response, but he still didn't open his eyes.

"You'll die if you don't bite me," she warned.

"Maybe I'll die if I do," Dillon moaned, falling back from her wrist.

His voice was hoarse.

"I've lived with death my whole life, and it isn't death you offer. Take my blood, Dillon. Let me do this."

Jade tried to reach for her stake again with the hand his mouth had released, but he stopped it with his other hand. Now he held both of her hands in his, and he pulled her forward over him as he took his arms back to the ground. Her heart began to race. He was no longer the vulnerable one. He was still hurt, but his hands were like steel vices around her fingers. She couldn't pull away.

Her face ended up very close to his. Her lips were inches away from his mouth. Then, he opened his eyes, and she forgot about blood, fangs and death because his eyes were alight with pale fire.

"I never wanted to become your drug, Mei gui. My bite can be addictive. You don't know what you're asking for," he warned.

Jade looked into his eyes and confessed her deepest darkest secret.

"Even if your fangs never pierce my skin, I'm already addicted to you."

His gaze burned into hers, but she didn't blush or look away. She let the need she felt for him shine. She wanted him to see.

Slowly, daring him to stand in the way of that passion, she leaned closer until her throat was pressed to his lips.

*

He had been taken past the point of no return to that empty, echoing, hollow place where a final death waited to claim him. He had felt its chill ice over every cell in his body until he was frozen and numb. Still, he heard her voice, Mei gui's voice, and somehow, her voice and the words she had spoken had brought him back. It hadn't been

her blood, although it was impossibly warm, pure and sweet on his lips. It had been her tears for him and her confession.

Now, she pressed her vulnerable throat to his lips, and the hunger rose up to try to take him in its hot, welcoming embrace. *Take. Drink. Be merry*, the monster called, gleefully, certain that he couldn't resist in his weakened state.

But, he did resist.

He pushed away the dark hunger even as he opened his mouth carefully to take the sweet, salty skin she offered to him in willing sacrifice. He took her in his teeth, and she softly gasped as he tasted her with his tongue. So hot, she was so very hot against his coolness.

He rejected the hunger even as he gently bit down to pierce deep, to release the flow his body needed to survive because, from Mei gui, he craved only sustenance. She wouldn't feed the monstrous hunger; she would sustain his soul.

She was all muscle in his arms, but soft and supple as well when he released her hands to wrap her close. She sank into him, and in places more injured than others were, her nearness caused the agony to flare. He ignored the pain. Her blood alone wouldn't be enough to heal him, but he would survive because she offered so much more.

"Addicted to you," she'd said, and he'd seen the glow in her warm, brown eyes that said she spoke the truth. She wanted him, needed him, and desired him as much as he did her. He could never be forgiven for the things he'd done, but Mei gui forgave him for what he *was*, and he'd never expected to receive such absolution.

The heat was scorching between them now. For him, it had built from the inside out. Her blood rushed to feed and fill his starving cells, and the press of her body began to burn soon after. But, the way she moaned his name and shifted her hips warmed him most of all.

Wanted, even before the bite, at long last, she wanted him.

He pulled his fangs from her skin long before he should have. His body needed more than she could give even in dying, and the dark hunger urged him to take it all and then search for more. He ignored it, and for the first time, it was easy to push the urgings away. He would live, or he would die, but he would never allow the hunger to control him, ever again.

She moaned as he pulled back, and he looked up into her heavy lidded eyes. He had given her pleasure tinged with pain, but it wasn't drugged desire he saw in her molten copper gaze. It was pure passion, for him, for all of him, not just his hypnotic aura and his seductive bite.

He could have sworn the look had begun to heal him, not the blood. He felt her emotion wash over him with a tingling, healing warmth that knit together muscle and sinew, then skin. The tingling found its way deeper, all the way to his tired and tormented soul.

She had straddled him, and he had pulled her close, but now she lifted herself so as not to jar his injuries as she carefully moved to the side. She was still looking into his eyes. He'd been gentler with her than he'd ever been before. He flicked his gaze to her neck where her blood still welled up from the bite. Thank God, he hadn't torn her almond skin.

"You didn't take enough," she protested.

"I'm still feeding," he assured her as her concerned hands feathered over his face and

down to his chest. "Having you by my side warms me and heals me."

"You need more blood," she returned.

"I need more of you."

He had recovered enough to reach for her faster than she expected. She gasped when he pulled her close again. This time, he nuzzled, kissed and held. Her skin was scented with harsh hotel soap and plain shampoo, but he also detected a hint of decadent chocolate.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Can you move? There's a storm on the horizon. We need to get back to the motel."

He let her pull away. He let her stand. He didn't protest when she reached to help him to his feet. He knew it would be agony to move his body, but he didn't want to lose her warmth during the transition from meadow to civilization.

What if she found and reclaimed Haven's duty on their way back? The minute he shifted to try to stand, white-hot pain ripped through him, and his concern vanished, replaced by a physical torment unlike any he'd ever faced.

*

She didn't know how he managed to stand and walk. Dillon. The vampire could move faster than she could blink her eyes. The superhuman creature could race a motorcycle through hairpin turns with reflexes no human could match. Now, he needed the support of her whole body to stay on his feet. Only by a miracle, a miracle fueled by her blood, could he move at all.

The trek that had taken her minutes took them over an hour. The rain had started by the time they reached the motel. It came down in a deluge that helped to wash away the blood and disguise Dillon's condition from anyone who might venture to look outside. Thankfully, the motel had exterior doors. She was able to go from the woods to the parking lot and then straight to the door of her room.

He didn't cry out, not once, but she could feel the extreme tension in his arm around her shoulders and the body against her side. He was hurting. He needed more blood.

"Heat," he mumbled as she keyed the lock. She pulled him inside and shut the door against the storm. "Heat will help."

She shivered because rain had soaked through her clothes. There was practically nothing left of Dillon's clothing. He hadn't been protected from the downpour. He was wetter than she was and colder than she'd ever imagined a living creature could become.

She managed to flick the wall switch with her elbow, and then she wished she hadn't. With the blood diluted or washed away, his skin was exposed. It was white as paper, glaring in the sudden lamplight, obviously anemic. A roaring fire or a hot cup of tea wasn't going to fix this problem.

"Bath," Dillon managed to get out between teeth he was clenching against the violent need to chatter.

She helped him to the bathroom. He seemed heavier. She was supporting more of his weight than she had been when they'd first started out in the meadow. The strength he'd gained from her blood was fading fast. He didn't need a Jacuzzi. He needed blood.

She made it to the tub with him in tow, and he sank down to sit on its edge. Jade turned the hot water tap on full force, but when she reached for the cold tap to regulate the temperature, Dillon stopped her.

Steam had already started to rise. She hadn't had a chance to turn on the bathroom

light. Illuminated only by the glow from the other room, Dillon looked more like himself. He met her gaze, and his eyes twinkled.

"Scalding, Darlin'. This one won't be for sharing."

She couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up in response to his incorrigible nature, but it didn't last, not when he had to be helped into the tub. He sank down into water that would have given a human third-degree burns with a relieved sigh.

While the sudden relief of the steamy water distracted him, Jade drew her stake and slashed her uninjured wrist. Deeper this time, so deep that blood immediately dripped, and her head grew light. Dillon's eyes were closed, but he opened them quickly as the scent of her blood reached him.

"No," he protested, but she was already offering her wrist to his mouth.

"A little more," Jade insisted.

He opened his lips and pressed them to her wrist, and it throbbed ... as well as places much, much lower. There was obviously something in vampire saliva that went straight to a victim's pleasure points to curl and pulse, enticing and sweet. The pleasure didn't mute the pain. It only made the sharpness of it more seductive than it would otherwise be.

Dillon drew strongly, sucking and licking, and the sensation seemed to transfer itself to the more sensitive parts of her body. Jade gasped. She fought the urge to climb into the dangerously hot tub and attack him, injured or not. He watched her reaction and broke the suction as his mouth curled up into his familiar, wicked grin.

"I warned you," he drawled, obviously strengthened, but still languid.

Quite the opposite effect hit her. Her knees turned soft, and she was now the one who had to lower her body to sit on the edge of the tub. His smile faded instantly, and a look of concern claimed his face.

"I took too much."

"No, no ... it's not that."

She didn't have enough experience with sex to tell him the onslaught of desire had weakened her not the loss of blood. Fortunately, Dillon had had enough experience for both of them. The tightness in his face eased.

"You'll have to hang on tight, Mei gui. There's much, much more where that came from."

It was a whiskey-kissed tease and a warning. One that made her heart beat faster. She looked at him, really looked, and she saw his skin was no longer stark white. It had flushed to pink-tinted porcelain. Before her eyes, between one blink and the next, his injuries were becoming less severe. The shallow nicks and cuts were already completely gone. The slashes were nothing more than ugly red lines. The worst of his wounds still looked like gashes, painful and raw, but even they were not as deep as before. She tried to offer him her wrist again, eager to see him whole, but he shook his head.

"No more."

He leaned back in the tub and slowly brushed the shreds of his soiled and ruined shirt off his shoulders. Already, his lean, muscular chest looked less vulnerable.

Jade swallowed.

She tried to think like a nurse and failed. Nurses probably didn't feel lust so strong it made their mouths go dry when their patients stripped.

Dillon had finished with the shirt. It lay in a discarded soggy pile beside the tub. Now, his hands were at his waist, unfastening the button of his jeans beneath the surface

of the water.

Jade was dizzy. It seemed the steam had gone to her head like warm, vaporous champagne. The one-two punch of blood loss and extreme desire was more than her senses could handle.

She quickly stood when he tugged on his submerged zipper, too quickly. The sudden move made her sway. She had to spread and plant her feet in order to stay on them.

"I'll be fine on my own here for awhile. Why don't you go and see if room service delivers O negative?"

Dillon continued to work on removing his clothes. For once, he didn't meet her eyes. Jade was glad. He was too weakened for the needs he would see there, and she was too far gone to help him without...

She walked to the door unable to reply scathingly to his attempt at lightening the mood.

"I'll be right outside if you need me."

"When, Darlin'. Not if. When."

She knew he looked now. She could feel the burn on the small of her back, but she didn't turn to meet it. She paused with her head on the doorknob lest he think she was running away from the promise he'd just spoken.

"When," she acknowledged.

Then, she did glance back at him only to see him gripping the sides of the tub as if he would lever himself up to accept her offer, here and now. Quickly, afraid he would hurt himself or that she would hurt him, she opened the door and left the bathroom, snapping it shut behind her.

Thunder still sounded outside, and rain still poured. They were miles from anywhere she might be able to go to procure some blood, but perhaps the blood would come to them.

Chapter Fifteen

The motel bed wasn't an ideal place for Dillon to collapse at dawn, but it didn't matter. She knew of no safer shelter nearby. Besides, he was lean, but he still outweighed her by eighty pounds.

When he came out of the bathroom on his own two legs, she'd had a moment of relief ... until she saw his eyes. No longer the vivid blue that had stalked her dreams, his eyes had gone pale, almost gray.

His skin was clean, as the blood had washed away, but it was far too white again. It had stood out against the towel he'd managed to wind around his hips.

He made it to the doorjamb before he had to stop and lean against it for support. His eyes had closed as if he fought dizziness.

Jade had rushed to his side to help him the remaining few feet to the bed. The ice of his skin had frightened her because it hadn't warmed beneath her hands as it always had before. The tips of her fingers had gone numb in the amount of time it took to reach the bed as if his body needed to take more heat than hers had to offer.

When his body fell onto the crisp, cool sheets, he sighed her name, the name he'd given her, Mei gui. Then, the daytime hibernation had claimed him. Only, this time, Jade was afraid Dillon would never wake again.

Rain continued to fall. Once closed, the heavy, triple-layered drapes seemed to shut out any ultraviolet light that might penetrate the storm clouds outside. Still, she rolled a towel and placed it across the seam at the bottom of the door just in case.

Then, she watched.

Dillon didn't move. There was no pulse she could search for, no rise and fall of his chest to reassure her. She could only watch. For hours, she willed him to live even though she was sworn to wish him dead.

She ate more contraband chocolate. This time, she chewed automatically without tasting. She went through the motions because she couldn't risk letting daylight into the room to search for calories that were more nutritious. Even with help on the way, she needed to be able to offer Dillon more blood if ... when he woke.

She didn't touch him; she couldn't bear to. She simply kept watch over him and allowed the memories of his flashing eyes, his vibrating drawl, his wicked laughter and his sweet cool-then-hot kiss to flicker through her mind.

She'd already made the desperate phone call. She'd picked up the phone. She'd dialed The Grove's number. No one had directed her movements. She'd followed the music in her heart the same way she had done on the dance floor.

There was no turning back now. When she'd called Meg and asked for her help, she'd crossed a line. She was no longer a warrior of Haven. She had turned her back on those that had saved her. She had chosen to save a monster who had loved her rather than keep allegiance to those who had nurtured her solely for a deadly purpose. Instead of feeling guilt or remorse, she only felt fear and impatience.

Jade heard the motorcycle roar into the parking lot hours before it was safe to open the door. Somehow, it helped to know she wasn't alone. Someone else didn't want Dillon to die; someone else knew exactly what he was and still wanted him to live.

She waited, perched on the side of the bed near Dillon's still form. Somewhere outside, perhaps at the coffee house next door, Meg Browning waited as well.

Just like a newborn, she felt weak and dizzy as if her eyes had only now opened to a strange new world, one with limitless paths she might follow. One ruled by life instead of death.

In the darkened room, the red digital read out of the clock on the nightstand read seven forty-five. Dillon still lay motionless. Jade's heart had begun to race at seven o'clock. Even with the drapes closed, she knew day was fading into night. Always before, Dillon had appeared just after sunset, always. Tonight, he didn't stir, not a blink, not a sigh, nothing.

Jade's heartbeat was the only sound in the room save for her own breathing and the sound of steady rain on the roof.

So many stark years had passed since she'd been found in her parents' blood. She'd faced the cold, hard reality of her world, day in and day out, night after night, for seventeen long years. She'd learned to live without the parents she could barely remember, laughter, hugs, kisses, and even happiness. However, as the clock flashed seven forty-eight, seven fifty-two and one minute after eight, despair took Jade in its icy grip. A world without the glittering blue of Dillon's eyes, without his swagger, without the sudden intense moments that gave someone who cared to look a glimpse beyond his mocking facade, a world without Dillon was too stark to face.

Jade didn't fight the tears that tracked down her cheeks. She didn't wail, sob or curse. That was strong enough. She didn't rise up and plunge her stakes into her own heart so that she could bleed out and join Dillon, lifeless for eternity. Surely, that was the strongest she'd ever been.

...Because she wanted to. In that second, she wanted to give up on the life she had only discovered a few short days ago when Dillon had stalked into it.

Instead of giving up, Jade realized she wanted something more. She didn't plunge her stakes. She used one, again, to slice across her wrist. She held it to Dillon's cold, unresponsive lips.

"You can't show me how to live and then turnaround and die on me. Please, please, don't do this. Don't leave me alone again."

With her wrist to his lips, Jade vowed to stand all night until her veins ran dry before she would give up. She would join him only after she'd given every last drop she possessed to try to save him.

She was so focused on her decision not to give up that the first slight movements against her wrist went unnoticed. Through her tears, she didn't see Dillon's eyes slit open. She didn't see him reach for her. It wasn't until he pulled her body down on top of his that she realized he wasn't gone. He moved his mouth from her wrist when she fell over him. He pulled her tight and rolled until his lean, naked body pressed hers to the mattress. Then his cool lips nuzzled closer, and his fangs penetrated her skin.

Joy mixed with fear and sudden exhilaration as she experienced the true swoon he could offer for the first time. Heat flared from her to him, and his cool lips grew hotter against her skin. Desire arched from his heated mouth, traveling to the intimate places he'd never touched. Her nipples grew taunt, and low, between her legs, pulsed. She throbbed in time with the beat of her heart and the pull of his feeding.

Good. So good. So hot and alive.

His hard muscular leg slipped between hers as he sought to share as much heat as he could. Jade opened for him, allowing his firm thigh to fit high against her sex, moving against it with an instinctive rocking motion when it did.

Soon, too soon, she was light-headed and floating. From blood loss or pleasure, she couldn't be sure. She didn't want him to stop, but when he pulled his lips from her neck, she was distracted from the loss of his fangs by the gift of his touch.

He slid his warmed hand between her legs. He replaced his thigh with questing fingers. He found her heat easily because her satin pajamas were less of a shield than a mold, moistened by her excitement. Already taken over by the swoon of his bite, she gasped when his thumb and forefinger found the nub of her clitoris. Only a few caressing strokes made her entire body tense as Dillon pleased her as no one ever had.

"Sweet, sweet, Rose," he murmured into her ear as she floated down from the heights he'd shown her for the first time.

She lay for a long moment, catching her breath, allowing her heartbeat to slow before she realized his arms had loosened around her. Jade opened her eyes. Dillon was breathing now, but his eyes were closed. His skin was too pale. She, alone, didn't have enough blood to save him.

Then, a soft knock sounded at the door.

Jade easily climbed from the bed and crossed the room. She was light-headed but not foggy. Dillon could have taken more but hadn't. His consideration for her safety above his own needs should have been surprising but wasn't. When had she begun to trust him? At the abandoned apartment hive or sooner?

She took a deep breath against the strangeness that was to come and in reaction to the full, tight feeling in her chest before she opened the door.

Meg Browning smiled when Jade greeted her, and the other woman's genuine warmth and concern eased Jade's tension.

"I thought it was time," Meg began, but her words came to a halt when she glanced over Jade's shoulder. "You still need me," she finished. It wasn't a question, but it wasn't assertive either. She stood in the doorway giving Jade time to send her away if she chose.

Of course, she didn't.

There was no time for hesitancy.

Meg was a stranger ... and not. Jade had seen the other woman at her most vulnerable. Now the tables were turned. Jade was rumped and dewy eyed, obviously bitten and pleased. Somehow, in this desperate moment, with this woman who had also shared her blood with Dillon, it was okay.

Suddenly, Meg pulled Jade close, hugging her quickly and fiercely before letting her go to step inside the room.

"I lost my husband five years ago," Meg told Jade's back as Jade locked the door. "I loved him with everything I had. All the way down to the bone. There's nothing left for another man. Nothing. I've tried a few times, but me and Tom had been together since we were sixteen..."

Jade faced Meg and recognized the tears in the other woman's eyes as the same kind of tears that had recently dried on her own cheeks.

"I'm telling you this because I don't want you to think I'm here for ... that. I'm not looking for happily ever after. I want to help and to..."

Meg's voice faded, and a tear spilled over her spiky lashes to flow down her cheek.

"Feel," Jade finished for her.

"Yes," Meg confessed. "I've been numb for so long. When he bit me, it was like it was the first thing I've felt since Tom died. The first thing that pulled me out of the loneliness. He shouldn't die. He can't die."

She looked toward the bed and then back at Jade. She wouldn't approach Dillon without Jade's permission. She was ready and willing to help, maybe even eager to feel again for a little while. However, Meg understood that she was a third in the room only because two wasn't enough under these desperate circumstances.

Jade was young and inexperienced in many ways, but sometimes not knowing exactly what you're supposed to do helps you know what needs to be done.

She reached for Meg. Their hands met and clasped as Meg lifted her arm to meet the gesture halfway. The other woman's hand was warm and slightly moist as if she was nervous. Or excited? Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes, bright with unshed tears.

Jade noted again how lovely she was, not young, not perfect, but very, very beautiful. For the first time, because of Meg's story, she could see how that beauty was magnified by Dillon because he brought about a sparkle, an awakening, in Meg's eyes. Behind the awakening, there was a need the other woman thought would never be met again in this life. Jade remembered thinking that Meg had looked like a lover reunited with her lost love on the porch that night with Dillon. How amazing that he could give her that reprieve if only for a few precious moments.

Jade recognized the sensuality in what was about to happen. She couldn't deny the heat in her own cheeks, and her pajamas felt all at once like too much against her skin and not enough at all. Leading Meg to the bed suddenly felt sexual. If she allowed that feeling to grow, she would be frozen to the spot. Instead, she focused on that moment of peace Meg would feel. She could guide Meg toward the bite that would help her escape the numbness for a little while.

Meg smiled tremulously when Jade urged her toward Dillon, but something in her drying eyes told Jade she wasn't sorry to have Jade by her side. She squeezed Jade's hand once before lying down beside Dillon.

When Meg released her fingers, Jade reached for Dillon. At the touch of her hand, he opened his eyes.

"Mei gui."

He looked at her, and his eyes had darkened. They were still pale, but they were finally the color of a misty sky at twilight. They flared when they saw what she had done.

"No."

Meg didn't move. She barely breathed. Both she and Dillon looked at Jade instead of at each other.

"I called her, and she came to help."

"You called her," Dillon replied.

She could hear the surprise in his voice, the disbelief.

"I'm not asking you to be the high school to my musical," Jade replied, recalling the quip he'd spoken to her.

"I'm a vampire," Dillon stated, closing his eyes against the harsh reality he'd had to accept long ago.

"I know 'what' you are. And now, I think I know 'who' you are. You say you're nobody's hero, but then you ride to the rescue again and again. You say you're a monster,

but then you kiss me like a man. You wear moonlight and waft pine-scented snow. You gave me music, laughter and a dance like none I've ever known. I think maybe I know you, Dillon, better than you know yourself."

Jade kissed him then. Her lips were salty from the tears she'd shed, but she pressed them to his and opened her mouth to lick past his lips and meet his tongue with hers. It was a sweet, hot kiss made no less so because warm brown eyes watched close by. Meg was quiet, an observer, waiting to be needed.

Jade pulled back from Dillon's mouth even though the kiss could have gone much, much hotter even in his weakened state. She didn't want to hurt Meg. She needn't have worried. The other woman was smiling, obviously enjoying their pleasure.

"My own private chic flick," the other woman suddenly teased.

"Another time, another place, and I could have shown you an entirely different sort of 'flick', Darlin'," Dillon teased back.

Jade's thrill at the sensual threat was not diminished because it was shared. Anything but wickedness from her vampire would have broken her heart. After all, this moment, which was so loaded to her, was probably nothing compared to what he had seen and done in two hundred years of decadence.

"I'm only offering blood ... this time," Meg whispered around a gulp as her cheeks grew even redder.

"And, I'll take no more than that. No more than I did before," Dillon replied, gently, no longer teasing.

Jade looked from Dillon to Meg and back again. For the first time, she realized Dillon had taken blood—and nothing else—from Meg before, even though the other woman had obviously offered more.

Meg averted her eyes and lifted her wrist as if she was embarrassed for Jade to know. Jade was the one who reached for Meg's hand to guide it to Dillon's lips. When he bit down, it was Jade's eyes he met. The woman beside them tensed, taken even quicker by the swoon because he'd already bitten her before.

A wave of pulsing pleasure swept over Jade's body. She gasped, almost dropping Meg's hand because weakness followed the pleasure as if her muscles couldn't pulse and function at the same time. He had fed from her, twice. They were intimately tied now in ways she couldn't comprehend. She could only tell by his eyes that he had known she would share Meg's swoon. They widened and intensified, and suddenly it was as if an invisible artist's brush swept across his irises. The blue returned in darker and darker shades.

The pulse built to a crescendo as he drank. She could feel his lips on her skin. She could feel the pull of his rhythmic suction. She could feel Meg's body respond, tightening and growing moist, because hers responded in kind.

Jade fell forward as her knees gave out, coming to rest against him on the bed. She could hear Meg's moans, but somehow, with her gaze still locked to Dillon's, it became a moment he shared only with her.

Chapter Sixteen

Afterwards, Jade held Meg and smoothed her mussed hair. Gradually, the other woman's sobs subsided into hiccupping sighs. Loosing the numb wasn't always easy or pleasant. Jade had shed her own share of tears since she'd met Dillon, more than she'd allowed to fall since she'd been a child. Sometimes being cold and numb was easier than burning and yearning for things you could never have.

But, easier wasn't always the best path to take.

"You have to experience the pain before you can move on, Meg."

"I've always thought crying for Tom made his death ... too real. But, I've been locked into this unfeeling cycle. Day in, day out ... functioning, but not living."

"Would Tom have wanted that?" Jade asked.

"No. Never," Meg replied with a shaky laugh. "He wasn't vocal about his feelings, but he felt them. He wasn't afraid to feel. He was quiet, but his heart was huge. I didn't know how bad it was going to be to lose that heart."

"You haven't lost it. Coming here tonight to help us only proves that you keep his huge heart alive in your own chest. You aren't afraid to feel either. You've forgotten how, but you aren't afraid."

"I never imagined a vampire's bite would do this for me. I feel hopeful. For the first time in years, I feel like my life isn't over. Not by a long shot."

Jade wanted to agree, but her feelings for Dillon were too complicated and new. She wasn't ready to admit out loud that the vampire had brought optimism into her life for the very first time.

"I should go. I reserved a room for the night. I ... I have so much to think about."

Meg's eyes were large and limpid in the lamplight like a newborn blinking at its first glimpse of the wide, wide world before her. Jade suddenly thought about the man from Eames Construction, how huskily he'd uttered Meg's name.

"Thank you," Jade said, softly.

"Love him. Love him with everything you've got ... all the way to the bone ... as long as you can, as long as you have him in your life."

Meg's urgent words were a tribute to what she had shared with her husband before he had died and possibly a glimmer at the bravery she might display herself in the near future. Jade felt a reply pushing up through her chest and into her throat, but she held it back. It burned somewhere in the vicinity of her heart, unspoken.

Meg's eyes softened. Perhaps she saw Jade's wants, needs, fears and ghosts from the past, all vying for space in Jade's own eyes. Whatever she saw, she smiled and reached to squeeze Jade's hand before she allowed it to fall from her fingers as she turned away.

* * * *

Jade shut the door behind Meg and took a deep breath before turning around. The extra oxygen didn't fortify her against the sight that met her eyes. Dillon was lounging lazily on the bed with nothing but a thin white sheet providing any sort of modesty at all. The sheet left most of him bare. It was more of a frame than a cover. Lightly fanning

across his hips, its slight softness served only to highlight the lean hardness above, below ... and underneath.

Jade swallowed, and again, she wasn't fortified. Suddenly, the room had morphed from a sick ward to an erotic painting with Dillon being the handsome, dangerous focal point, the gorgeous god at its heart.

And, he was.

Gorgeous.

God-like.

Dangerous.

Resurrected from near-death, he healed before her eyes.

Against the white sheet, his skin was porcelain pale, but no longer stark. It had reclaimed the glow of life beneath the paleness, and in the dark hotel room, she saw why moonlight always seemed to love him. His skin itself was luminous with so warm a white that it almost glowed when compared to the flat, dull white of the sheets. The wounds that had been so horrible and shocking had healed to the point of being nothing but angry red marks on his skin. It seemed as if the painter who had lovingly created the vampire's sexy portrait had decided the only way to show the pure beauty of his skin was to contrast it here and there with crimson scars.

Jade stood looking for too long. Dillon's eyes opened halfway, and he watched her hesitation. After all they'd been through, her pause said more than words could say about the moments that might follow. They were alone in the room, but the attraction that had been building between them for many nights seemed to be another presence, hovering nearby, waiting for its chance to sweep in and claim them in its hot embrace.

Dillon was no longer a patient. She saw that in the healing of his skin, in its glow, and in the ever so slight curve to his lips. He was a recovered vampire, waiting to see what she would do next.

Love him. Love him with everything you have ... all the way to the bone... Meg had urged.

He lay, so beautiful, so seductive, so perfect and powerful, only a few strides away. And, Jade decided to take those strides.

Chapter Seventeen

"Mei gui," he breathed when she rejoined him on the bed.

When she reached to touch his lovely, cool skin, his breath caught, and he held it. From his shoulders down to his hips, she ran her hands, then up again and down his arms to his wrists. She could see the flush left in her hands' wake. Now, she was the painter. Her touch spread a rosy fire over biceps and triceps, over pectorals and abs.

He was breathing again, and her nipples peaked because his breaths came quick and shallow. His eyelids drooped as his hooded gaze followed her hands. Beneath her fingers, his body was like a marble statue, but soon, as she continued to stroke, pet and worship his lean form with her fingers, he became heated like a velvet-covered stone left too close to a cracking fire.

She heated him. She was the fire licking across his skin. She gave him heat, but rather than becoming cold as she shared her warmth, she felt an inner well of heat for him deep inside of herself that, because of him, could never be exhausted. His quickened breathing stoked it, as did the intensity in his eyes and the hard muscular perfection of his form. The knowledge that he desired her made that inner heat into an eternal flame.

Jade dipped lower, brushing aside the sheet to take him in her hand. Fire? He was cool for only an instant, and then he was red hot as if all of the heat she had shared with his skin had flowed to this intimate point.

"Mei gui," he gasped again.

This time he threw back his head and closed his eyes as if pleasure claimed him harder and faster than he expected. He was vulnerable beneath her as she leaned over him, so swept away by her touch. The simple warm wrap of her fingers around him was the most powerful thing in the room. Her heart swelled, and the warmth he caused deep and low in her body throbbed in the most intimate ways imaginable. In that second, he was hers. Every hot wicked inch of him was hers to heat, to pleasure and hold, forever if she chose.

Jade bowed her head and claimed the moment with her lips, teeth and tongue, guided by the pulse between her legs and the instinct to taste him. She gloried in her power, his vulnerability and the fiery heat of him against her lips. The new, salty-sweet flavors on her tongue and the winter fresh scent of his skin, the friction and the heat, completely dominated her senses.

When she was suddenly pulled up by strong hands and rolled over and under his hard body, she took her turn to breathe his name in surprise.

Dillon vulnerable? The very idea seemed like a distant hallucinatory dream.

His hands were firm on the sides of her face. His fingers threaded into her loosened hair, and his thumbs held her in place as his palms cupped her jaw. He held her, and his gaze swept from her mouth to her eyes and then back again. Their intensity seemed to heat her already swollen lips, but she had no time to wonder over that impossibility. He dipped his head and captured her mouth with his, and the heat that flared was real, so real, and then cool, then nearly too hot to handle.

That was Dillon.

It wasn't a kiss calculated to woo a virgin. Instead, the kiss was a complete and total

consummation of the burgeoning tension that had been building between them since he'd first swaggered into her life.

Jade didn't need wooing. She met the fierce blending of their lips with urgent thrusts of her own tongue and encouraging hungry moans.

He moved his hands from her face. It didn't matter. She was held in place by her own urgent need to taste him.

Slowly, as their lips continued to meld, he worked his fingers further into her hair, and she realized he was setting it free. Her heavy locks fell slickly from their braided prison, wavy, free and tickling down over her shoulders. He combed through them gently, never softening their kiss, until the contrast of passionate tasting and whisper-soft combing caused her to gasp into his mouth. Tension she hadn't even known was there faded from her scalp in tingling waves that seemed to work their way from her scalp to everywhere that Dillon's body touched hers: lips, breasts, abdomen, thighs, and then between her thighs, with a greater and greater charge.

He moved his hands away from her freed hair.

Effortlessly, he pulled the satin off her skin, popping buttons and rending seams with the ease of plucking the petals from a rose.

Vulnerable? As if.

She'd been at his mercy from night one. Her stakes had been nothing more than sharp spice, dangerous zest. Jade's pulse pounded in her ears and chest as her skin was made bare. She embraced the sudden fear just as she embraced her vampire with her suddenly naked legs wrapped around his waist.

He broke their kiss, pulling back from her lips to look into her eyes. And there, deep in the blue, she saw the truth.

Dillon was vulnerable ... and powerful, and wicked, and different. He would never be a simple lover, an ordinary man. She thought, maybe, he'd never been those things even when he'd been alive, before the queen had claimed him. He was Dillon, all vampire, all heart, passion personified, and more than most women would ever want to handle, but Jade wasn't most women. She'd been exiled from passion her entire life. She'd been cold, alone and lost in a world where she didn't belong. Her need for passion met and matched Dillon's passion perfectly.

The fear faded as he looked at her; the intensity of his gaze had softened, touched just enough by tenderness to ease her fear but leave adrenaline in its wake. He moved, and adrenaline flared because, as he entered her, she was suddenly reminded of her inexperience. In that moment, Dillon shared his experience with her in gentle, seductive strokes, soft words and even softer kisses spiced with hints of his tongue. Now, he seduced. Now, he wooed.

And, Jade's body responded. She opened. She craved. She took. She tasted.

Her natural grace and affinity for rhythm found her easily able to follow his lead. There was one sharp pinch and then nothing but sighs as he moved with precision to pleasure her past the pain. The heat between them was so fierce now that moisture coated their skin. His lean, hard form slid against her soft supple muscles even as the length of him found the deepest inner reaches of her. He found the fire and stoked it even higher.

His kisses grew less polished and more frenzied. The thrusting of their tongues sped up in time with the movement of their hips. Her body tightened around him, and her wicked vampire was back moaning her name and working against the tightness to press

his body close. She was swept away but not too swept away to enjoy that his seduction had turned less controlled. She was tender but not too tender. She didn't protest when he clasped her tighter than ever before and buried himself deeper than she thought possible.

A wave of pleasure hit her hard, claiming her entire body with tension, and then, right then, Dillon sank his fangs into her neck.

The sudden swoon wedded with her orgasm. It buoyed it, heightened it, intensified it until she could do nothing but cry out and let it carry her, fast, up and out. Dillon sucked, and the suction extended her pleasure until it was almost but not quite pain. She reached the crest of pleasure, held there by his arms, his mouth and his fangs in her skin for long, long seconds, and then she washed down the other side with abandoned cries.

* * * *

A soft sound woke Jade from a deep slumber.

The door.

Immediately, she recognized the empty quality to the room around her. There were no rustles, no sighs from a sleeping lover by her side. Even more telling than that was the absence of the charge that the air always contained when Dillon was around.

Though slightly light-headed, Jade rose and quickly pulled on her jeans in the dark. Part of her wondered why Dillon had left without speaking, but she pulled on a t-shirt and strapped on her stakes in the mean time.

Death still stalked somewhere in the night. He didn't rest. He didn't stop once his quarry was found. That he hadn't killed Dillon earlier didn't mean he wouldn't. He had left the vampire for dead. Surely if he found out Dillon was still alive, he'd be back to finish the job. Dillon couldn't face Death alone, not again. Together, they might be able to fight him off.

She didn't have time to bind her hair. It fell down her back in loose, wild waves, and she couldn't decide if it was an annoyance or a pleasure to feel it swish along her naked arms as she followed Dillon out into the night.

She saw a flash of white beyond the parking lot's northern border. She hurried to catch up.

Was he hunting?

He had been close to the brink of death. She had no idea how much blood he would need to replenish his strength fully. He must need more.

Instinctively, she stepped lightly, avoiding twigs and brush. Death could wait for them around any bend in the path.

Why had Dillon left so quietly? He had left the room as if he was slipping away.

She heard the murmur of voices before she could see their source. She reached for her stakes because that response to the unknown was ingrained into her from years of training.

The rain had stopped, but there was no moon. Its waning crescent was easily covered by the clouds overhead.

Jade was too close by the time she saw them, too close to risk moving away and too close to avoid the painful truth. It punched her hard in the gut, reverberating up through her chest, stealing her breath and practically stopping her heart.

Two vampires stood in a tiny clearing caused by a fallen tree.

Two.

Dillon and an ethereal, blond beauty so pale and so perfect that no moonlight was necessary to illuminate her face. She stood in Dillon's arms looking up into his face with an expression Jade recognized. She had felt it on her own face too many times in his presence to count. The female vampire looked at Dillon as if he was her entire world wrapped up in a handsome bow, as if he completed her by his very existence. She stared at him as if her heart only started beating when he touched her, as if he was her oxygen, her life's blood, her heart.

Jade could only stand, shocked and horrified, as their words floated to her on the night breeze, gone suddenly cruel and crisp.

"You came," Dillon said, and his voice was strangely raw, so unlike the charming, masculine drawl she was used to.

"You were ... fading. I had to..."

The female vampire's voice was too soft, too pretty. That voice would have been perfectly at home in a park on a sunny day lyrically calling for a child, too innocent and sweet for a vampire.

Jade's hands tightened on the stakes they held.

"Would have thought me gone was a dream come true for you," Dillon replied, and it pained Jade's ears to hear that he cared about this vampire's dreams.

"I ... no ... not gone, not for good," the blonde said, her soft voice stumbling over the words as if she was afraid to say too much.

"'Absence makes the heart grow fonder.' Would you 'grow fond,' Holly? Would you miss me?" Dillon asked, and there was a hint of familiar wickedness in his words as if he'd recovered somewhat from the initial surprise of finding her here.

"Every second of every night for the rest of my unnatural life," Holly confessed, and now her voice was raw, harsh and ugly as if she didn't like the words she said.

Dillon pulled her closer, and Jade realized she'd gripped her stakes so tightly that her fingers had gone numb. Her entire body followed suit. Tingling numbness claimed her from her ankles to her ears. She welcomed it, pleading that the universe would spare her from the pain that was sure to follow. Its sharpness hovered just outside of her heart, stalking around it hotly until she felt each beat throb against the pressure of looming pain.

"I'm sorry, Darlin'. I can't undo what's been done. I can't set you free. Only death will do that," Dillon murmured into the shimmering blond hair.

Jade knew he lied. He wasn't sorry this "Holly" felt for him, not really.

She didn't understand the connection between the two vampires, but she had come to understand Dillon all too well. He needed to be wanted above all else. He wandered, unforgiven, night after night, and only the wanting held his damnation at bay. Here was evidence that he had inspired such devotion in the female vampire that she would love him beyond the grave.

Holly's wanting was obvious. Her body leaned into his. Her hands held onto his shoulders as if she would fall if she didn't hang on. When Dillon embraced her, it was as if the swoon claimed her without him even needing to bite. Her head fell back. Her body stiffened. His name came twice from her lips.

"I took without asking once, more than once. I won't do it again. Are you here to help me, Holly?" Dillon asked the question with his lips brushing the vampire's exposed neck.

Jade's own neck tingled where Dillon's bite had left its mark, but this wasn't like Meg back at The Grove. She wasn't titillated by what she saw.

This Holly was more than sustenance to Dillon, much more. It was in the rawness of his voice and the tension in his body. It was in the super-charged air all around them. When the clouds rolled back so faint moonlight spilled down on their faces, Jade saw it there as well. More than sustenance, more than desire, she saw need, raw need. It consumed them.

"I think ... you'll die if I don't. Human blood can't heal you this time."

"There are other vampires."

"It has to be me."

"Willingly."

"Yes."

The "yes" had barely left her lips before Dillon bit down. As he did, the pain claimed Jade, completely overwhelming the swoon she should have shared. She stood, cold and empty, shivering, as Dillon drank his fill fast, heavy, and deep.

The female vampire's pleasure was vocal and fierce. Jade endured her moans only because she could do nothing else.

Breathe. Blink. Endure. Breathe. Blink. Endure.

It didn't last long, five minutes at most. For Jade, it was an eternity and the dawn of time all at once. When Dillon lifted his face from Holly's neck, a new life began for Jade. One in which she knew she would never dance again.

That's when he saw her. She felt the strengthening moonlight wash over her, revealing her presence.

"Mei gui," he said, but she no longer knew the name.

If Death had come in that moment, Jade would gladly have fought by his side.

Dillon's hands fell away from Holly, and he stepped toward Jade.

"I made her, Mei gui. My blood flows in her veins. The blood of the queen and those that came before her. Tainted all the way back to whatever damned origins we can claim."

"He was dying," Holly explained.

Her voice was softer. She had been weakened by how much blood she had shared.

"He was healing," Jade protested.

She wasn't sure why she didn't attack. The pain throbbed in her muscles, urging her to leap, to stake, to ash.

"Temporarily. On the surface. Deep down, the centuries were coming back to claim him. I could feel it. He is my Maker. Our blood is tainted. That taint sustains us. The human blood merely feeds that darkness. He had lost too much. I could feel him ... slipping away."

Jade looked from Holly to Dillon and back again. Was it about sustenance, after all? No, not entirely. There was more between them than that. Even now, as if of their own volition, the female vampire's feet carried her closer to her Maker. Not one noticed but Jade.

"She's saved me more than once. I was in thrall to a crazed queen for two hundred years. My Maker. Holly killed the queen and set me free."

There was more between them than gratitude. Jade noticed Holly's hands were fisted. Was she stopping herself from reaching for Dillon?

Even in the darkness, a stain flushed across the female vampire's pale cheeks when she noticed Jade looking at her hands. She stepped away from Dillon, one step and then

another. It was an obvious effort for her to put distance between them.

"My heart beats for him, but I love someone else," Holly said, and the simple honest words finally cut to the truth.

The blond vampire didn't want Dillon regardless of her body's need for him. Now, Jade saw her tension in a different light. Holly's body craved to be near Dillon's, but she, herself, resisted the physical allure.

But, what of Dillon's wants? Dillon's desires?

"There was a time when I craved her blood. A time when I would have carried her into the night and not looked back," Dillon confessed.

Jade heard the "was." She found herself holding onto its past tense with all of her heart.

"But, Mei gui, now I crave only you. Your dance. Your song. Your smile. You fill me as the blood never can. If he had killed me tonight, I would have gone to dust with your name on my lips."

"He?" Holly asked, suddenly alert as if she had a vested interest in identifying the man who would have destroyed her Maker.

"The Angel of Death. He is a warrior pledged to eradicate all vampires from the face of the earth," Jade explained.

"All?"

There was panic now. It claimed the blond vampire and flowed outward, filling the clearing with its pulsating energy. Dillon looked at Holly, and he had gone stiff suddenly as well.

"She lives," he said.

Jade didn't understand what passed between them.

"But for how long?" Holly whispered.

Then she was gone. The spot where she had been was empty with nothing but the rustle of surrounding leaves to indicate her passing.

Dillon had always been fast but in the next second Jade discovered how fast. Air sucked from her lungs as a sudden vacuum claimed her. Before the world went black, she felt Dillon's strong arms around her like a permanent promise never to be dislodged.

Chapter Eighteen

Jade had never ridden a roller coaster or hitched a ride on a hot air balloon powered by jet engines. She'd never taken a toboggan ride down Mt. Everest or perched on the roof of a Formula One racecar as it went for the cup. All of those things combined couldn't have equaled the swirl of nightmare that dizzily filled her mind when Dillon carried her away into the night.

Duty. Dishonor. Dance. Decay.

All seen through a wet crimson curtain that dripped until she stood in a puddle of tainted blood. She could see a ribbon of darkness coiling and writhing within the blood around her toes. Though she slept, she cringed away from the black, snake-like predator. If it entered her, if it claimed her, she would lose herself forever. The need to escape intact drove her into consciousness.

"Easy. Easy. I've got you," Dillon said.

She had wakened swinging, going for his heart in the oft repeated move that usually resulted in ash. This time, her fist wasn't clenched around the base of a stake. This time, her fist had thumped against his chest and stayed there just over his still beating heart.

"I've got you," he repeated.

It was meant to be a reassurance. She thought about the black, snake-like taint seeking to claim her. She wasn't reassured.

Carrying her slowly, his feet found the earth with a graceful but solid sound of boots meeting grass and soil. With a sudden strong push, she freed herself from his arms and moved several stumbling steps away. They were in an overgrown field. Tall grass dampened her jeans all the way to her knees. When Dillon stood silent and didn't reach to pull her back into his arms, she risked a look around.

She didn't know how far they had traveled, but they'd left the storm behind. There were no clouds. The crescent moon gleamed in a starry sky revealing a small white farmhouse and several dark gray outbuildings. At first glance, they seemed abandoned, but when Dillon turned to walk toward the house, Jade noticed tended flowerbeds and clothes hanging on a line. Several white nightgowns flapped in the gentle breeze. They looked like wispy, delicate ghosts trying to dance, but they were held too tightly by their wooden pins to fly free.

Dillon stopped near the back porch of the house. All was quiet. The silence seemed to ease his tension because he leaned against a tree and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He shook one loose and plucked it from the pack with his lips. Then he put the pack back in his pocket and pulled out his box of matches. He shook it also, as if gauging how many were left, and then he slid back the cover to pull a match free. He struck it, and the sulfur scent that its combustion made wafted in front of her face. That was followed by the acrid, sweet scent of burning tobacco as he held the match to the tip of his cigarette and inhaled to light it.

All of this, he did in the same manner as a warrior monk would make tea or braid his hair. It was ritual, a calming ritual. She watched as he shook the match to extinguish the flame before dropping it. She followed its fall to the ground and watched, further fascinated by the worn dirt at the base of the tree when Dillon's booted foot slid perfectly

along an indented track to hide the matchstick from view.

How many times had he stood here, just so, lighting a cigarette and training his gaze on the house that appeared hazily through the smoke?

"Holly's mother is also a vampire. I made her. She's ... vulnerable, not as clear-headed as her daughter. She wouldn't stand a chance against your 'Angel of Death.'"

"Not mine," Jade protested, thinking of the warrior with his dark, dark eyes and his skin painted red with blood.

Still, her heart ached. She wasn't ready to choose sides. The sight of Dillon holding Holly was fresh and cruel in her mind. How could she take their words of reassurance and accept them so quickly? She had been ready to stake them both back in the clearing, but had that been the right path or the path of jealousy and pain?

Dillon's eyes flicked from the house to her and back, but then his gaze came to her again, dropping down to focus on her hands. She hadn't even realized she rested them on her stakes. Was she ready to draw, or was she holding them in their sheathes until she knew what she should do with them?

His gaze tracked slowly up to her eyes. It took what seemed an eternity for his pale blue eyes to focus on hers finally. Was he trying not to spook her with sudden movement, or was he daring her to draw?

His eyes glittered.

"Isn't he yours? You haven't decided who you are and what you want. You've spent your life being what Haven wanted you to be. You can't decide what 'Jade' wants because you have no experience being 'Jade.'"

His words cut to the heart of her dilemma. Had she ever been Jade, the cold disciplined warrior? Or, was she Mei gui, the woman who longed to dance in the moonlight?

"I made them. I can't leave them to face Death alone."

With his cigarette only half-smoked, Dillon pushed away from the tree and flicked it into the wet grass. Jade didn't back away, though the move brought him very close to her stiff body. He stood looking down at her as if he waited for a reply. When she didn't speak, he reached to smooth a wave of hair off her face.

She closed her eyes as the cool trail of his fingers on her face grew warm. It seemed nothing—not even fear of betrayal—could prevent the heat between them.

"There was a time when any opening was enough for me. A glance, a sigh ... and I swooped in for the kill. With you, that's never been enough. I don't want to beguile and seduce you. I don't want to lure you into my arms. I want you to choose: kill me or love me. It's your call."

He leaned closer as he spoke, bringing his handsome face near hers until his lips almost brushed her cheeks and the soft breeze of his respiration tickled across her skin. Jade's entire body tingled because the moment was so charged. If sizzling arcs of current had gone from him to her and back again, she wouldn't have been surprised.

Still, she didn't speak. Seventeen years of her life played out in her mind's eye. Seventeen years of training, sacrifice, and pain, felt then swallowed and pushed down so deep it became nothing but a dull lump of memory, sat heavy on her heart.

She didn't move when Dillon closed the remaining centimeters between them to touch his lips to hers. She was frozen, locked in an inner battle she found herself waging at the worst possible time. Death could appear at any second, and she wasn't sure yet if

she would fight with him or against him.

"I'll fight to protect them, Mei gui. I owe them that ... and more. More than I can ever repay. But, if you choose to plunge your stake in my heart, I won't fight. If that's your choice, then I'll welcome oblivion," Dillon murmured against her mouth.

Suddenly she tasted tears, hers. They tracked hotly down her cheeks and onto her lips. Through the blur of spiky lashes, she watched him step back and turn away. She watched the familiar, graceful swagger take him away from her and into the farmhouse. The door snapped shut behind him, and she was left alone with her tears.

* * * *

It could have been hours or mere minutes when movement interrupted her indecision. Quickly, she slipped behind Dillon's tree, unfrozen by a new arrival, not the Angel of Death but a man.

He came around the corner of a distant building where he must have left a vehicle, too far away for her to hear it arrive. She was able to watch him long enough to ascertain he was a hunter. Though he wore a rumpled trench coat and baggy trousers, the movement of his body was predatory. His strides were smooth and strong but contained, as if he had his muscles leashed until they were needed.

As he came closer, she recognized the object he twirled in his hand. It was a knife. It didn't glint in the moonlight. It gleamed, dully, because it was made of wood. Even though Death hadn't arrived, this man carried death in his hand.

He didn't call out nor did he slow down to stalk up to the house with stealthy footsteps. He seemed comfortable, even happy. He jumped on the porch with a spring in his step as if he was coming home. His whole manner seemed to lighten, and a smile took over the grim lines of his face. He didn't knock. He simply opened the door and stepped inside.

Jade was already moving when the door snapped shut this time. She ran for the porch, all out, her decision made. She leapt up the steps, drawing her stakes between the first and the last, and barreled inside where the three vampires and two vampire hunters would converge.

* * * *

A surreal atmosphere greeted her as soon as she stepped inside the house. Tea simmered on the kitchen stove, and its cinnamon blend filled the room with a homey fragrance directly at odds with what she expected. Though her eyes had to adjust to the dark, she immediately picked up the surprising sight of cookies under glass on the counter and a cheery flower-filled vase on the table.

The hunter's coat was thrown over a kitchen chair.

Homey indeed.

Jade felt like an intruder, but she pressed forward anyway. She hurried through the archway that led into a nearby breakfast nook then onward and into a sitting room.

There, lit by the soft glow of numerous candles, she found Dillon squared off against the hunter.

"Let go, Hol. I need to finish this." The hunter's voice was deep, masculine and oddly warm considering he griped his wooden blade as if he would use it on "Hol" should she

not let go of his arm and step away.

"Finish me, and you'll only hurt her. Not a wise move, Winters. Not wise at all."

"You're a monster," Winters replied through clenched teeth.

"True, but I thought you were beginning to develop a taste for monsters." Dillon looked slyly from the hunter to the blond vampire gripping his arm.

"Stop teasing him, Dillon. You're provoking him."

"That stained blade says he's easily provoked, Darlin'. I'm fairly certain me standing here in your living room all nice and quiet like wouldn't change a thing. Not. At. All."

Dillon stepped toward the hunter, Winters, with his final words. After one step for each syllable, he practically stood toe to toe with the man who obviously wanted his dust on a platter. Holly tensed, and Jade could see her muscles bunch as she exerted her vampire strength to keep her hunter from lashing out at the monster who had invaded their home.

"She'll never be yours, you bastard. Never. I'll die before..."

"Yes, you will die 'before'. 'Before' either of us," Dillon interrupted, and the hunter lunged almost breaking Holly's hold and coming within a millimeter of ramming his blade home in Dillon's chest. Dillon continued, "She isn't mine or yours. She's Holly, and she's chosen to love you for a little while, for the blink of an eye, and you're wasting precious time hunting me."

The hunter looked stunned. He blinked, and some of the tension left his body.

"There isn't much time," a quavering voice interjected from an overstuffed armchair by a large picture window.

An older female vampire, Holly's mother, looked out at the empty night. Though Dillon's words seemed to have triggered hers, she didn't look at the confrontation going on behind her back. Rather, she looked at the trees beyond the grass as if she could see something Jade couldn't.

"I've done horrible, evil things, Winters. If I walk this earth for another hundred years, it won't be long enough to atone for what I've done. Ash me now. I'd welcome the rest."

"No," Jade finally found her voice. "He can't."

All eyes turned toward her, and she stepped further into the room, positioning herself before she could change her mind.

Dillon looked at her. He noted her stance and her words and realized what they might mean. His eyes went wide and then they softened.

"Mei gui?"

She closed her eyes against the longing he managed to infuse into the name he'd given her, not because she rejected it but rather because it met and mingled with the longing in her own heart.

In that moment, as she made her choice, a soft sound interrupted. It was the stirring of cloth and a long, long sigh. Jade followed the sound with her gaze.

Death had slipped into the room. He leaned over Holly's mother, and the older vampire looked up into his face as if he was something warm and wonderful rather than something deadly. He smoothed her hair back and kissed her forehead.

"No," Holly gasped, even though her mother smiled.

How? How had he come into their midst so quietly?

"Stop," Jade ordered, feeling protective of the helpless vampire who sat ignorant to

the danger she faced. Surely, any creature with pink-painted toenails posed no real threat.

"I am Cizin, and I am 'The Source' you seek. Before you were born, before your great-great-great grandparents were born, I was a Mayan priest. We sought to unlock mysteries best left alone. For years upon years, I've tried to atone. I've tried to wipe the hunger we unleashed from the face of the earth. In my travels, I came upon the Shaolin monks and knew I had found the perfect warriors to help me. From their ranks, came the first Warriors of Haven. For generations, they have spilt the blood of vampires as I did the same. And yet, time might heal what blood spilt does not."

He touched Holly's mother again, and she smiled up at him as if he hadn't killed hundreds, no, thousands of vampires in the past. Unlike her, those vampires were mindless beasts. Did Death appreciate the difference?

"Perhaps people are more resilient than I supposed. Perhaps even as the hunger is diluted by the passing of time and the passing of the tainted blood from one vampire to another, humans are developing a resistance to it."

Jade tried to follow his confession. Her entire worldview had to shift, inexorably, and it was as if an earthquake had revealed a lost city. Ancient secrets lay open for the first time. Death, Cizin, had carried this mystery hidden within himself for over a thousand years.

If what he said was true, he was more tainted than any vampire horde could ever be. He was "The Source." By his actions, he had caused untold death and destruction. If it weren't for him, her parents would be alive and well, laughing, singing and dancing.

"I came after you because I thought you couldn't be a warrior. I saw vulnerability in your eyes the day we fought. Your heart isn't cold,"

Cizin spoke to her. Though his voice was pleasantly masculine and his face was perfect beyond reproach, she saw his black, black eyes and his gleaming black hair. She realized the threatening snake she'd seen in her nightmare hadn't been Dillon, after all. Just as the rumors suggested, Cizin was tainted, and his cause was twisted and tainted as well. Haven was built on secrets and lies. Killing wasn't the ultimate answer.

"I was wrong. It would have been easier to kill this vampire. I nearly fell into the ease of it myself. Kill him and forget he ever existed even though he and others like him might prove to be the salvation of us all. You didn't take the easy path. You shame me by the strength of your heart."

Her time with Dillon had been far from easy, and yet standing by his side tonight had been easy once she'd decided to do it. Right and natural, as easy breathing in her next breath or the next beat of her heart, she stood with him.

"So the Raveneaux resistance to the madness of vampirism might be explained by evolution?" Holly asked.

"Perhaps human bodies react to the taint as they would to any invading force like a virus. Defenses are mustered. Resistance is cultivated," Cizin explained. "I had always seen it as a parasite, one that could only be killed by the death of its host. Now, my eyes have been opened to other possibilities."

He looked from Dillon to Holly and then back to the woman who still smiled up at him. He placed one of his hands on top of her head.

"You have given me hope," he said.

Jade was going to give him a fight. He stood there looking as if he was a knight on crusade who had discovered the Holy Grail when he was, in fact, the devil himself. She

moved toward him, blinded by anger and hurt. The disillusionment of truth pounded in her ears, but Dillon stepped in her path, and before she could push him aside, Cizin was gone. Faster than a vampire, he spun and left the house through a rear door that flapped in the breeze from his passing.

"Let him go," Dillon urged turning her in his arms and pulling her close.

Suddenly, she forgot Cizin as she saw Winters still brandishing his knife as if he would use it. In fact, he had taken a step toward Dillon while everyone's attention was focused elsewhere.

Jade forgot Cizin, Haven and the unfairness of it all.

"I will defend him with my last breath," she warned the hunter over Dillon's shoulder.

He paused in his approach, obviously not prepared to fight a human girl half his size. She decided not to inform him that size didn't matter. Holly came forward and hugged Winters from behind, resting her head on his shoulder. A vampire and a vampire hunter, the odd couple proved love could be found in unexpected places during difficult times.

Dillon wasn't a handsome prince, but she had never believed in fairytales. Her life had been simple, stark and dark for as long as she could remember. To have Dillon's passion, here and now, was better than any happily ever after a storyteller could envision.

Jade heard the familiar rattle of Dillon's ever-present box of matches. She looked away from the hunter and into her lover's beautiful blue eyes. Dillon smiled. It was his usual cocky grin as if he'd known the night would end with her in his arms. Yet, she saw beyond the grin now to the hunger for love hidden deep beneath the gleam in his eyes.

With a sudden flip of his hand, Dillon tossed the matchbox into the fireplace. Before she could see it consumed by the flames, he had tilted down to press his lips to hers. She was suddenly distracted by an entirely different sort of fire, one only she and this wicked vampire could make, together.

Epilogue

The music was called "Zydaco" and, wonder of wonders, she'd never heard the style before. They had crashed a Cajun wedding in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana. Dillon had sweet-talked the mother of the bride, and they'd been invited to the outdoor reception. Lit by twinkle lights, the reception was crowded with so many guests that two more wouldn't make a difference.

Jade was tapping her toes on the temporary wooden dance floor set up for the party while Dillon swung her around in a double-time two-step. The dance left her almost as breathless as the look in his eyes. He held her, twirled her and laughed with her now, but his eyes promised a much more intense later that she couldn't help but anticipate.

A tall, black-haired groomsman, still wearing a rented tuxedo but with its sleeves rolled up because of the hot summer night, cut into their dance. He pulled Jade into his tanned arms while his partner took her place in Dillon's. Dillon allowed the trade without missing a step. He whirled the bride's mother away but not before he winked at Jade.

Her lover. Her vampire. He'd never lose his showmanship. He'd always have a touch of rock-star flair.

The song ended with a noisy finish, and Dillon caused the crowd to erupt with foot stomping and yells of encouragement as he bent the mother of the bride back over his arm and kissed her soundly. Jade laughed until tears leaked from her eyes when the woman came up for air, stammering and blushing like a teenager. This show was for them, to thank them for the music, the warmth and the dance.

Later, much more serious kisses would be all hers.

The father of the bride came to take his wife from Dillon, laughing and shaking his finger at the young cuss who had stolen a kiss. Jade wondered what he would think if he knew he'd just jovially pounded a vampire on the back!

Through it all, even as he grinned and laughed, Dillon's bright blue gaze found hers, again and again.

The groomsman who'd claimed her for a dance decided to follow Dillon's lead. With a mock leer, he leaned to steal a kiss from Jade, but before she could protest, Dillon was there. He'd risked exposure to get to her side before the handsome Cajun could taste her lips.

"Not even if you were twenty years older and just in it for a lark, partner."

So serious. So deadly. In seconds, Dillon had traded showmanship for genuine feeling.

Jade placed her hands on his arms and immediately his tension eased. The groomsman nodded and backed away to allow them to begin the next dance. Dillon's smile returned, but it was softer. The show was over for now.

"Jealous much?" Jade teased.

They began to sway together to a much slower tune. The barely-there gleam from the twinkle lights created a halo around Dillon's pale blond hair.

"I didn't drain him on the spot. That's what most folks would call 'remarkable self-control,' " Dillon teased back, but Jade could see shadows deep in his irises. Her lover was no angel, and he'd been alone for so long.

Love him. Love him with everything you've got ... all the way to the bone ... as long as you can, as long as you have him in your life. Meg's words had become Jade's promise.

As Dillon pulled her even closer and she felt the lean hard press of his body against hers, the crowd around them seemed to disappear. She tilted her chin to bring her lips close to his cheek.

"I love you," she whispered, for his ears alone.

The End

About the Author:

As the daughter of an alcoholic, Barbara learned at a very young age to turn to fictional worlds for escape. She especially loved romance, horror and fantasy. When she decided to write, she naturally combined her early loves. Barbara has a special affinity for characters who live in the shadows but refuse to be defined by the darkness that surrounds them. She loves exploring deep emotions, bringing impossible happily-ever-afters to life on the page... and Glacier Mint ice cream.

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