

HEATHER KILLOUGH-WALDEN



THE PATRICK  
SINCLAIRE STORY

# **THE PATRICK SINCLAIRE STORY**

*A Chronology of the Seduction and Claiming of a Vampire King's Chosen Queen*  
As told by the queen, in six parts.

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## **Chapter One: The Meeting**

The glass of blush wine was growing warm in my hand. I wasn't sure why I'd even decided to come to the party that night. It could have been that, like everyone else who was there that night, I, too, was curious about the party's enigmatic host, the elusive and alluring billionaire, Patrick Sinclair.

However, the fact that my boss had made the affair mandatory for everyone in the office probably had more than a little to do with it. He'd been particularly adamant about me coming. Which had seemed strange at the time, but I'd let it go.

All I knew for certain, at that moment, was that my empty bed was waiting for me in an apartment just across the street, and that yesterday I'd finished down-loading The Moonlight Sonata to listen to on my iPod as I drifted off to sleep. I yearned for that final moment, between wakefulness and dreaming, when my fists finally unfolded and my teeth separated from their constant clenching and my eyelids fluttered shut...

"So, I guess you're excited, huh?"

I opened my eyes, nearly dropping the full wine glass in my hand. I looked up to find one of my co-workers standing beside me, a nearly empty scotch on the rocks in his own slippery grip.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, realizing that I'd been day-dreaming about dreaming. How pathetic was that? I was embarrassed to be so tired and hoped he couldn't see my blush.

"Aw, come on!" His eyes glistened with that shine that only truly sloshed people get. "You know what I'm talking about! I bet you can't wait to see him! That rich son of a bitch who hosted this blasted get-together just so he could show off his brand new mansion and his brand new court yard and his brand new... Whatever!" He waved his

arms around him, gesturing to the grandeur that surrounded us. A bit of his drink swilled and slopped out of his now nearly empty glass. “Makes me sick.” He swigged the last of the scotch and gave his empty glass a dirty look.

I eyed him warily, feeling suddenly apprehensive. Simon Gray was, in my book, a bit of a genius. He was the brains behind most of the work we did at the foundation. He found loopholes that no one else could see, and he made sure that, on our end, there were none. He was also handsome, in a school-girl-crush-on-her-teacher kind of way, and he was a genuinely nice guy. At least, he had been thus far... At the moment, there was something dodgy in his green eyes; something I hadn’t noticed there before. And I also noticed something else about him. Perhaps it was my inexplicable apprehension that made me realize Simon Gray was a rather big man, when it came down to it. He had to be more than six feet, though his frame was a touch on the slight side. Wiry.

Wiry men made me nervous. There was something untrustworthy about that Mark Antony look...

“Simon, did someone give you a ride here tonight?” I wanted to know that he wasn’t going to attempt to get behind a wheel in his current condition. But he never answered me. Instead, he looked toward the circular drive where a crowd of revelers were now gathering, and he made a disgusted face.

“Yep, there they go.” He began to mime a little happy dance. “Oh, look at me, I’m so gorgeous and I hope he notices me – do you think he’ll notice me? Oh, Patrick, Patrick, Patrick!” He sing-songed in a high-pitched voice, flailing his limp wrists about as he rolled his eyes and pretended to toss his hair over his shoulder. His glass dropped to the ground and, thankfully, rolled along the grass to rest safe and unbroken a few feet away.

And then he burped. And swooned. My eyes went wide. As luck would have it, at that very moment, a waiter came by with a tray. I quickly placed my still-full glass on the tray and then put my arms around Simon's waist, attempting to steady him. He made a few more unpleasant sounds and then seemed to re-gain his balance. His attention was on the gigantic car port and the sleek sable luxury sedan with pitch-black tinted windows that was pulling into the drive.

The ever-obscure bachelor who now lived in this mansion owned enough business and real-estate across the country to make his evasiveness not only mysterious, but irritating to media executives everywhere. He was wealthy beyond measure and, if his very few photos were to be believed, he was exceptionally handsome. Hence, what everyone really wanted to know was – what was his deal? Why wasn't he married or in a partnership? Why didn't he give interviews? Why did Patrick Sinclair seem to hide from the very light of day?

The car came to a silent stop. A loud murmur arose and spread like a wave through the waiting crowd. I couldn't help it; I had to admit that I was curious too. I wondered what the man looked like in person.

He had technically owned this mansion for more than three months. While it had remained empty so that construction workers could make a plethora of repairs on the building, I was a bit befuddled that, not once during that time, had I managed to look out my apartment window and catch a glimpse of Mr. Money Bags. Didn't he come to supervise or anything?

Apparently not.

*But he lives here now*, I thought to myself. A shiver ran through me. As of tonight, he would take up residence in his new home. *And it's right across the street from mine...*

I shook myself out of my somewhat pubescent thoughts and focused on the car. So many people were in-between it and myself that I would most likely not stand a chance at catching sight of the man.

The car door opened and I squinted as the throng of party-goers surged forward.

A strange numbing sort of chill stole over me as he gracefully stepped out of the back seat, straightening to his full height. I could only see him from behind; he had yet to turn in my direction, but the power of his presence was enough that, even from this distance, I was fairly overwhelmed. It temporarily stole my breath.

I looked around me. No one else seemed to be as affected. Didn't they notice it? That strange sort of... well – *magic* about him?

"Uh-huh," Came a drawl beside me. "I knew it. You too. You're Sinclair's little love-sick puppy."

I blinked, rather forcefully pulling my gaze from Sinclair's form and looking up at Simon as he glared down at me. "What?" I demanded as I stepped away from him, not really caring, suddenly, if he fell or not.

But he didn't fall. Instead, his green gaze narrowed. "I expected better from you, you know. Of all people. You're not one of those shallow bimbos from the marketing department. You're – you're..." He searched his muddled mind for a word. "You're deeper." He paused, closed his eyes momentarily, and then re-opened them. "So, why do you care about this ass hole? Why did you even *come* here?" He demanded, his tone raising slightly.

Luckily for us, no one was paying attention. All eyes were on the gorgeous blond billionaire dressed in – as far as I could tell – a black sports coat and black jeans with black motorcycle boots.

*How did I notice all of that so fast?* I asked myself. But when Simon took a step toward me, an alarm bell went off somewhere in my head and thoughts of Patrick Sinclair took a back seat.

“Simon, you need to calm down. I refuse to have a conversation of any type with you when you’re three sheets to the wind. Why don’t we go inside and sit down?”

He shook his head and, just like that, my throat went dry. He pointed a finger at me. Every muscle in my body got ready to fight. Call it a woman’s intuition. I sensed trouble, and I readied for it.

And then a strange heat began to tingle along the back of my neck. My skin felt flushed, though not uncomfortably. A sense of calm stole over my body. It was as if someone had just given me an injection of liquefied reassurance. Here I was, facing a man much larger than I who was drunk as a skunk and unreasonably peeved, yet, quite unexpectedly, I felt no fear at all.

I blinked in confusion.

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache and then he let it go and focused on me again. He, too, blinked, as if he couldn’t quite make out the features of my face. But that didn’t stop him from continuing with his confrontation. “Why did you say ‘no’ when I asked you to go to dinner with me?” He asked. His tone had dropped once more, but it wasn’t a safe kind of quiet. It was the deadly kind of quiet laced with

malice and dripping with acid. I was amazed that he wasn't slurring his speech at all. He must have either had practice speaking drunk – or he was just that pissed off.

"That was months ago, Simon." I kept my voice even and calm. It was surprisingly easy. "And it's irrelevant. Now, let's go inside. We can ask someone to make us some coffee. I could use some too."

He took another step toward me and made to grab my wrist. I pulled away, side-stepping him. He suddenly cried out in pain and fell to his knees in the grass. He was clutching his head so tightly that his knuckles were turning white.

"Simon?" I knelt beside him, abruptly concerned. "My god, are you okay? What's happening – what's wrong?"

His only answer was another harsh cry of agony. My breath caught in my throat as, before my eyes, a thin trickle of blood trailed from the crevice of Simon's right ear. "Oh, no..." The calm I'd felt was lifting fast. I looked up to catch the attention of anyone who might be near me. "Does anyone have a cell phone?" I asked as I glanced up to meet their gazes.

And that was when I realized that everyone had become strangely still – quiet. They moved aside in mute obedience as two large black-clad men from the security detail stepped through the crowd to stand beside my kneeling form. They flanked another, third man. He was gazing down at me with eyes like the ocean.

It was Patrick Sinclair.

"Take care of him," Sinclair spoke softly. His men moved immediately, grabbing Simon under his arms and lifting him off of the ground in one smooth move.

At the same time, in an act that bespoke of a chivalry I'd long ago thought was dead, Sinclair knelt beside me so that we were on eye-level. I found myself trapped in the bottomless blue of his orbs. He offered me his hand. "I apologize for the behavior of one of my guests," he said softly. His voice was magnificently accented and his pitch was movie-star striking. If I'd been able to think at the time, I would have placed him somewhere between Yorkshire and Essex, England. But despite the fact that his men carted off a friend of mine who might be seriously ill, all I could really do was stare back at Patrick Sinclair. And take his hand.

"It won't happen again, I promise." His fingers curled possessively over mine and he lifted me with ease so that I was once more standing.

I'm a relatively tall woman, but Sinclair stood half a foot taller than me, at least. And his pictures seriously had not done him justice. He was, singularly, the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes upon.

He smiled at me, flashing perfect, straight white teeth. "I was just about to give the media their much longed-for tour of my property. Perhaps you would care to join me?"

I gazed up at him for a long, speechless moment. And then, thankfully, sense returned to me and I shook my head, clearing it. "I-I'm sorry, Mr. Sinclair," I stuttered. "Though I have to admit that I'm curious, the truth is..."

"You're tired." He finished my sentence for me and something flashed in the depths of his sapphire eyes. I couldn't tell what it was, it was there and gone so fast. However, he slowly released my hand and nodded graciously. "Of course. I do understand. The night grows deep and you face an early morning. I trust you are from the Foundation?"

I nodded. "Mr. Ross thanks you for your generous contribution, Mr. Sinclair."

He cocked his head to one side, studying me with interest. “Please, call me Patrick,” he told me, and he appeared suddenly, inexplicably weary. But that look, too, was quickly replaced, chased-away, and might as well never have been there. “And, not to worry,” he continued. “Your Mr. Ross has already thanked me – in grandiose – for the donation.” Sinclair nodded to something over my shoulder. I turned to see my boss standing with several other co-workers, the drink in his hand raised in a toast to Patrick Sinclair.

I flinched. Geraldine Ross could be a bit much at times. But he was a good man and that was the only reason I continued to work for him.

“Sorry,” I found myself saying, feeling the need to apologize for what had most likely been profuse flattery and gratitude from my employer. I turned back to face him once more.

“No need,” Patrick assured me, shaking his head once, slowly. His eyes were again locked on mine. “At least allow me to walk you to your car or provide you with a ride home.”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary,” I told him. “I walked.”

His eyebrow shot up. He glanced down at my heels.

“No, what I mean is,” I blushed furiously and fidgeted. I forced myself *not* to begin playing with my hair. “I just live right across the street.” I turned and pointed. “In those apartments.”

He gazed at them for a long while and then his eyes slowly trailed back to mine. There was something unnerving about the vigilant deliberation and inescapable ease with which he held me in his regard. When he looked at me, I felt trapped. Deliciously, *dangerously* trapped.

“Very well.” He said then, causing me to blink as he slowly took a small step back. With his slight retreat came a strange emptiness. Lonely, but liberating.

“I’m afraid I must return to my other guests.” Sinclair’s gaze slipped from my eyes to my lips and back again. “Sweet dreams.” He whispered. He nodded once and then turned and walked back through the crowd. It immediately surged after him, leaving behind a few curious and plainly jealous on-lookers who chose to stay and stare at me in a distinctly non-friendly manner.

I ignored them. My body felt oddly warm. And yet, I shivered. I closed my eyes and immediately, behind my closed lids, Patrick’s gaze stared back at me. I wondered how long it would continue to do so. I shook my head, opened my eyes and blew out a sigh. I definitely needed sleep.

And a shower.

## **Chapter Two: The Latent**

As I made my way down the circular drive to the wrought-iron gate that waited at the front of his property, even the few revelers who'd remained behind to shoot dirty looks at me decided to move on, following in Sinclair's wake.

A gate keeper nodded politely to me when I approached, and opened the gate for me. I stepped through and onto the side walk.

And then I stopped at stared up at the window I knew belonged to my apartment. Darkness waited beyond. Darkness and a sleep that I knew damned well would never come. Not now. Not after having met Patrick Sinclair up close and in person.

"Damn." I swore under my breath, threw one last longing glance over my shoulder at the mansion behind me, and then turned back to the stretch of black. There was a bar not too far down the road. And I finally felt as if I could use a drink.

But first, I wanted a change of clothes.

After a brief stop at my apartment to slip into jeans, boots, and a t-shirt, and to brush out my hair, I was back down on the sidewalk and beating a fast path to Papa Zombie's, a bar I particularly enjoyed because, every once in a while, the owner, Ted, allowed me to slip onto the stage and play the drums.

When I passed Sinclair's mansion, I couldn't help but give it a glance. It appeared as if almost none of the party-goers had gone. Every light in the giant manor was lit, people rambled in and out the front door, and Sinclair's black sedan was still in the drive.

Laying eyes on the shining black car filled me with an unnerving sense of longing. And not just longing, but... *need*. It pulled at my insides with shocking force. I almost

stopped in my tracks, but somehow managed to rip my gaze away and keep one foot moving in front of the other.

And then I was pushing through the front door of the club and finding a stool at the bar. The Penguins were playing the Bruins. They were tied. I decided that my butt could stay glued to that stool all night long, if need be. As long as the beer kept coming and Geno kept playing, I'd find a way to put Patrick Sinclair out of my mind.

An hour and a beer and a half later, the guy to my left got up to take a leak and a red-haired woman slid onto the stool in his absence. I turned to nod at her affably but found myself, instead, frozen in the emerald green of her gaze.

"Hi luv," she drawled. She was positively breathtaking, from her long, luxurious red curls to the impossible clarity of her verdant eyes, to the swell of her perfectly sized, perfectly buoyant breasts. I was, at once, a touch jealous and more than a little impressed.

"Umm... Hi?" I responded.

She laughed and it sounded like pixie dust.

"You're overwhelming her, Lizzie."

I turned to find another woman to my right. This one was the very picture of night, with blue-black locks of hair that fell to the curve of her bottom, and eyes of the same color. Her lips were candy-apple red, her skin the color of marble. "Don't let her get to you, luv," she purred, her accent the same as her sisters. In fact, it was familiar. Reminded me of someone... As did something about their faces... But I suddenly felt too fuzzy to figure out what it was.

"Elizabeth always comes on too strong. Got no sense of fair play, my sister. But then, luv, what's the point of playing fair, eh?" The black haired beauty winked at me and

my world tipped on its axis. I'd never been so dizzy in my life. I felt myself falling...  
*falling...* I was sure I would hit the floor of the bar.

But instead, I hit a bed.

It must have been a bed. The sheets or blankets or whatever they were... They were so soft... They caressed my naked flesh. The dizziness was gone and in its place was a delicious weakness, a heavy feeling of deep relaxation. I realized, vaguely, that I wouldn't be able to feel the silkiness of the sheets through my jeans. I must have taken them off.

Was I at home?

I opened my eyes and comprehension hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Shhh," Elizabeth purred as she sat on the bed beside me and very gently brushed a lock of my hair from my neck. "Don't be afraid, my beauty."

"I want a taste."

I slowly turned my head to find the raven-haired sister standing on the other side of the bed. There was something strange about her eyes. The pupils were unnaturally large. My heart beat sped up in my chest to the point that it hammered painfully. I glanced down, half expecting to see it burst through and fly away like Meatloaf's ticker had done in *Bat Out of Hell*.

But it stayed put, of course, and instead, I noticed that I'd been stripped down to my white tank top and panties.

"He'll kill you and you know it, Sonya."

"Then, call him and make it quick. Tell him we have a surprise for him."

With that, Elizabeth smiled, flashing two perfect, sharp fangs.

I stared in stunned disbelief.

As I stared, she nonchalantly pulled a cell phone from the top drawer of the dresser against the wall. She pushed the #2 and then the “Talk” button.

I tried to move – to get up – but I was frozen on the bed, prone and vulnerable. My eyes must have been the size of saucers because Sonya, the black-haired sister, smiled knowingly, showing me her fangs as well.

Again, I tried to break whatever strange hold had been placed upon me. I wanted to sit up, to get off of the bed, to shake my head violently – to wake up from this strange and impossible dream that had suddenly veered so horribly out of control.

This nightmare that I knew, in my sorely hammering heart, was no dream at all. It was a reality that was much, much worse.

Elizabeth’s phone rang once and then I heard a man’s voice on the other end. It was deep and accented and radiated great power. At once, the familiar voice seemed to snake around me, even from this distance, and through the phone’s receiver. I was helpless to suppress a shudder. Sonya and Elizabeth noticed and I closed my eyes to their stares.

“Come to the den, big brother. We have dinner ready for you.”

“What have you done, Elizabeth?” Came that perfect voice. It was tinged with worry, and also frustration.

My mind reeled. *They’re vampires*, I thought... *Real vampires... And Patrick is their brother.*

*That means he’s a vampire, too.*

“Don’t be angry, Patrick. This was just too perfect for us to pass up.” Elizabeth winked at me. “Or for you.”

“You took someone from the banquet, didn’t you.” Said Patrick.

Elizabeth didn’t answer.

“That was reckless and incredibly foolish, Elizabeth. He will be missed.”

“Not ‘he’, big brother. *She*. And I promise, you won’t regret it. Come soon or we’ll enjoy her ourselves.” Elizabeth hung up. I watched, numb, as she moved to a large screen on the wall of what appeared to be a well-appointed bedroom. She switched the monitor on, revealing neon lines of complex architecture. It was a lit up map of the mansion and its estate grounds. A red dot moved through the blue-lit hallways. “He’s on his way.”

Sonya laughed deep in her throat and gently brushed a lock of my hair from my face. “He’ll be so angry when he arrives,” she purred, as if she were delighted that her big brother would be upset with her. “But not for long.” She smiled again, licking her full red lips.

“This needed to be done. He never would have forced her. It was time to take matters into our own hands.”

“Indeed,” Sonya agreed, not taking her eyes from mine.

And then the front door banged open. I noticed that it coincided with the red dot arriving at the small green square on the screen on the wall.

“I can’t believe you’ve done this,” he said as he entered the room like a storm.

And I got my second good look at Patrick Sinclair. Again, it struck me how incredibly handsome he was. Blonde hair, Scottish blue eyes, tall with the perfect athletic build and dressed in black from head to toe... He presented an impossibly commanding figure in a world where men like him simply didn’t exist.

Where as the other guests of the banquet had seen fit to wear tuxes or suits, Patrick Sinclair had simply dressed as he pleased, casual and easy, as if he could go from the dinner table to the saddle of a Harley at a moment's notice.

There was a bit of scruff on his chin, giving him a careless air. And surrounding him was an aura of power so great that it rolled off of him in waves, nearly suffocating in its intensity. Whatever I'd felt earlier, in the court yard, had been exceedingly mild compared to what I felt now. He must have been holding it back then. He was no longer so inclined.

I was not at all surprised that he was a billionaire. Merely being in his presence would most likely make people want to give him money. They would give him anything. Anything he wanted.

His eyes traveled from one of his sisters to the other – and then they fell on me.

There, they stopped. He froze as if stunned. The blue of his eyes darkened until they were nearly black, his pupils growing large, his expression more than a little shocked.

“My god...” He muttered with that beautiful voice. “What have you done...” He whirled on his sisters. They simultaneously took several steps back.

“Did you think you could hide her from us, Patrick?” Sonya asked, then.

“Indeed, Patrick. Her essence called out to us over hundreds of miles.” She straightened a little and rolled her shoulders, apparently attempting to summon a bit of courage. “She’s a latent. Her very existence is a miracle and yet you hover, idle, biding your time. For God’s sake, Patrick, she flies in her dreams. You must not make us wait any longer.”

“We’ve waited long enough.” Sonya agreed softly. Her expression was almost sad. Pained.

At that moment, I’d have bet real money that I was the single most confused person on the planet.

Patrick seemed to consider their words for a moment and then he turned back to me. I felt the weight of his gaze like lead on my limbs, at once as heavy and inescapable as manacles and chains. I had no idea what kind of magic vampires possessed, but it was pulling a doozy of a job on my will power. The only thing I could manage was to finally rip my gaze away from his and turn my head. It took every last ounce of strength that I possessed.

“She’s a fighter.” That, from Elizabeth. I recognized her voice now.

“Latents always have been,” Sonya said. “Which is why you must take her now, Patrick.”

I knew he was still watching me. That weight had not lifted. Yet, he answered his sister. “She will be at my side for all of eternity, Sonya. I will not have her hate me.”

“You can’t afford to let her make this decision on her own, brother,” Elizabeth said. “We have always made this horrid mistake in the past. And look at what it has brought us.”

“Guinevere, Helen... Latents attract danger, Patrick. And, without fail, they have invited their own deaths, denying us a queen, for thousands of years. Will you continue to condemn us to this fate?” Sonya asked.

I couldn’t help it when I turned back to look at her and her sister. They were gazing at their brother imploringly – even as he gazed at me.

“Our powers are half of what they once were,” Elizabeth whispered as she took another step toward her brother. “We need a queen, Patrick.” She came to stand by his side.

Sonya then began to move around him. “She is perfection, Patrick.” She leaned in to whisper in his ear. “*Take her.*”

And then both sisters grew still where they stood at his sides. And the nearly unbearable weight of three vampire gazes were piled upon me.

Patrick closed his eyes, as if to spare me. But it didn’t take a genius to tell that he was trying to gain some sense of composure – and that it wasn’t working.

Utter life-preserving desperation flooded my veins, fueling my muscles with enough strength to push up against the mattress and scoot back a few inches.

Patrick’s eyes flew open. His irises were now completely and eerily black. I was caught in them, trapped in their murky darkness. I recognized that all-pupil look now. It was hunger. Uncontrollable and undeniable. It was what happened to a jaguar’s eyes just before he pounced upon his prey.

Sonya and Elizabeth smiled simultaneously and each took an arm of his black sports coat, shrugging it off of his broad shoulders. He moved forward, placing his knee on the end of the bed, and then loomed above me, one hand planted firmly on either side of my head.

His muscles were corded tight and stood out beneath his tight black T-shirt. He smelled of expensive cologne and something else – something more primal. Inescapable.

And then I heard him in my head.

... *Trust me...* He told me. *I won’t harm you...*

*I don't want to die*, my mind screamed.

*No*, he told me. Even in my head, his voice was like iron wrapped in silk. *You will not die. Not ever.*

He parted his lips and I saw his fangs. He lowered his head to my neck. I felt his breath against my skin, cold as ice and hot as fire.

And then he bit me.

The rush was unimaginable. Compared to any pleasure I'd ever experienced in my life, it was like chocolate to water. I *wanted* him to drink. I wanted him to stay like that, above me, against me, locked within me, forever. I felt my blood pump out of me with every pull he made and should have been terrified. At the very least, disgusted. But what I felt, instead, was desire, sharp and cruel – and a kind of sexual bliss that was just as exacting.

A low rumble escaped his throat like a growl and his left hand fisted in my hair, possessively. He began to drink deeper. I gasped at the sensation, feeling the blood race to meet his demands. I found myself arching my back so that I was pressed against him. In turn, he leaned into me and his other arm snaked around my waist, holding me fast. I was in erotic heaven.

Was it possible to climax as you died? Was I about to find out?

*I told you, luv. You will not die.*

The voice in my head was admonishing, but gentle. Patrick Sinclair swallowed one last time and then lingered for a moment, his teeth embedded in the taut flesh of my throat, his arms securing me like bands of steel. I could literally feel his mind exerting

control over his body, telling it to stop. And I could sense that it was more difficult for him to do than anything had been in a very long time.

Slowly – oh so slowly – he pulled those long, sharp teeth out of my neck.

The aura he now gave off was animalistic in its dominance. He straightened, gently lowering me back down upon the mattress. I peered up at him through blurry, half-closed lids.

“It is begun. Give her the wine,” he commanded. There was no room in his tone for argument. Elizabeth turned to a side table beside the bed. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a crystal decanter filled with red liquid on a silver serving tray. Beside it rested two waiting crystal goblets. She un-stopped the decanter, pouring a good amount of its liquid into one of the glasses.

“We will continue this when I return.” He pushed away from the bed and stood, taking his jacket from Sonya and sliding it on. His gaze never left mine. “Don’t even consider, for a moment, tasting her for yourselves,” he ordered, shooting a meaningful look at each of his sisters. They both nodded. “See that she is well and, above all, don’t let her leave the estate.”

He moved to the door and took a moment to compose himself, drawing a deep breath and releasing it through a mouth that no longer sported sharp, white fangs.

In the sleepy recesses of my pleasure and fear-addled mind, fleeting thoughts bounced around. It was a moment before I realized that they weren’t my own... *damage control... explain her missing from work... my queen...*

They were Patrick's thoughts. His taking my blood had created some sort of link that remained, even unconsciously. But I barely cared. My eyelids fluttered, heavy. My mind wanted oblivion.

Elizabeth sat beside me on the bed and, with one arm beneath my shoulders, she lifted me so that I was sitting with my back against her. She put the glass to my lips. "Drink, my queen."

I simply possessed no faculty to resist. I swallowed. The wine burned beautifully and filled me with unnatural warmth. I drank deeply, knowing, at once, that the liquid was somehow more than mere wine. There was magic in that glass and it slid down my throat like a healing potion.

"I will return shortly." Patrick Sinclair opened the door. "Remain vigilant. Do not forget that she is a latent. Her powers have now been released." He left then and I closed my eyes, swallowing the last of the wine. The glass was removed.

And warm, safe darkness embraced me.

### **Chapter Three: The Power**

The lamp made a satisfactory shattering sound as it hit the wall above Sinclair's head and then dropped, in a shower of sharp, tinkling shards, to the black marble floor.

He straightened slowly and eyed me with wary determination, as a lion tamer might watch his new pet. I glared at him.

"You killed him."

He said nothing, not bothering to deny it.

Anger seared my veins and though I hadn't even noticed it there before, a book end from a shelf to my right was suddenly air borne, soaring through the room and straight for the vampire king.

As he had the lamp, he ducked with ease, evading my wrath as if it were nothing more than a pesky fly.

His eyes never left mine. "You need to calm down, my love. And gain control."

"Control?" I gritted out through clenched teeth. "*Control? I have* no control! I'm a prisoner in your home and you murdered a friend of mine!"

This time, I picked up the other book end with my own two hands – and when I did, I noticed that the palms of my hands were beginning to glow. I dropped the book end. Warmth spread up through my wrists and into my finger tips. My heart beat sped up and a sense of urgency engulfed me.

On pure instinct, I spun around and held my hands palm-out toward the much-targeted Patrick Sinclair. Fire literally leapt from my hands and raced across the room, scorching the wall where Sinclair had been standing a millisecond before. He was now standing at my side, having blurred there with vampire speed.

My eyes felt as wide as golf balls. My breath hitched in my chest. I could not believe what I had just done. What I'd been doing all morning. "I'm Drew Barrymore," I muttered. "And Carrie." I gazed down at my hands.

"Your powers will continue to present themselves over the following days," Patrick told me, his tone unusually tender for one who had just had a lamp, a book end, and a ball of fire thrown at his head. "And they will grow. You must learn to manage them."

Tears welled in my eyes. "Oh god... What the hell have you done to me?" I asked, barely managing a whisper.

"You are a latent. A rare individual whose powers are released with a vampire's kiss."

I spun on him and could very nearly *feel* my eyes shooting daggers at him. "Is that what you call that?" My voice was unnaturally high. Hysterical, almost. "Sinking your fangs into my neck and drinking my blood? A *kiss*?" I was shaking, but I ignored it. "How convenient for you. What would you call killing Simon Gray?"

His blue eyes took on a shadowed cast. His tone was low, his voice powerful, as he said, "It is what it is, luv. Make no mistake. I will kill any man who dares to touch you." He took a step forward, closing the distance between us. His nearness was intoxicating – almost suffocating. "Know this now and remember it well, for you've the power to save a great many lives as long as you do."

The rebel in me wanted to lash out, to hit him, to scream and strike back. But the rebel in me was tied up and gagged and cowering in some dark corner in the very troubled recesses of my mind.

With each passing minute that had composed my afternoon and night, I had become more horrified. First, I'd *felt* Simon's death. I had felt it as if I'd killed him myself... And then I'd awoken from sleep to find that objects were hovering in mid-air beside the bed that I'd been laid in. Startled, I'd sat up beneath the sheets and everything had crashed to the floor.

Then there were strange words pouring out of my mouth. Without understanding how I knew, I was absolutely positive that they were swear words – in different languages. *Lots* of different languages. And they just kept coming. Apparently, I could speak every bloody language on the planet.

I heard the plants growing outside, the animals speaking, the very clouds hinting to me that, if I so chose, I could pull lightning out of their depths.

It was like living in one of my most powerful dreams – but without the control that I so desperately needed. Without that control, the dream could only become a nightmare. Force without focus. A disaster waiting to happen.

And then I'd looked in the mirror atop one of the ornate dressers against one wall. Two perfect puncture wounds marked the side of my neck, so stark in their red-black contrast to my skin, that they felt like a brand.

And I'd wondered...

“Am...” Even my whisper shook. “Am I a vampire?”

At this, another dark flicker passed through his eyes, but he smiled a somewhat bitter smile and stepped back. “Unfortunately, no.” He turned away from me and I felt as though I'd been drowning in chocolate and could finally come up for plain old air. He strolled toward the bookend that lay on the floor against the opposite wall. “Despite what

legend maintains, the fact of the matter is, no vampire possesses the ability to turn a mortal without that mortal's consent." He bent and lifted the book end and then casually walked back to the shelf and set it down. "All I have done is awakened you to your potential."

"Then why am I here?" I asked. His distance afforded me courage. "What do you want from me?"

He focused those impenetrable orbs on me once more. I tried to swallow past the dry spot forming in my throat.

"My people have been without a queen for too long." He paused. "*I* have been without a queen for too long." He came toward me. "Have you any idea what it's like to wake every night to an emptiness that has grown larger since the night before? To do this for decades? Centuries? Until, one night, you are certain that the hole inside of you could not possibly grow any larger... And yet it does, swallowing you whole for another century – and another?" He moved closer. I found myself stepping back.

I shook my head. Of course I didn't know what it was like to go for centuries feeling empty. I was a human being, for god's sake. His question was rhetorical.

"We've grown weak without the guiding strength of a female sovereign. You will be that sovereign, luv." He paused and then added, "You will be our queen."

I blinked. I was utterly perplexed. How could I be their queen if I wasn't a vampire? I would die in a space of time that, to a vampire, must feel like blinking.

Patrick smiled. It was predatory and promising. He took one last step toward me and I found myself up against the wall. And then his arm shot out so fast that I literally could

not see it move, and his fingers encircled my throat. I half expected him to squeeze, but they just rested there, threatening. Possessive.

“A mortal’s consent and a mortal’s willingness are two separate things, my sweet,” he said. He must have been holding his power in check, sparing me, up until that very moment because I suddenly felt it rush over me like a tidal wave, wrapping around me like the leather straps of a cat o’ nine tails, forbidden and sensual and painful all at once. My eyes closed of their own accord. I willed myself to suppress a moan. I would not allow him to know the effect he had upon me. I would not. I *could* not...

And then he began to squeeze. Ever so slightly.

“You will consent to join me, luv, I promise.” He leaned in and his breath whispered across my lips as he spoke. “You’ll find I can be quite persuasive when the situation calls for it.”

His thumb came up to caress the line of my jaw. I found myself pressing my hands against the brick wall of his chest, half-heartedly attempting to push him away. It was a futile endeavor and he immediately punished me for my efforts by releasing another wave of his power. At once, I felt as though I’d had a tall glass of champagne and two hydrocodones and some kind of merciless aphrodisiac. Times ten. It stole my breath and gave it back in ragged pieces. Moisture gathered shamelessly between my legs.

With his thumb, Patrick turned my head, exposing the length of my neck.

My heart beat out a frantic rhythm against my rib cage.

“Please...” I whispered. It was all I could manage.

Gently, lovingly, he kissed the curve of my chin... His lips were cool and dry. They trailed to the top of my neck. Shivers wracked my body. And then he removed his right hand and pulled my hair away from my throat with his left.

I knew what was coming. Patrick had created some sort of link between us when he'd taken my blood. I knew, now, what he was feeling. I could sense his anger, his hunger, his desire, his jealousy. Lacing these emotions, like fine wisps of lace tied to black leather, were other emotions... Different and strange to Patrick. Previously unknown.

Tender. Compassionate.

But they were helpless to stop the influence of his more powerful, more ancient and desperate needs. Patrick Sinclair wanted to taste me right then and there, in that moment, more than he wanted anything else in the world.

I held my breath as his teeth grazed my skin. My fingers curled tight in the black material of his shirt. I knew he could sense my fear. I knew he could smell my desire. And I knew it acted like kerosene on a fire already raging within him.

When he finally pierced my flesh with his fangs, he did so with deliberate languidness. It was maddening. Slowly, his teeth claimed me, driving deep, sinking until they held me fast and any movement on my part only increased the pleasure – and the pain.

I was incapable of coherent thought. All that existed in my world was my burning body, my blood, the vampire king – and his truly wicked kiss.

## **Chapter four: The Punishment**

“Bind her.”

I gasped at the command and whirled to face the men who were coming at me from either side. “Get back!” I screamed, gathering heat in the palms of my hands.

Strong fingers wrapped around my wrists and Patrick leaned in, his lips against my ear. “None of that, luv. There’s no escape for you here. Not tonight.” With great strength, he spun me around and then yanked me against him, holding me fast in his steely grip. “Not this time.”

I felt the magic in my palms sputter and go out. My eyes went wide. He smiled, flashing fangs. His deep blue eyes had grown dark as an ocean’s abyss, his pupils expanding hungrily.

Again, he leaned in to whisper in my ear, excluding the other men in the room, who waited to do his bidding the moment he gave them the signal. I heard him draw in a deep breath, smelling the shampoo in my hair and most likely other things as well – my fear, my anger, my magic.

“A vampire’s punishment of his chosen bride can take all manner of forms,” he said softly, allowing the powerful pitch of his accented voice to wrap around me as forcibly as the steel bands of his arms. “And a king’s punishment of his queen...” He chuckled. “Well, that can be quite interesting, indeed.”

With that, he twisted my arms so that both wrists were held firmly behind my back in one of his impossibly strong hands. His other hand moved up to fist possessively in my hair. I gasped as he yanked my head back, exposing the column of my neck. “I dare say

you'll enjoy this, luv," he said then, his lips moving against the flesh of my throat. "But not as much as I will."

And then he raised his head and I could feel him communicating with the men behind me. It was a sort of knowledge I'd acquired since falling into his grasp – I could sense it when he spoke telepathically with his subjects. Now was no exception. As he suddenly pulled away, his men crowded around me, grabbing my arms in no fewer than six bruising grips.

I struggled uselessly, attempting with all of my might to summon a bit of the power I'd learned, only recently, that I possessed. But Patrick's own darker magic was too strong. It suffocated the flame of power within me, rendering it useless.

He smiled a beautiful and terribly cruel smile as the men wrapped my wrists in leather straps and raised them above my head, connecting metal rings on the straps to steel chains that hung from the ceiling.

I cried out at the indignity and pulled on the chains, but before I could raise my legs up and attempt to climb the chains binding me, one of the men who had grabbed me moved behind me to take hold of my chin with one hand and my hair with the other, once more pulling me back to expose my throat.

My heart beat sped up painfully. I knew what was coming even before Patrick blurred into motion. In one second, he was several feet away and watching me struggle – in the next, he had closed the distance between us and his teeth were sinking into my neck.

Again, I cried out, but this time in ecstasy. As much as I hated it – and he knew that I did – it never failed to bring me vast amounts of pleasure when Patrick Sinclair, king of

the vampires, bit into my neck. Or my wrist. Or my leg. It didn't matter which vein he chose. The feeling was inescapable and damningly delicious.

My eyes closed and I shuddered, unable to suppress the moan that escaped my lips. As if in answer, he drank deeper, pressing his strong body into mine. The leather straps bit into my wrists and pain mingled with the pleasure. I heard the rumble of his low growl against my throat and knew, without a doubt, that whatever I felt, he felt it ten-fold.

At length, I began to feel weak. My knees felt shaky and with each draw of my blood that Patrick took, I sensed my strength draining away.

And, suddenly, I realized what he was doing. It could have been that Patrick had telepathically given me some sense of his purpose as he drank from me. Knowing the capacity for cruelty that the vampire king possessed, I didn't put it past him. This was no ordinary feeding for Sinclair. He was not merely taking his pleasure from me as he had been since my capture. He was weakening me. He was stealing my will to fight so that the punishment could be meted out without further resistance and any attempt at escape.

I heard him laugh then. In my head.

*This is only the beginning, luv*, he told me. Even in my mind, his voice was silky smooth power, wrapping itself around me like a velvet vice. *You're mine; I owe my sisters for helping me see that... Can't believe I waited so long...*

His words snaked around my consciousness, lulling me into a stupor of surrendering bliss.

*But you continue to resist me*, he admonished, his tone coming stronger now. There was anger in his unspoken words, even as there was undeniable lust – possibly even

something deeper. *I can't have that, luv.* He growled again, and this time the sound flashed through my mind like lightning. *No more...*

Again, I moaned. For, at that moment, he sent an orgasm rushing through me merely by willing that it do so. As I climaxed, Patrick pulled one last time, long and deep, swallowing the precious red liquid that gave me life.

And then, as I hung from my binds, spent and drained, he pulled his fangs from my neck and stepped back. Through half-closed lids, I watched him close his eyes, composing himself and forcing his fangs back to where they'd come from.

When he looked up and opened his eyes once more, they were again the calm sea-blue that I'd found so stunning the night we'd met.

He stared at me for a long, silent moment. It was a look of hunger, of patent desire and of maddening need.

Somehow, I managed to remain standing. Even beneath the weight of that indomitable gaze and even after the onslaught of weakening pleasure that had been dolled out by its master.

"Your strength continues to astound me, my love." He spoke softly, but aloud. "I must admit that it is part of what drew me to you." He took another step back then, putting distance between us as he moved toward a throne-like chair that waited on the raised dais several feet away. "However," he continued, "as king, I must insist that my new queen stop attempting to escape her destiny."

With that, he turned around and claimed his throne, taking his seat with the grace of someone who'd learned to move for a thousand years. "Begin." His command echoed off of the dark walls of the stone chamber.

A wooden iron-banded door opened up in the wall to my right and two men dragged a third person into the torch-lit room. The prisoner fought madly, but it did him no good. He was a handsome young man, probably no older than twenty-five years of age. He was tall and muscular and, unfortunately, familiar to me.

Fear is the best motivator and, at that moment, my own fear surged to life, issuing renewed strength to my limbs. I straightened and tugged at my bonds, trying, desperately, to clear my head enough to use my magic.

“Don’t bother gagging him; I want her to hear his screams.” Patrick’s gaze never left mine. I could feel him watching me even as I was watching the prisoner.

“Please, Patrick. Whatever you’re going to do – don’t.” My voice was not nearly as strong as I had hoped it would be. I was so weak. He’d taken so much of my blood; and his cloak of dark magic was draped heavily over me. He wouldn’t let it up – not even a little.

Patrick cocked his head to one side and regarded me with a gentle fondness. It was so strange when he looked at me like that. There was tenderness in the beautiful features of the devil. And the most bizarre thing about it was that I knew it was genuine. I could feel it – just as I felt everything about the vampire king.

The young man that they now chained to the ground in front of me was a musician. I’d met him in a bar a few nights ago. That night, I’d run away from the mansion, using the magic I’d gained to meld through one of the walls and actually take to the skies when I’d reached the other side. Flying was my favorite of my new abilities and I used it whenever I got the opportunity. Unfortunately, flying is a basic ability of vampires as well, so it wasn’t at all difficult for them to come after me.

Sometimes, we forget the important things...

When I landed in the alley behind the club that night, I'd heard the band playing. They sounded like Nickelback. I like Nickelback. The music had drawn me inside.

I found a seat at the back where I could keep my eye on the door and I ordered a beer. Then I listened. After a few drinks, I was even closing my eyes and listening. I had paid special attention to the drummer because I, myself, loved to drum. It was one of the few things in this god-forsaken world that managed to take my mind off of my life – at least, before I'd met Patrick Sinclair, it was, anyway.

Going into that bar was a horrible mistake, as I was learning now. It was a horrible, dangerous mistake, for one thing, to escape from the mansion. But it was an even worse mistake to escape from the mansion and then give another man my attentions. No matter what form those attentions might take.

To be honest, it hadn't been entirely my fault. The alcohol was partly to blame. But there was also the drummer. He'd been as drawn to me as I was to him. And once the band took their break, he went into a back room, got cleaned up, and then came out and sat down in my booth across from me.

In all fairness, I'd told him to leave.

But he'd smiled a beautiful smile and asked me if I was in a band. I blinked, thrown for a moment. Then I asked him what would make him wonder such a thing. He laughed and admitted that he'd caught me drumming along with him – he mimed a tapping on the table and I blushed.

"No," I said. "I'm not in a band. I just like the drums." I took a drink of my beer and then added, "They're good for relieving pent up frustrations."

He laughed and it was a beautiful sound. I'd heard better laughs, admittedly, but for a human, he was quite charming.

"Yeah, beating the crap out of something for a while will usually do the trick."

And from there, we had talked. I don't know how long I'd been in the bar when the vampires came for me. I felt them, first. It was something carried on the wind; a sensation in the air around me.

Like Spiderman's danger sense.

I stood up and told the drummer that I had to leave. He asked me why and stood to walk me out, but I shook my head. "No. Stay here." I slipped my coat on. "And if anyone asks if you saw me, you have no idea who the hell they're talking about."

I must have said this with enough gravity that it hit home with him that I wasn't kidding around. Someone was after me. His expression became patently concerned.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" He asked.

I smiled a wry smile and turned to leave. "You have no idea."

That was then.

This was now.

And the drummer was chained to metal loops in the stone floor. Once the men finished securing him and stepped out of his line of sight, his eyes locked with mine.

"You!" He tried to sit up, but the chains prevented him from doing so. His eyes searched my face. His expression pleaded, *What the hell is going on?*

"Oh god..." I muttered, yanking violently against my bonds. The movement caused a wave of dizziness to wash over me. I closed my eyes against it. Patrick's gaze burned into

me. I opened my eyes again and looked at the vampire king. “Patrick, please, let him go...” I could only whisper this time.

Patrick’s gentle smile turned cold.

As I always could, I felt him communicate telepathically with his men. Two of them stepped forward to tower over the prisoner. He looked up at them apprehensively, but to his credit, he said nothing.

And then one of them pulled back and kicked him hard in the ribs. I heard his boot connect with the drummer’s bones and, at the same time, heard myself cry out against it.

As I did, another intrusive wave of pleasure rolled through me. An orgasm ripped a second cry from my throat, the mind-numbing sensation mingling with the pain in my wrists and my fear for the man being beaten before me.

The other man kicked him then from the other side.

And, again, Patrick sent me reeling into unwanted erotic bliss. I screamed this time, the sensation was so sharp. I felt the straps at my wrists begin to cut as I pulled against them. A thin trickle of blood slowly meandered down one of my raised arms.

Patrick’s desire spiked. If he’d wanted me before, now he was barely holding himself in check. Yet, he remained where he was, seated casually on his throne, as his twisted, malicious punishment continued.

The men beat the drummer, despite my hoarse cries for them – for their king – to stop. And each time they hurt him, Patrick willed my body to betray me. It was sickening to orgasm to the sound of an innocent man’s screams of pain. The dichotomy was so evil that I began to hate myself for ever going into that bar. For ever leaving the mansion.

For ever defying Patrick Sinclair.

And that, of course, was the point of this torture.

It was working.

Tears streamed un-checked down my cheeks. I'd bitten my lip during one of the orgasms that he'd forced upon me and it, along with both of my wrists, was bleeding.

The smell of blood, in fact, was thick in the air of the chamber.

Along with sweat – and sex.

I had nothing left in me by the time the punishment ceased. The only movement I managed was to drop to my knees as Patrick's men unfastened my leather straps. My hair hung around my face and strands of it stuck to my cheeks. My breath was ragged, my heart racing, my mind a muddled mess. My body was on fire and yet strangely numb at the same time.

I knelt there for several silent moments and then slowly looked over at the unconscious man on the floor before me. He was beaten and bloody and I knew that he'd suffered several fractures. I wondered if he was alive.

A basic instinct arose within me; a need to help someone who needed help. It was natural for most humans. I couldn't help it when I made as if to crawl toward him. I only wanted to feel for his pulse.

"Touch him, luv, and he will die." I looked up. Patrick had moved without me seeing him do so. It was a vampire thing. He was now standing beside me, gazing down at me with warning in his dark blue eyes. "That, I can promise you."

I pulled my own gaze away. I hated him in that moment. I hated him more than I'd thought it was possible to hate another human being.

He knelt on one knee beside me. His touch was tender as he placed his palm to the side of my face and forced me to look upon him once more. I could not pull away; he was the one with all of the power this night. He held all of the cards. I'd lost in a big way.

“Have you learned a lesson, my queen?”

He waited for me to answer and I knew that if I didn't, he would only continue his punishment in some other, more horrible manner. So, I swallowed my pride and nodded. Just once.

The expression on his handsome face was victorious, though the thousand-year-old wisdom in his deep gaze bespoke of caution. I may have learned a lesson this night, but he'd learned one about me as well. I was a fighter. And, if not now, then some time in the future, I would take back my wings and fly again.

Of that, I knew, he was certain. After all, he was king for a reason. His chosen queen would not surrender so easily. Some day – some night – I would defy him once more.

And I wondered, in fact, if he might even be looking forward to it.

## **Chapter Five: The Chase**

“Will you ever forgive my brother for what he has done?”

I glared at Elizabeth, but my heart wasn't in it. I looked away to gaze into the fire once more. I wasn't mad at her. I was mad at Patrick. “How can I forgive him? He tortured an innocent man.” *And brought me unbearable pleasure as he did so...* I wasn't sure which part of that was worse.

“If it means anything to you, I have seen to the boy's care. He is healed and will not remember last night's events. He is safe in his own home now.”

I looked back up at her. The fire light danced off of the rich auburn waves of her hair. “*You* did that?” I asked.

She smiled a small smile and took a seat beside me on the divan. “Aye, my queen. I do have some sway in this house,” she shrugged. “Though it's nothing compared to the power Patrick holds, of course. He is the king, after all.”

“He killed Simon,” I told her, not ready to give up on the subject of Patrick's evil just yet.

Elizabeth looked at me for a long time, and then she cocked her head to one side. “My queen, you must know this – that man was deeply troubled. He was not well. If he had not died, he would have killed that night.”

I blinked. “What?” I asked, incredulous. “*Simon*? What are you talking about?”

Elizabeth's expression was at once tired and sad. “A vampire always knows what is in a person's heart,” she told me. As she said this, she gently laid the palm of her hand over my chest. I felt the spark of energy jump from her skin through my shirt and into my body. My eyes widened and her smile returned. “It is the heart which gives life to your

blood. And it is your blood which brings you life. It is the center of your world – and of ours.”

Silence filled the room. Our gazes held for a long while and then her hand softly dropped back to her lap. The king’s sister looked away to stare into the fire of the hearth once more. “You are, by far, the most powerful latent our kind has ever known.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. I still felt as if I was trapped in a waking dream. Sometimes, I literally felt as if I would burst at the seams with all of the magic swirling around in my veins.

“It’ hurts sometimes,” I said softly.

She obviously understood what I was talking about because she nodded. “Once a latent’s powers are released, her magic will grow until it is unbearable.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked. A distinctly nasty kind of fear began to churn up in the pit of my stomach. “What do you mean by ‘unbearable’?”

She sighed and her shoulders dropped. “You must make the change, my queen. Or your powers will overtake you.” She looked at me then. A world of emotion was having a field day behind those green eyes. “You will die.”

I don’t know what my face must have looked like at that moment, but it must have been bad, because she reached for my hand and held it. It brought me no comfort what so ever. I was numb from head to toe and nauseated with terror at the same time. I was also angry. Mad as hell.

“That’s why he bit me, isn’t it,” I asked. My gaze narrowed of its own accord; my field of vision was turning slightly red. “So that I wouldn’t have a choice but to become a vampire. To become a queen.” I think, somewhere, my inner child stood up then and

started playing with matches. My palms began to heat up. The books on the shelf began to tremble in their places; the door rattled in its frame.

Lightning split the sky and thunder shook the window pane.

Elizabeth glanced down at my hands, then around at the unsettled room, and then back up at me. She swallowed and shook her head. “No, my queen. That is not why my brother tasted of you. I admit that it was the reason Sonya and I wanted him to give you the kiss...” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “But not Patrick.” She opened her eyes again and her expression fairly begged me to believe her.

“Patrick took you because he loves you. Because it was torture for him to see you every night, to be near you, to watch you dreaming and to never follow through with what every fiber of his being wanted him to do.” She licked her lips as the wind picked up outside and a book shimmied off of the shelf and landed on the marble floor.

Nervously, she continued. “Can’t you see, my queen? You are made for him – and he for you. Can’t you *feel* it?”

There was so much wrong with what she’d said that I didn’t know where to start.

Patrick had been watching me?

I blinked. *Of course he had*, I realized. *He moved in right across the street. His sisters had accused him of hiding me from them...*

*Oh my god*, I thought. How long? How long had he been waiting? Watching?

And then I realized that it didn’t matter. The important thing – the hellish thing – now, was that I had a choice to make. Become a vampire or die.

“You’re telling me,” I said as I rose, “that I either let your king take away every sunrise and sunset I will ever know – take away color and Springtime and diamonds in the snow – or I will just *die*?”

She rose as well and even took a step back. I could tell that she searching for something to say. I could feel her unease coming off of her in tiny, nervous waves.

“You’ve killed me,” I told her. It wasn’t a question.

“Not if you join us,” she insisted. “To us, the moon is the sun. We don’t miss the day light. Mortals fool themselves into thinking it would be something horrible to go without. But the moon and stars light our nights as fiercely as the sun burns your days. We miss nothing. You must believe me-”

“Must I?” I asked then. She fell silent.

My emotions and thoughts were a jumbled mess and they were blanketed by a rage unlike any I’d ever known. All that I knew for certain was that, at that moment, I wanted to run away. I wanted to be somewhere hell and gone from the Sinclair mansion, far away from the vampires and their immortal plans. I wanted to go back in time, tell my boss I wasn’t going to Sinclair’s party, and then pack up and move to Australia. I like Australia.

Elizabeth’s eyes began to widen.

The room seemed to be receding... Everything around me blurred. Dizziness swept over me and I raised my arms as if to steady myself. But the world tipped on its axis, all the same. Somewhere in all of that blurred topsy-turvy chaos, Patrick’s red-haired sister cried out and lunged toward me.

And then she was gone. And so was the room.

In fact, there was nothing but the feel of sand beneath my fingers, a distant lull of ebbing surf, and the cries of a few sea gulls.

*Sea gulls?*

It took me a moment to realize that I was laying on the ground and that my eyes were closed. I opened them and stared down at a dark, sandy beach. It was night. I rolled over and looked up. The full moon shone bright, lighting the outline of the coast, which seemed to go on for miles.

The beach was deserted.

I waited a moment, just to be sure I could do so without falling, and then I got my feet underneath me and looked up and down the long line of sand and water.

I shook my head, disbelieving. I recognized this place. I'd been here for my college graduation. My friends and I – it was the Gold Coast.

“Oh, you have got to be shitting me.”

If it weren't for the fact that I'd been forced to grow used to my burgeoning powers over the last several days, this one would have utterly floored me. As it was, I was stunned. It would appear, for all the world, as if I'd *teleported* – for lack of a better word – clear across the world. In the blink of an eye.

Yet another impossibility to chalk up to latent powers.

“Oh, *Christ!*” I hollered. “*Now what?!*” I looked up at the clear night sky and held out my hands, beseechingly. “What the hell am I supposed to do?!” I spun in a circle, utterly directionless and without a clue as to where I should go or what I should do.

Eventually, I sank back down in the sand. I folded my arms on my knees and rested my forehead on them.

*Okay, I told myself. Just think. You wanted out of the mansion. You wanted to be away from Sinclair. Well, now you are... Now if you can just figure out a way to stay alive without becoming a vampire, you'll be fine.*

***Tell me where you are, luv.***

My head snapped up. I looked around. But I was still alone. The question had come, not from outside – but from within.

***Where. Are. You.***

It was Patrick, his tone impatient and demanding. Across all of these miles? I knew that he'd created a bond between us, but I'd had no idea it was so strong.

***You are my queen, he told me, plainly. I will find you anywhere.***

*No, you won't!* I mentally screamed at him, at once feeling trapped, even on this beach with not another soul in sight and nothing but water to the horizon. *I will **not** be a vampire! I'll find a way out of this,* I thought furiously. *And...* I stood up and looked around, striving for some sense of purpose or direction. I had to get help. Help of a powerful kind. *And...,* I continued. *You'll never see me again!*

Low laughter rolled through my mind like thunder and wrapped around me like strands of spider's silk.

I gritted my teeth, hating the way my body automatically responded to the sound of his voice and the power it commanded.

***You're on a beach...*** Came his voice again.

*Crap!* I'd given that much away already? How? It must have been in my subconscious thoughts... His reach was deep, indeed.

I tried with all of my might to throw up a mental wall. I began muttering mental gibberish – in every language on the planet – hoping that I could throw him off of my trail. In the meantime, I ran.

*You are only weakening yourself, my love. Do you believe you can outrun me?*

*Where do you think you will go? There is no place on this planet where you can hide from me.*

*Get out of my head!* I stopped with the gibberish and screamed at him in English. I couldn't help it. He just knew how to push my buttons.

More laughter. *Keep talking, my sweet.*

I stopped running. He'd sounded clearer just then. Stronger. Closer.

Was he actually moving toward me?

No, it couldn't be. I shook my head. I knew he could move with blurring speed. And, that was a heck of a lot faster than a plane could move. But he still had an entire ocean to cross... The flight was something like fourteen hours. I had at least a *few* hours, didn't I?

*Ah... So, you're in the land of thieves. Fitting that they should then steal my future bride from me as well.*

Oh my god! I'd just given myself away!

I tried to take to the skies, but when I raised my arms and attempted to lift off, nothing happened. I felt glued to the Earth. That power simply wasn't there for the taking. Confused and frustrated, I closed my eyes and, in the hopes of teleporting once more, I began thinking of other places... Easter Island... Greece...

Again, nothing happened.

And once more, Patrick's laughter whipped at my consciousness.

I began to run again. Desperation fueled my body and my long legs ate up the sand at a good pace. Before long, I was off of the beach and up on a board walk of some sort. Still no one in sight. I paused for only a moment, then continued at break-neck speed. I had no idea what I was even looking for. I figured I would either know it when I saw it.

Or Patrick would catch me.

Either way, I wasn't ready to give up just yet.

***Why do you continue to fight me?*** Patrick's voice was tinged with something that I couldn't quite put my finger on. It made me feel tired. ***Would it truly be so bad?***

I didn't answer. I didn't need to. Whatever information he wanted from me, he could simply dig out of me on his own. Instead, I concentrated on where I was and, despite the weakening influence of his mental connection, I managed to notice a symbol in one of the windows I passed as I ran by.

A pyramid with an all-seeing eye above it. Below the symbol was a list of services: "Palm-reading, practical spells, Tarot cards, a wide selection of rare spell components."

I stepped back and looked up. Whoever owned the shop probably lived on the second floor.

I bit my lip. It was a hopeless plan and I knew it. But I'd already learned that vampires existed. Maybe witches did too. And I was desperate.

I knocked on the door.

***They can't help you, luv.***

He was closer, still.

***Will you drag another innocent mortal into our affair?***

Closer...*Shut up!* I screamed. Tears were building in my eyes. I didn't want to kiss the sun good-bye. And I didn't want to die. I'd never known such despair. I knocked on the door again, this time banging on it with abandon.

A light came on in the upstairs window.

A man's face appeared behind the glass. His skin was dark and his features looked as if his heritage were half Aborigine and half Caucasian. He peered down at me and I waved frantically. "Please help me!" I called up, hoping against hopes that he wouldn't discount me for a raving lunatic and greet me at the door with a baseball bat.

He frowned at me for a moment and then put his hand up, palm-out, in a sign for me to wait. A few minutes later, he was unlocking the shop door.

I wasted no time. "Please help me. I don't know where else to go." I didn't know what else to tell him. My situation was so complicated and so... unbelievable.

His gaze narrowed on me for a moment. He had the grayest eyes I'd ever seen. Gray like slate. Like silver. Molten and metal. Finally, he nodded and gestured for me to come inside.

***He's a dead man,*** Patrick's voice promised. ***You will regret this.***

The silver-eyed man led me to a room with a table in its center. But he moved past the table and toward a curtained-off section at the back of the room. I experienced a very brief moment of insecurity. I was a woman, after all, and this was a strange man. But the apprehension was gone as soon as he shoved the curtains aside to reveal a small sitting room, draped in tapestries – and a woman seated at the low-lying table. She looked up at me with eyes that matched the man's eyes. Siblings.

"He is coming for you, isn't he?" She asked me.

I blinked. I realized several things in that moment. One, she was speaking to me in a language that I would not have known several days ago. Two, she was talking about Patrick. Which meant that she knew. She knew *everything*.

I swallowed audibly. And then nodded. “How can you know that? How can any of this be?” I was so bewildered. This last week was simply too implausible.

“It is fate that has brought you here,” she told me. She gestured for me to sit down and the man left, closing the curtains behind him. “We haven’t much time.”

The air around me seemed to grow thick. Something like a deep, resonant and slowly rolling growl echoed in my ears; a foreign agitation stole through my limbs. Patrick was angry.

“Please, is there some way for me to turn off these powers – to not be a latent anymore – so that I don’t have to become a vampire?” I got right to the point.

The woman studied me solemnly.

***Get out of there, luv.*** He wasn’t laughing now.

“First, I must insist on a measure of privacy,” she said. She struck a match and lit a black candle on the table. At once, I felt Patrick’s influence unwrap itself from around me and slide away. That was some incredible candle.

“That’s better.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The wind brings hot air to cold places and a breeze to a fevered forehead. Everything must balance out in the end,” she told me. “You have power now, but to keep it, you must make a sacrifice. You are not willing to make this sacrifice?”

“You mean become a vampire?”

The woman nodded.

No,” I said. I realized, once I said it, that it lacked the conviction it should have held.

The woman cocked her head to one side and her gaze narrowed. “Then you must sacrifice the power, itself.”

“How?”

She shrugged, as if it should be obvious. “You must die.”

I stared at her. And then I stared at her some more. And then I closed my mouth and opened it again. “What?” I finally asked.

“The vampires possess a wine which has the ability to heal, do they not?”

I nodded.

“If you are given this wine as the last of your breath leaves your body...” She gestured to the mark on my neck and I touched it self-consciously. “Then the king will have no hold over you. Along with his influence will pass your powers. With luck,” she added with a smile. “You will live.”

It was a good long while before I was able to speak again. I had no idea how close Patrick was now, but I was too caught up in what the woman was telling me to give it enough thought. “That’s it?”

The woman laughed. “What did you expect? A crystal ball and a magic wand?”

“Well...” Actually, I sort of had. I mean, life had become a veritable fairy tale for me of late. “I - I have to die...” My voice trailed off. I took a shaky breath and rubbed my forehead. I wasn’t feeling so well. It was warm in the room, but I felt cold. And my body sort of hurt. It must have been the run across the sand. And the punishment Patrick had put me through. Maybe I was just anemic.

“Your gifts are exacting their toll on you,” the woman told me then. Her voice had dropped to something barely above a whisper. “Whatever it is you choose, child,” she gave my hand a squeeze. “You must choose it soon.”

With that, she stood and released my hand.

“Now, you must go. The vampires draw near. I will not have them destroy my home to get to you. Please understand.”

I stumbled up out of the chair and tried to thank her, but only a squeak of a “thanks” would come out. I was too wrapped up in the horror of the situation, like a mummy, trapped in its bindings as its brains were pulled out of its nostrils... I, too, felt paralyzed, figuratively – and a little, literally.

“Go out the back door,” she said. “There is an alley-way and an empty warehouse next door.” Her expression was sincerely sad. “I am sorry that I can not help you more.”

I left the room, shoving the curtains aside. The man who’d led me into the house now showed me to the back door and opened it for me. With the open door came the flood of night. I knew what waited in that darkness. There was no candle beside me now. I could feel them out there. The king – and others. They were like flashing red lights on a radar screen, fanned out on a map and honing in on their beacon. He had come for me and he had reinforcements.

I stepped through the door and into my destiny.

The alley was dark and deep. A rat scratched at the trash bin as it scrounged through some garbage, emitting a high-pitched squealing sound.

Overhead, bats flocked across the night sky. I remembered that about Australia. Lots of bats. I shivered and wiped at my brow. My forearm came away damp. I was dying. I understood that now.

I made it to the door on the opposite end of the alley and, with one determined kick, I knocked it in. A gaping storage space loomed beyond, dark and quiet.

I went in, strode to the center of the room, and stood in silence.

And there it was... That familiar wave of comfort and contentment and forbidden bliss. It licked at me, teased me, and then rushed me, wrapping me in its steely grip. My knees went weak. They shook. More sweat broke out along my brow and pooled between my breasts. I could hear my shaky breaths in the daunting silence of the dark, empty space around me. I forced myself to remain standing. I have always been very stubborn.

“Was it really worth it, luv?”

I knew he was there, of course. I had felt his presence the moment I’d stepped out of the witch’s shop. Apparently, Australia wasn’t all that far, as the vampire flies.

The sound of boots on pavement echoed throughout the vast warehouse. A shaft of moonlight pierced the dust-motes a few feet in front of me. It was into this light that Patrick stepped. I gazed up at him.

He looked like an angel. Handsome beyond compare, eyes that glittered like blue diamonds, dressed in the color of night... The angel of death.

How very fitting.

## **Chapter Six: The Choice**

When I didn't answer his question, Patrick took a slow, deep breath and lowered his head to gaze at me through the tops of his endlessly blue eyes. The intensity of that gaze was heartless. It was cruel. He was angry and pinned me to the spot, holding me in his thrall so that he could let me know just how cross he was.

I gritted my teeth against his influence. I'd always been one to buck the system. I'd never liked the way the world seemed to work. Its order seemed askew to me, a little off, a little wrong. Rules were made to be broken, drums to be beaten on until they broke, and black-leather clad vampire kings were made to be defied.

"You don't scare me," I told him.

"So you say," he replied, his tone low. As always, his voice was intoxicating.

Then, like a shark circling its prey, he slowly began to move around me. The sound of his boots echoed off of the walls of the warehouse.

Patrick never took his eyes off of mine. I was forced to turn in place. They say you should turn your back on the devil. I say, keep him before me, in plain sight at all times. I'm no fool.

"Just out of curiosity," I began, trying to put some strength into my words. "Where do you keep your stash of magic wine?"

He laughed, shaking his head in admonishment. It was the most delicious and dangerous sound. "You don't actually believe her, do you, luv?" he asked, his gaze narrowing.

Apparently, though he'd been candled away from our private conversation, he was not stupid. He knew what the witch had told me. It was the source of the anger snaking out around him now, like long, writhing tentacles of malice.

"You wouldn't be so mad right now if it wasn't true," I told him.

He smiled then, flashing fangs. Somewhere along the way, they'd come out. He was in a dark mood.

I swallowed hard, trying to get past the lump that was forming in my throat. He was a vampire, after all, and a very powerful one at that. How far would I have to push him before he decided to push back?

My instincts began to kick in. Without meaning to do so, the palms of my hands started to tingle with gathering warmth. I glanced down at their growing glow. At least I still had *that* power at my disposal...

As if in response, more of Patrick's wrath reached out and whipped at me, stealing my strength, almost stinging my skin. My *soul*. He was not only angry. I could feel other things tied up with that rage, like DNA that couldn't come uncoiled. He was frustrated. He was hungry. He was... Something else... I couldn't quite grasp it. But it was fueling his fury and extending its reach like wind did a grass fire...

And then I had it. There it was, in the keenly expanding irises of his fathomless cobalt eyes.

He was scared.

The realization stunned me a little. Patrick was afraid.

Of what? I paused in place and blinked. I was attempting to wrap my head around this new information and understand what could possibly frighten the king of the

vampires, when another sickening chill engulfed me and piggy-backing on it was that unwelcome, unpleasant dizziness.

*Dying...* My thoughts reminded me.

Patrick growled, low and animalistic, a sound that reverberated off of the walls, forcing the windows to rattle in their panes. And then, with a speed I could not comprehend, he suddenly had me in his arms and we were literally shooting straight through the molded glass roof of the dilapidated warehouse.

My breath caught in my throat, preventing me from screaming at the sudden rush and my utter lack of control. Peripherally, I noticed that not a single shard of glass from the roof came anywhere near me. Patrick had somehow seen to that.

We blasted through the air so impossibly fast that I was certain we were breaking several laws of physics. The wind speed should have left me frozen. I should have been pelted with insects that hit me like rocks. Or water vapor that left me drenched. *Something.* But nothing touched me except the vampire king and a slight breeze.

Patrick's arms were thick bands of steel around me, an inescapable cage of intoxicating sensations. He smelled good. Like expensive cologne and leather. The strong curve of his chin, his neck, his shoulder... They were enticing beyond measure. For one horrifyingly out of control moment, all I wanted to do was kiss that chin, dig my mortal teeth into the muscle of his shoulder, nuzzle his neck.

My eyes widened. *What on earth is wrong with me?*

As if he knew what was going through my head, which he did, Patrick smiled, again showing me those cruel fangs. I stared up at him and our gazes met for a brief instant. And then his attention was back up and focused on the blurring world around us.

There was nothing for it. Even if I'd wanted out of his protective embrace, I could not fly on my own. Not any longer. The only thing I could do was allow him to take me where he would. And after a few minutes, I found myself tucking my head into his chest.

It was safer there.

A few minutes more and I peeked to see that we were above land. And then city lights blurred into streams of neon below us. I shut my eyes tight, trying to avoid vertigo, as Patrick lowered us toward the ground...

When I re-opened them, he was setting me down on my slightly wobbly legs.

We were in the throne room underneath his mansion.

He slowly released me and I stumbled back. He let me go. I looked around to find that Sonya and Elizabeth were standing in one entrance to the torch-lit chamber. Along one wall were at least a dozen of Patrick's men. I glanced from them and then back to Patrick.

Everyone stood still, hands at their sides, expressions tense – *anxious*.

All eyes were on me.

But as always, Patrick's gaze was the one I noticed most.

"You work for the foundation because you want to change the world," Elizabeth's voice echoed in the chamber. She came away from where she'd been standing and slowly approached us. Patrick's gaze continued to burn into me, even as I turned to look at his sister. "Admit it, my queen," she said. "You are not happy with this reality. The rape as an act of war. The animal torture. The serial killers. You are haunted by the unfairness of existence and your powerlessness to change any of it." She finally closed the distance between us and I stared into the emerald forests of her eyes. "You fly in your dreams..."

She sighed. “Do you think you would find so much pleasure in leaving the earth behind if you didn’t hate it so?”

Patrick still had not said anything. My mouth had gone dry. Everything she said was true. A part of me hated the world. The disease and death and war and famine and abuse... That part of me seemed to grow larger every day, sucking me in and rendering me to pieces, like an internal black hole.

Until I’d met Patrick Sinclair. And then *he’d* become my world. I hadn’t realized it until now, but Patrick had taken my mind off of the unfairness of life. And I also didn’t realize until that moment just how refreshing that had actually been.

“Think of what you could do with the powers that have been awakened within you,” Sonya said. She crossed the chamber as well, pinning me with her dark gaze. “As our queen, they would return to you. All of them. You would no longer be helpless against the evils of the world. Consider this carefully. How many mortals are given such a chance?”

Another wave of unpleasant dizziness swept over me, chilling me to the core. I closed my eyes against it and felt myself swoon.

Patrick had me in his arms once more and was lowering himself to one knee on the stone floor, gently taking me with him. He cradled my back against his leg. For some reason, he still did not speak. But his presence around me was warm. It felt like fleece on my shivering soul. Like sitting before a fire place on a snowy day.

His sisters knelt beside us.

“Why...” My voice broke, but I swallowed and tried again. “Why is this happening now? So fast?” I asked. I had to know. Why was I getting so sick so suddenly?

Elizabeth shook her head. “It must be the effects of your last gift. It was quite potent. It may have drained you. As I said, you are the strongest latent we have ever known.” Her expression was helpless. “You are beyond our understanding.”

My mind was spinning end over end. I could not make heads or tails of my emotions or thoughts. I tried to straighten them out, but it was like trying to untangle a hundred metal Slinkies and then lay them out flat. My brain skipped from fear to chance to hope and then back to fear again. I didn’t want to die, but I didn’t want to drink blood for the rest of my life or never see the sun again. I could get used to the night, though, if what Elizabeth said were true. I could make a difference in the world – *Superman-style*... Or I could simply become evil, losing all semblance of myself in the darkness that was the vampire world.

*Please join me, luv.*

His words cut through my fevered thoughts and rippled outward across the jumbled mess of my mind, coating it with a sense of peace that only magic could produce.

*Don’t leave me. Just say “yes.” All I need is one spoken word. Your consent.*

I finally looked back up at Patrick, who had not taken his eyes from mine this whole time. I peered into that ocean and as I sank below the surface and began to drown in that blue, I realized something. Something imperative.

I had never dated a mortal man. I had always found a reason to say “no.” Simon Gray was not the first man I’d rejected. I had never been happy with them. Not one. They’d left me feeling empty. Incomplete. Agitated. Tired.

These were things that I did not feel with Patrick Sinclair.

Not at all.

I'd never known where my destiny lie in life. In fact, I'd always just sort of figured that there was no such thing. That life basically sucked and books and movies stoked our longing for something that could never be, and then left us high and dry. C'est la vie.

*No more, luv. Stay by my side.* Patrick's voice soothed through my mind, caressing and coaxing. Gently, he brushed a long lock of hair from my cheek. It fell against my shoulder and then dropped behind, exposing my neck.

He glanced down at the mark he'd left there. It was fading.

Then he closed his eyes. *I need you... Please just say "yes."*

*Oh my god, I thought. I am being the biggest idiot in the world.*

I opened my mouth to give Patrick the consent he needed to save my life, but just as I attempted to speak, a shock of agony rode through my body so fast and so hard that I bucked in Patrick's grasp. A piercing scream was ripped from my throat. It was no longer just my hands that felt as if they were harboring fire. My entire body was burning.

The pain was unbearable.

I screamed again, shuddering against the sudden onslaught of wracking torture.

Patrick's blue eyes began to burn eerily red. They widened slightly and his grip on me tightened considerably. I stayed locked in his changing gaze as my body died around me.

And then he let out a roar of pain equal and greater to mine and tore his gaze away from me to level it on his black-haired sister. "Bring the wine!" He barked the order. I could see that she wanted to hesitate.

But, Patrick was not a man to argue with. Not just now.

She rose and blurred from the room.

He was going to try to save me. Without my spoken consent, he could not change me. And yet... He wasn't willing to let me die.

In that pain-laced and lucid moment, I came to comprehend the truth of the man – the vampire – that was Patrick Sinclair. He was no monster. He was not evil. He was simply in love. Desperately, agonizingly, helplessly in love.

With me.

I came to a decision. I was a fighter. And if ever there was a time to fight, if ever there was a thing to fight for, it was now and it was this.

I closed my eyes and summoned up every last bit of strength I possessed. I pulled it from my fingertips, from my toes, from my heart and lungs... I stole the last of my breath on purpose and sent it through my mouth with one direct intent.

*“Patrick...”*

He looked down at me. Some of the red had leaked from one of his eyes to pool in a tear drop that resembled wine.

His breathing was as ragged as mine had been, but he managed to still it. In fact, everything became so eerily quiet at that moment, I'd have sworn that the world stopped turning.

I tensed as another wave of pain stole through me. And then I whispered, “... *Yes.*”

Patrick blinked. I could sense that he didn't trust what he'd just heard me say. That, for the briefest of moments, he couldn't quite believe it.

And then the world exploded into action.

Patrick reared back and drew his arm across the side of his neck in a blurred motion that left a deep bleeding gash in his throat.

“Restrain him!” Elizabeth gave the command, turning to the men who had been waiting against one wall. They, too, blurred into movement, and suddenly Patrick had more than ten pairs of hands on him, some securing his arms and some wrapped tightly around his broad chest.

I was confused, but then Elizabeth was beside me.

“You must drink from him, my queen.” She raised me up so that I, too, was on my knees and level with him. She held me there as I looked into Patrick’s eyes. They’d gone all-pupil. His fangs glistened sharp and white and long in the flickering torch light.

“Drink now.” Elizabeth repeated.

I gently placed my hands against Patrick’s chest, feeling the corded muscles beneath the black material of his t-shirt. I didn’t know where I got the strength to do so; perhaps Elizabeth gave it to me – maybe Patrick. But nothing could have stopped me from doing what I did next.

I leaned in and placed my lips over the wound in Patrick’s throat.

He bucked against me and I could feel the vampires communicating like mad with one another. His men tightened their grips on him; every one of his muscles beneath my fingertips was taut with barely contained power.

Slowly, curiously, I brushed my tongue against the gash in his neck. A low growl emitted from somewhere deep within him. He tasted like the wine. It burned across my tongue and numbed me as it went down. I closed my mouth tightly over the wound and began to suck. As I swallowed, the tormenting misery riding my body ebbed away like a receding tide. In its place remained a peaceful, liquid bliss. There is no greater pleasure than the cessation of pain.

I continued to drink from him, and every time I pulled and swallowed, Patrick fought harder against the grips his men had on him.

*What is wrong with him?* My question went out on a mental link, as I simply couldn't bring myself to stop drinking.

*His blood is turning you,* Elizabeth answered, also mentally. *When you drink from him, it is an act that fills him with a very dangerous desire. If we don't contain him, if we can't restrain him, he will take you – and he will not be able to stop himself.*

I could feel my powers returning to me. Somewhere outside, lightning split the sky and thunder rolled across the recesses of the chamber. The surge of magic being stolen from his veins and fed into mine was like getting drunk on an aphrodisiac. Selfishly, I didn't care what effect it had on him. I didn't care if I was about to put myself in mortal danger. I wanted to tease him. It was something wicked in me, burgeoning to life. I moaned low against the flesh of his throat and ran my hands over his chest. I leaned in further, pulling deeper on his blood.

In response, Patrick lowered his head to my neck and I could feel his hot breath as his lips parted.

"Hold him!" Elizabeth shouted. "She's not ready!"

"Forgive me, my liege." One of the men who held Patrick grabbed a fist full of his blonde hair and just as I felt Patrick's fangs graze the skin on my neck, the other vampire yanked the king's head back. Patrick roared in outrage, and the sound echoed off of the walls with more force than the thunder had. The torch flames flickered. Tiny pieces of stone wall crumbled to the ground.

And then, with a slowly mounting certainty, I felt the change within me click into place. At first, it was a sense of calm. It was a tranquility that infiltrated my veins, my body, my soul. And then it was a sense of belonging. Of purpose. Next came a wave of love and adoration such as I'd never before known, nor believed I could know.

And then came happiness. And as I smiled against Patrick's neck, I felt the most miraculous thing. My own fangs. New, small, and sharp. They were perfect.

I wanted to dig those fangs into Patrick's neck and continue to drink, but I didn't. I supposed that this must be what Patrick felt like all the time. And I guessed that the control I now exerted upon myself was simply part and parcel to being a vampire.

Very slowly, I pulled away from the vampire king.

He was shaking in his men's grasps. I could feel his power more tangibly now. As ever, it was wrapped around me, possessively. And it very nearly prevented me from pulling any further away.

But I managed to put enough space between us that the man holding Patrick's head let him go. And Patrick's gaze dropped to mine... And then to my mouth. I smiled a small, shy smile.

Flashing fangs.

A shared gasp went up around the room and with this gasp of wonder and respect came the knowledge that I had fulfilled a dream that had existed for thousands of years. I was giving them a gift that no one else could have given them. I felt their powers swell and expand around me, completing them, filling the emptiness that had grown inside of them for far too long. As their queen, I gave them a unified strength. As long as I was well, they would be too.

And I felt proud.

But what made me proudest of all was the look that Patrick Sinclair was giving me at that moment. I'd never seen a gaze so filled with admiration or longing before. I'd had no idea an expression could contain so much desire.

And so much love.

***Everyone out!***

This time, it was Patrick who gave the command. In a blur of movement, the other vampires in the room were gone, including his sisters.

We were alone.

And then he was upon me. Had I been a mortal any longer, his action would have been so fast, I would not have been capable of seeing it. But as a vampire, I saw him coming, though I still could not move fast enough to get away from him.

He took us both to the ground.

*You enjoyed taunting me*, he admonished, smiling as he whispered the thought into my head. One of his hands expertly captured both of my slender wrists and pinned them to the stone floor above my head. Though he bared his fangs with determined promise, his smile was a genuine smile. There was no anger in it at all. He just couldn't help his inherent badness from spilling out. He'd been a vampire for far too long.

I fought against his grip, testing the strength I'd been given as a vampire. Though I felt the power surge to my command, Patrick was still stronger. I wondered at this. I'd taken his blood. It wasn't fair that he should still be stronger than I was!

*I'm the king for a reason, luv*, he laughed. His words brushed across my mind like silk.

My gaze narrowed, but like his, my expression held no malice. We were playing a game.

His free hand encircled my throat. I reared up against him, trying to dislodge him from where he sat across my hips, but it was pointless and he began to squeeze.

At the same time, he sent a wave of ancient magic rolling over me. I would have thought that, as a vampire, I would now be immune to this magic.

But, I was sorely mistaken.

The power he had to control what happened to my body had only grown stronger. *Much* stronger. The bond between us was now unbreakable and his influence over me just as formidable. My only consolation was that I had some power over him as well.

I just couldn't concentrate enough to use it at the moment. His attack was relentless.

I gasped as moisture gathered between my legs and my nipples hardened painfully. His grip around my throat tightened, only increasing the intensity of the sensation.

A low rumble escaped Patrick's throat and he lowered his lips to mine. His kiss was at once brutal and tender, exacting and demanding. It was as if he'd waited forever to kiss me, to taste freely of me. I was helpless in that kiss. I had never known it was possible to feel this good. This cherished. It was every woman's dream of the perfect kiss – soft, dry lips, expert control, deep driving need and a taste like blood and wine and chocolate. A taste like sin.

I couldn't help but arch up against him as his hand slowly released its pressure on my neck and grasped the collar of my shirt. In one clean movement, he ripped the fabric from my body. I gasped against his lips as I was exposed to him and to the cool air of the chamber. His hand returned to slowly move over my flesh. When his palm cupped my

breast, my breath hitched. He kissed harder; his fingertips finding my erect nipple and squeezing gently.

And then he squeezed hard and something sharp pierced the taut skin around my nipple. I cried out against the pleasure and pain, and he swallowed my cry, effectively silencing me. I moaned against him.

I remembered how he had opened the vein in his throat for me to drink from him. He had no talons – no claws. I realized that it must have been one of his many powers. He could open a wound in flesh wherever he wanted to. And he'd just opened a tiny one in what was, without a doubt, one of the most sensitive places on my body.

He pulled his mouth away from mine and trailed his fangs along my neck. He paused there for a fraction of a second as if he couldn't make up his mind. And then he continued along my collar bone, to my chest and, finally, he placed his mouth over the small cut that he'd created on my breast. He began to suck.

I cried out and bucked in his grip, my body shuddering with pleasure. I was on fire in so many places, my mind was a blank slate but for the demanding need that rode my every shaking breath, my every fluttering heart beat. My body quaked and quivered beneath his touch. He still held me fast, my wrists clutched in one of his inescapable grips. His other hand moved to the waist band of my jeans.

Hunger and desire were riding him hard now. I could feel it in him just as I could feel it within me. He was losing control and I knew I was in for a wild ride.

He grasped the denim material and ripped it viciously from my body. I screamed as the jeans bit into my flesh and then shredded completely. His mouth came down upon

mine once more, stealing my breath and my voice, drinking me in as if he would never, ever get enough.

His free hand was between my legs now, his fingertips grazing the insides of my thighs. He released me from his kiss and trailed his lips along my cheek, my jaw bone, and to the side of my neck. There, he waited, his breath shaking and hot against my throat. In sheer willful defiance, I tried to turn my head toward him, denying him the vein I knew he so badly wanted to sink his fangs into.

In answer to my rebelliousness, two of his fingers deftly delved into the moisture between my legs, driving deep. I screamed and arched my back, forgetting altogether about exposing my throat to the vampire king.

He laughed wickedly, a low taunting sound that told me he had won. And then he sank his teeth into my neck, drinking in my life's essence as I had done to him only moments ago. The power he drew from my veins raced to his heart and then raked through his body, flooding him with so much magic, it would have overwhelmed any other vampire. But, as he'd said, he was king for a reason. And with a bit of effort, he had the newfound power under control. Compartmentalized. Easily within reach and there for the taking.

He withdrew his fangs and reared up above me. He wasted no time in using these new powers. My eyes widened when he simply teleported his clothes out of existence and I found myself staring at the ripped and corded muscles of his biceps, his chest, his six-pack abs, his...

He gave me little time to contemplate his perfection. His need was far too great.

I knew what he was about to do and I fought against him with renewed vigor. There was a tiny part of me that was afraid. Some left over semblance of my mortal self.

But he was out of control now and there was no escape for me.

In the next instant, he was thrusting into me, no gentleness in his movements, no mercy in his demand. He claimed me in desperation, in heated desire, in hunger and in love and once more plunged his fangs into my tender throat.

This time he pulled at my blood with abandon as he drove into me again and again, deeper and deeper, claiming me with a relentless, unrelenting need. I screamed with each orgasm that convulsed through my over-sensitive body. My voice eventually became ragged and hoarse.

I felt it when he climaxed because he sent me reeling end over end into an abyss of ecstasy. It almost ripped a laugh from my throat, it was such heaven. I'd never been so bruised, so used, so drained. And I'd never been so happy.

Patrick took one last taste from me, drinking languidly and thoroughly enjoying it as he swallowed a final time and then slowly withdrew his fangs.

Only then did he release my wrists.

They were sore, but I didn't mind. And I could feel what bruises I had healing already. Patrick said nothing. He only gazed down at me. His pupils slowly dilated to their normal size and the blue that remained was a shade I had never seen before. It was such a light blue that it nearly glowed. They were the most beautiful eyes in the world.

*No, luv.* Patrick slowly shook his head. *Yours are.*

... Later that night...

I wasn't sure what to make of the unfamiliar adoration that was doled out on me when the vampires slowly bowed their heads as I passed them by. They lined the hallway and exit to the mansion, reverently inclining their heads. I felt self-conscious, but I also felt a constant wave of reassurance. It came from them. They would protect me with their lives, for it was me that gave them life. It also came from Elizabeth and Sonya, who flanked me at either side as I made my way toward the front door.

And it came from me. I was their queen. All was right with my world.

I made it through the double doors and stepped out into the clear, moon-lit night.

Waiting in the drive way and also flanked by vampires was the vampire king.

He rested casually in the saddle of a matte black Harley Davidson. The other vampires stepped back out of the way as I approached, caught in the pulling tide of his gaze.

When I was a few feet away, Patrick offered me his gloved hand.

I knew it was the hand of the devil.

I gladly took it anyway.

For, I had made a decision. And, as Patrick Sinclair started up the bike's engine and the sound of thunder poured over me, I realized that it was a decision I could live with.

**Forever.**

THE END

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