

Summoning the Beast

by

Desiree Acuna

© copyright by Desiree Acuna, 2010
Cover Art by Alex DeShanks, May 2010
ISBN 978-1-60394-432-8
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

On some levels, Cara was aware that what she was about to do wasn't rational. She'd established a fairly lucrative business around such ancient, pagan beliefs, but she wasn't a believer. She had her feet firmly planted in reality and knew such things didn't exist.

Thankfully!

Desperation and grief, although she knew she was suffering from both and that they'd warped her sense of reality, weren't adequate excuses for her behavior when she knew with some part of her mind that it was a waste of time.

It was the almost infinitesimal possibility that there might be something to it, though, that drove her—and grief and desperation.

She couldn't face losing her mother. She'd tried to prepare herself when they'd run out of options, but she simply couldn't.

All she could think as she moved around her living room, preparing for the ritual, was that it couldn't hurt. It might be useless, but she'd exhausted every other possibility—every sane, rational possibility. They'd thrown everything known to modern medicine at her mother's cancer and hadn't succeeded in anything but putting off what seemed to be the inevitable, torturing her mother in the process when she was already suffering.

Pushing those thoughts from her mind, she focused on studying her preparations, trying to think if she'd left anything out. There was no telling what might be important, she thought.

Not that it was likely anything would happen regardless.

She shook that thought off.

Deciding she'd prepared everything for the ritual as nearly as she knew to the way it was supposed to be, she left the living room and went to prepare herself—the offering. When she'd soaked for a little while in the hot water where the herbs had been steeping, she got out, patted herself dry and donned the ritual robe.

Returning to the living room, she lit the ceremonial candles and settled cross-legged within the pentagram with the book containing the summoning spell. Dismissing her qualms, she began to chant the ancient words of magic that would open the doorway to the netherworld. She repeated the chant over and over, demanding, cajoling—until her throat felt dry and raw, and her back and butt ached from sitting so long. She chanted until the candles melted down and began to gutter—and nothing happened. Nothing at all.

The urge to cry assailed her when she finally gave up and fell silent. She swallowed against the tightness in her throat, ignoring the urge as she focused on what she'd done, going over it again in her mind. She'd done everything right, she finally decided—everything except performing the ritual on the night of a full moon.

Why would that have anything to do with it, she wondered angrily? But she realized that it might actually be the most important part of all. She'd thought that when she'd hatched the crazy notion of summoning a demon to heal her mother. She'd dismissed it because she'd been afraid it would be too late to help her mother if she waited until the next full moon. She might not live that long!

“Open damn it!” she screamed abruptly, flinging the book away from her. Not surprisingly, nothing happened except that she turned over a candle and broke the magic circle she'd drawn around herself.

Surging to her feet angrily, she leaned down to blow the rest of the candles out and stalked back to her bedroom, flung herself down on her bed and wept as she hadn't in weeks. She'd tried hard to hold her emotions in check. She hadn't wanted to upset her mother when she was so sick, but her mother wasn't there to be disturbed by her wails of anger and grief.

Soon, her mother wouldn't be there for her at all anymore.

She wept about that, expelling the grief she'd been holding back and her frustration that she'd resorted to such a crazy thing and it had still been for nothing! She fell asleep railing against the unfairness of life. Her mother was all she had! What was she going to do when she was alone? Who would be her ally against the rest of the world?

Exhaustion from her emotional outburst carried her from consciousness to the dream world without any awareness of the transition. One moment she was struggling to cope with a situation that seemed beyond her and the next she found herself in her living room once more, lighting the ceremonial candles and carefully drawing out a pentagram and then marking a circle around it with the magic powders she'd obtained.

An odd sense of *déjà vu* swept through her. Hadn't she done this already?

She frowned, studying the preparations she'd made, checking everything carefully. When she started into her room to undress, to bathe in the ritual bath, and don the ceremonial robe, though, she discovered she was already wearing it.

Confusion flickered through her briefly, but she dismissed it. She'd just been too focused on preparations to remember she'd prepared herself first.

Settling in the center of the protective circle, she opened the book of spells and began to chant the summoning spell. The words seemed to flow from her as if she'd memorized them. That seemed odd, too, but she dismissed it, concentrating. When she'd reached the end of the spell, she began again. On the third repetition, she noticed that her skin had begun to prickle, almost as if with a static charge.

Uneasiness slithered through her. Sternly, she reminded herself that she was doing this for her mother and continued the summoning chant. The prickling intensified. The flames in the candles surrounding her elongated, began to dance—not as if the air currents were controlling them, but something else.

She fell silent when she'd finished the third repetition of the chant, waiting, unnerved by the strange currents she could feel crackling in the air. Abruptly, the flames of the candles seemed to combine, to form a fireball. Her heart leapt into her throat, but before she could react to the certainty that she'd just set her living room on fire, a shadowy figure emerged from the center of the flame. For a handful of moments, it looked like nothing more than a shadow and then it became solid.

Cara stared at the being that stood before her, absolutely frozen with sheer terror. His flesh was as red as fresh blood. A pair of great black wings sprouted from his back and curled around him, keeping his face in deep shadow.

"Why did you summon me?" he demanded in a deep, resonating growl of a voice.

Cara swallowed convulsively several times, trying to find her voice. "To make a bargain with you," she managed finally.

He seemed to consider that curiously for several moments. Abruptly, he folded his wings and crouched down so that his face was level with hers. A jolt of surprise went through her. Despite the fact that he was like nothing she'd ever seen, his face wasn't a horror mask as she'd expected—far from it. It was startlingly handsome.

"What sort of bargain, mortal?"

It took an effort to gather her wits. "My mother's dying."

"Mortals die—that's why they're called mortals," he said dryly.

The awe vanished and along with it her fear. "I can't bear to lose her! Heal her for me. I know you can do it. I'll do whatever you want, if you'll just make her well again."

He tilted his head, studying her. "This is why you summoned me?"

"Yes," Cara croaked.

"And to seal the bargain you wish to make with me, you offer whatever I should ask for?"

Cara blinked at him. "Whatever I can do. Whatever I can give you."

He frowned. "You aren't asking for anything else? Riches? Fame? Power?"

Cara felt her pulse leap at the suggestions. Wealth, fame, power—who wouldn't want such things? In the scheme of things, though, what use were they without health? In any case, she knew what she was asking for was not only the greatest prize she could've requested, but she

wasn't willing to risk asking too much, more than he was willing to give. "None of those things would give me comfort without my mother and I know demons are inclined to use trickery. I just want my mother healed. Take the cancer away and make her better. It's all I ask."

"And you're willing to pay whatever I ask?"

Cara swallowed. "If I can."

He sent her a sardonic look. "You."

Cara blinked at him. She'd known there was a strong possibility that that was what he would ask and she'd thought it was worth it. She still did, but if she gave him what he was asking, she still wouldn't have her mother.

Her mother would have her health, though.

"You mean my soul?"

He lifted his brows. "Aye ... and the vessel that contains it."

She frowned. "I still wouldn't have my mother."

"She would be well."

It was selfish to think, she knew, but she realized she didn't want her mother to leave her alone ... and yet she was contemplating leaving her mother alone.

"Could I ... delay payment?"

He tilted his head, eyeing her sardonically. "You want me to give you what you're asking now and to pay at some distant date?"

Cara sucked in a calming breath. "It isn't as if it would be any great hardship for you!" she said tightly. "You're immortal! My entire lifetime would be barely a blink for you!"

"Ah ... but that's the point, little mortal. You will fade in time. Why would I have any interest in a faded blossom when I might have a fresh one?"

She frowned. "Well, I suppose that depends on what you have in mind for the vessel! I thought demons only wanted to collect souls for their master to torment!"

He laughed. It sent shivers through her. "Which only goes to show that you've no understanding of what you're dealing with."

"I guess I don't."

"If I told you that I am an incubus would you have a better understanding?"

A jolt went through her. She swallowed convulsively several times. "You're an incubus?"

He grinned. "I didn't say that. I merely asked if you knew what one was."

"A male demon that has sexual intercourse with mortal women while they sleep."

His eyes gleamed, turning from black to flame. "You have some inkling then."

Cara considered it, feeling oddly relieved and unnerved at the same time. How bad could it be, though, to have sex with a demon? And wasn't that better than giving up her life or her soul? "What you're saying is that I would be accepting that you would come to me in to my dreams and have sex with me as your part of the bargain?"

"I would feed on your desires and your pleasure."

A shiver skated through her but this time it wasn't entirely due to fear. "You wouldn't require me to give up my life and my soul? I could still see my mother? Be with her?"

He hesitated briefly. "I would not require that ... only your willingness to allow me to feed."

Cara dragged in a shuddering breath. "Then I agree. Heal my mother. Make her well again and in return I'm willing to allow you to ... uh ... feed."

He straightened abruptly. "Then I'll consider the bargain you wish to strike. I warn you, though, if I do decide to favor you I will not tolerate treachery. Once I have given, I will take what I'm due and if you attempt to bind me once more, you will regret it."

* * * *

Cara woke with a jolt as if she'd fallen and landed hard. Still groggy, she searched her mind for the nightmare that had pitched her toward consciousness but, as it happened so often, the moment her mind became alert the images that had frightened her disappeared and she was left with nothing but a sense that she'd dreamed something frightening.

Struggling to throw off the jitteriness the nightmare had left her with, she rolled over and opened her eyes. Daylight spilled into the room. Climbing from her bed with an effort, she staggered into her bathroom to perform her morning ritual and then headed into her kitchen in search of something to rid herself of the lingering sluggishness.

Settling at her kitchen table with a steaming cup of coffee, she found herself trying to recapture the elusive dream that had awakened her. Indistinct images flickered through her mind, but they flitted just out of reach. Dismissing it finally, she fixed herself a second cup of coffee and wandered into her living room to boot her computer.

A different anxiety churned in her stomach as she studied the orders she'd gotten since the day before. The sales were actually pretty good. She'd sold a dozen pieces of jewelry and several charms.

Unfortunately, although those sales would've been a cause for celebration before and would've been sufficient to carry her for a week, at least, they fell woefully short when compared to the mounting medical bills for her mother's care. She'd begun to feel as if she was drowning in debt, something she'd tried hard to hide from her mother.

It made it worse that her mother was so apologetic about it and continued to argue about every new treatment they'd tried. What good was money, though, if it couldn't buy the most important thing in life? Life!

It was hard to convince her mother that she didn't count the cost, though, when she was worried sick.

Checking the time, she got up to begin working on filling the orders. The remains from the ritual she'd performed the night before caught her attention as she did and she stopped, staring at the candles for a long moment as something tickled at the back of her mind. Unable to grasp it, she dismissed both the sense that there was something she needed to remember and the mess she'd left in her crazy attempt to summon 'other worldly' help and headed into her workshop.

Chapter Two

Discomfort brought Cara drifting toward awareness, and yet the drugging mists of half sleep seemed determined to cling to her mind, leaving her with the sense that she was dreaming. Trying to identify the cause of her discomfort and even the location, she struggled to direct her mind, to sift through the sensations.

She was lying face down ... she thought. Even that confused her, because although she felt pressure against the front of her body rather than the back, she couldn't feel any pressure against her face or anything to indicate her head was turned to one side. She did feel a strange sort of pressure against her forehead, almost like a band. She couldn't seem to open her eyes. She tried for a few moments and gave up, searching with her other senses once more. It was uncomfortable but not the source of her discomfort.

Her arms were out to her sides, seemed to be parallel to her body. She tried lifting them, failed, and then tried moving them up and down and discovered she couldn't seem to move them in any direction. More confused than alarmed, she abandoned that puzzle since it didn't actually seem to be the source of her discomfort either and focused on her breasts.

There was every reason to feel discomfort there, except it wasn't like it should have been. They weren't crushed flat by her weight. Instead, it almost seemed as if they protruded from something, like a sleeve—or a manacle because it was tight, she realized, around the base of her breasts—all the way around. The tips of her breasts didn't seem to be restrained at all, but either her position or the tight bands around the top that felt as if they'd forced her rounded breasts into a more tubular shape seemed to have forced the blood to pool at the ends of her breasts. They were throbbing like an aching tooth.

The pulsing throb held her attention for a few moments and then her mind wandered again in search of the other area of discomfort. Her clit was throbbing, too, she realized, and seemingly for the same reason. The outer lips of her sex had been peeled back, not merely exposing the far more tender inner flesh to currents of air, but restricting blood flow and making it pool in that sensitive area so that it rivaled the uncomfortable pounding in her nipples.

Having identified the source of her discomfort, her mind seemed to focus on them and it seemed the more pointed her focus became the more intensely they pounded until discomfort began to give way to pain and she began trying to free herself from the restraints causing it—uselessly—because as soon as she did, she realized it was as if she was glued to the hard surface that supported her. She couldn't so much as shift a hair in any direction.

She was so focused on that disturbing circumstance, she didn't realize that her legs were being slowly drawn upward by pressure beneath her knees until she began to feel the strain in her tendons. She realized fairly quickly that she wasn't in control, though. They were pulled upward until her thighs were parallel to her body as her arms were. The pressure had curled her hips upward and tautened the pull against her nether lips until it almost felt as if the inner area of her cleft was bulging, until she could feel that the mouth of her sex was stretched open.

Alarm struggled to penetrate the strange fog gripping her mind as something pressed against the mouth of her sex. It was hard and thick enough it spread the mouth wider and wider as it was pushed deeper inside her until she began to feel uncomfortably stretched and then painfully stretched. She began to pant, her entire focus on the burning resistance of the mouth of her sex and then the muscles along her channel as her flesh yielded with great reluctance to the enormous thing being driven with slow deliberation inside of her until it was pressing against her womb.

The pressure eased, but she felt little relief. The fog had begun to churn as thoughts flitted through her mind, but she couldn't identify what had been pushed inside of her. It felt too big to be a cock, too hard and unyielding and yet beyond stretching her until she thought her

flesh would tear, it had seemed as smooth and cylindrical as a cock. The tip first inserted had seemed rounded like the head of a cock, hadn't seemed as big as the shaft.

So abruptly that it sent a wave of shock through her, creating further chaos in her mind, something hot closed over both of her breasts at once. She realized she hadn't merely imagined that the blood was pooling in the tips. It had been. They'd swollen and, in doing so, become so intensely sensitive that she nearly blacked out as the heat engulfed her. It was only as the darkness parted a little that she realized that it was mouths clamped over the ends of her breasts, sucking and pulling at them with such vigor that she wove in and out of the darkness. Pain and pleasure so intense it bordered pain poured through her body like fire, closing her throat and squeezing her lungs until she couldn't manage more than choked gurgles of sound while her mind screamed at the torment to her nerves.

Even as her system began to acclimate to the horrendous sensations, another mouth clamped over her clit with the same ferocious greed, sending her spiraling toward oblivion once more. It eluded her. She skated the edge, hoped for it, and yet she couldn't reach it because of the intensity of the sensations pouring into her. The muscles along her channel fluttered abruptly in reaction, clamping around the shaft so tightly her belly cramped.

The shaft began to move then, withdrawing and then slamming back into her jarringly. She began to come with the third jarring thrust, the convulsions wracking her until she thought they would shake her apart and still the cock pounded into her and the mouths fed greedily until she reached maximum overload and blacked out.

When she surfaced again toward awareness, every pulse point on her body seemed to be sizzling and throbbing. Slowly, her breath returned to normal and her fevered flesh began to cool. It still throbbed. She could still feel the bindings that made the blood pool until the flesh was so swollen it ached, but it settled to mild discomfort again—briefly.

Without warning, a mouth settled on her clit with a fierce hunger than pitched her toward the abyss. Before she'd even managed to catch a decent breath of air, the twin tormentors of her breasts returned, throwing her into a mindless, drunken fever. The muscles along her channel fluttered madly. As if summoned, she felt the pressure of the cock, felt insistent penetration despite the resistance of her body to its girth—she knew it was a cock, so thick it was sweet agony to feel it ram into her.

She sucked in a sharp breath as she was impaled fully on the enormous shaft. Even as she did so, she felt the pressure against her forehead increase, tilting her head back. A thick cock was forced between her jaws. Her senses rioted. The sensations were too intense, too much for her mind to handle at once. She sucked on the cock in her mouth mindlessly as she was penetrated from both ends at once, almost in sync. The tug at her breasts and clit became so savage pain and pleasure collided, sent her body barreling toward a climax that was so explosive that it flung her from consciousness.

She was jolted awake by burning cold against her clit. She gasped, squirmed to evade it, but it coasted around and around her clit until it was numb. Dread clawed its way up her throat, but despite the fact that she'd guessed what was coming next, the ice on her breasts knocked the breath from her again. She didn't manage to regain it until her breasts grew as numb as her clit. She was shivering all over by then, her jaw cramping from the effort to keep her teeth from chattering.

The ice disappeared. Slowly, the numbness dissipated. The bindings drew the blood to pool once more until she scaled the rungs from discomfort to aching sensitivity. She whimpered when she realized she'd reached the peak in sensitivity again, struggling to brace herself. It was an exercise in futility. She was as sensitive when the twin mouths latched onto her breasts once more as she had been the first time and as it had then, it nearly pitched her into darkness. The disembodied mouths seemed more feverish than before, though. This time instead of merely sucking and tugging out them, she felt sharp teeth digging into her. It didn't prepare her for a similar assault on her clit and yet, despite the searing pain, she felt her kegels convulse, threatening a hard climax.

Before it could gain ground and become a full-fledged climax, she felt fingers prying at her buttocks and then pressure against her rectum. Sucking in a sharp breath, she struggled to

relax the muscles and it still burned like fire as he drove deeply inside of her. The burning eased as he withdrew and thrust again. She'd almost managed to regain some semblance of sanity when she felt pressure against the mouth of her sex. It threw her into a total state of chaos all over again as he drove the thick member to the hilt inside of her. As he withdrew, the cock in her ass drove deeply. The counter thrusts pistoning inside of her one behind the other catapulted her into a climax within moments, holding her at the apex until a dark cloud enveloped her. She never actually touched down. Her body convulsed, rested briefly, and spasmed again. The third time she hit orgasm, she passed out.

She roused fully enough when she came around again to begin to feel dread fill her, to feel it seep into every pore. Just as she'd fully tensed with it, they began the torment all over again, pulling frantically at her clit and then her breasts. A cock was forced between her jaws and moments later, the thick shaft was forced into her channel again. They began to pump in sync as before, driving her toward another climax. Before she could achieve it, a third cock was rammed into her ass. Already mindless with a mixture of pleasure and pain, the pounding cadence of the triple penetration sent her over the edge, sending one hard shockwave after another through her until she passed out.

There were two things Cara noticed almost immediately when she surfed toward awareness again. She could move when she hadn't been able to during the hours she'd been bound and fucked within an inch of her life and she ached as if she'd been beaten half to death—seemingly everything on her body. She thought her arms ached from nothing more than straining to move when she couldn't. Her neck and legs were sore from the awkward position she'd been bound in, her stomach from climaxing over and over. Her jaws, her ass, and her pussy ached from being thoroughly reamed out, though, and beyond that her skin was still so sensitive the slightest movement sent jarring sensation along every nerve ending.

There was no possibility of convincing herself it had been a dream or a nightmare. Nothing purely of the mind could've made her so miserable.

Dread filled her, but when she'd searched her surroundings with her senses, she couldn't detect anything indicating she wasn't alone. Nerving herself, she opened her eyes. The room she was in was dim, but not pitch black as the room before had been—as she believed it was. She was no longer certain whether she hadn't been able to open her eyes or if it simply hadn't made any difference when she did.

She could see that she was alone, though, and a modicum of relief flickered through her. Lifting her head, she scanned the room. A jolt went through her. She was in her own room, her bedroom! The discovery made her feel perfectly blank. Questions crowded into her mind to fill that void within seconds, but she couldn't shake any answers loose.

Had she been in her own bedroom the entire time?

If she had, there was something seriously wrong with her mind!

Shaking that thought, she got off the bed with an effort, paused to gather her strength and headed toward her bathroom. She relieved herself while she waited for the temperature of the water to adjust and then climbed into the shower shakily.

Her mind filled with flickering images of the things she remembered as she soaped her sponge and began scrubbing herself, prompted by the twinges she felt with every touch, every movement. As she rinsed, she examined herself for bruising, looking for anything that would substantiate her certainty that what had happened was real. There wasn't a trace of a bruise on any part of her body that she'd been convinced was bound in some way, though. Her nipples and areolas looked chafed and so did her clit, but not raw and lacerated as she was certain they should have.

She'd felt more than tongues and the suction of mouths! She'd felt teeth! She was certain of it, as if whoever it was knew the very moment sensation began to dull and used their teeth to optimize awareness again.

She paused at that thought, considering it. At the time, she'd thought they were growing more excited and less cautious of damage they might cause, but as she considered it, she realized that it hadn't seemed like a loss of self control so much as a determination not to allow her to avoid feeling.

Even the ice used to cool her hadn't been used to numb her from feeling, although it had briefly. It had been used to optimize sensation after she'd been exposed to so much her body was struggling to protect her by dulling her awareness of the stimulation of her nerves.

They had. She'd felt three mouths and three cocks—all at the same time. It boggled the mind trying to figure out how they might have been ramming their cocks into her at the same time as they were gnawing a breast or her clit, but the alternative was to consider six rather than three and she found that was hard to swallow. It was hard enough to consider the undeniable fact that there had to have been three to have done what was done to her, but as wild as that was, six simply defied belief.

She couldn't imagine being in the same room with three men and not hearing anything to indicate it. The only thing to support that was what they'd done, which would've been impossible for one.

It flickered through her mind that she should report the assault and just as quickly reluctance filled her. She'd bathed. If there'd been any evidence, she'd washed it away. She realized abruptly that there hadn't been, though. Considering how many times those three cocks had pumped into her, she should've been awash with semen and yet she hadn't noticed any at all.

Condoms?

They had to have been wearing them, she decided, relieved about that at least.

But how had they gotten in? How had they bound her like that without waking her? What had they used to bind her? And on what surface, now that she thought about it?

Stepping from the shower, she turned it off, dried herself carefully, and wrapped up in the damp towel. She left the bathroom then and moved around her apartment. Every door and window was locked and not one room seemed it might have been the room where she was used as a sexual slave and tortured within an inch of her life—with more pleasure than she could stand.

She hated even to admit that to herself. She should be hysterical and catatonic after what had happened to her! She should feel soiled, particularly when she knew she'd felt a lot of pain and she'd reacted as if she'd felt nothing but pleasure.

It was worse than that, actually. The pain had almost seemed to intensify the pleasure and that realization should have made her feel like puking. She should be disgusted—with herself if not whoever had done it.

There was no getting around the fact that she was appalled. No one in their right mind *enjoyed* pain.

Brushing that thought aside, unwilling to examine it, she went in search of something to drive off the weakness that persisted. She didn't see anything that really appealed to her, mostly because she simply felt too weak to have the energy to prepare it. Finally, she settled for a piece of wheat toast and a glass of juice.

When she'd finished, she decided she was just too exhausted to think straight. She still took the time to check all the windows and doors again, to reassure herself that they were all locked, before she returned to her bedroom. As soon as she entered the room, uneasiness wafted through her. Her heart began to hammer a little faster—almost as if some part of her *knew* that this room, her own room, was where she'd been bound and sexually tortured.

It wasn't rational, she told herself. It couldn't have been this room.

But then where? Was it even possible that she could've been transported from one place to another without knowing it and then back again? Because she'd been in her own room when she went to bed and she'd awakened in her own bed.

Drugs? It seemed like the only answer and yet she couldn't think how she might have been drugged.

She couldn't think straight at all! Shaking off her thoughts, she decided to leave her bathroom light on and climbed into her bed again. For a while, she lay staring at nothing in particular while her mind continued to scramble around for answers. Finally, her weariness overcame her again, though, and she fell into a deep chasm.

She woke to the same strange sense of floating that she had before, as if she was drifting between the dream world and the real world and unable to fully capture either. Dread curled in

her stomach, but unlike a typical dream, or nightmare, she seemed almost as cocooned from that emotion as she was from true awareness.

She knew it wasn't a dream, however, the moment she tried to open her eyes and discovered they wouldn't respond to the command. Almost as if she was a puppet, with no command over her own body, she felt her arms pulled behind her back and then tugged downward until her back arched, thrusting her chest out. Her palms settled against a flat surface and then something that felt like wide metal cuffs clamped around her wrists, holding her in place. She discovered she couldn't twist her shoulders either, though, or her torso. While she was still trying to understand that strange phenomena, she felt her legs drawn into place. Her knees bent as her legs were pushed close to her body and then her bent legs were spread wide, so wide she could feel air brush along her entire cleft as the flesh parted moistly. Something clamped on the flesh that formed the outer lips of her sex and pulled them up and back until her clit was fully exposed.

She wasn't lying down as she had been before, she realized a handful of moments before she felt pressure against the mouth of her sex. Her heart leapt into her throat and tried to strangle her as the pressure swiftly increased. She hadn't had any stimulation to help her produce moisture—not that she could possibly have produced enough to make engulfing anything that huge easy or painless.

It defied reason that almost the instant she felt the initial penetration, moisture flooded her channel and yet, as she'd thought, it did little to help. The pressure increased to burning pain regardless of the moisture as she was stretched to the very limits of what her flesh could take without fracturing. She panted for breath as the thick shaft was driven home, her mind weaving in and out of darkness. Relief flooded her when the pushing stopped as the head came to rest against her womb. Internally, she struggled to adjust to the invasion.

She was distracted before she'd managed to acclimate when her clit was seized. It couldn't be a mouth, her mind screamed, and yet it felt like one—hot, moist, pulling frenziedly at the sensitive bud until she felt her body scaling toward a peak. She hit it when a mouth abruptly clamped onto each of her breasts and began suckling them as frantically as her clit, gasping and groaning as the convulsions rocked her, her belly cramping as the muscles along her channel clenched around the shaft.

She was still shuddering with it when she felt her buttocks pried apart and a second shaft that felt almost as big as the first, was driven into her so fast and so deep, she blacked out briefly. She wasn't deprived of awareness more than a handful of seconds. She came around when they withdrew in tandem and drove into her again. Unlike before when one was driven in while the other withdrew, they continued to thrust into her in sync and each time they did, she felt like her body would explode from the twin pressures.

And her body still responded with mounting pleasure. She hit orgasm twice more before she reached a surfeit of what she could endure and fainted.

She roused again with reluctance, realizing even as she did from the uncomfortable tightness in her lower body that she was still mounted on both shafts. As awareness penetrated her mind, they began to move, driving in and out of her with such force and swiftness that she began to come again within moments and continued to spasm until she lost consciousness again.

She groaned when she woke once more to the realization that she was still impaled on those twin shafts. They began to move before she'd achieved full awareness. It wasn't until she'd convulsed so many times that she felt herself falling into the well of darkness again that she realized the mouths had vanished from her breasts and clit and the entire focus had been on driving into her.

That changed when she woke once more. As soon as she roused, the mouths fastened onto both of her breasts and her clit. When her channel began to spasm in imminent release, she realized both cocks had been withdrawn. Almost on the thought, the thickest of the two was rammed into her channel and began driving frenziedly until she passed out, completely overwhelmed by the ceaseless rapture that rocked her body.

Light was filtering through her window shades when she surfed toward consciousness again. An internal search told her that she was sprawled limply on top of her bed, completely naked.

She hadn't gone to bed that way. Feeling drunk and thoroughly disoriented, she half climbed half fell from her bed. Her legs gave out, dumping her painfully in the floor, which set off pain in every direction. Waiting until the worst had passed, she got to her feet shakily, looked around her room vaguely and, when she located the door of the bathroom, headed inside.

There were deep bruises beneath her eyes from lack of sleep. Her head swam with weakness and she gagged on her toothpaste and nearly threw up. It took all she could do to stand beneath the shower spray long enough to bathe off quickly.

She lost the towel she'd wrapped around herself as she left the bathroom again, but she didn't feel like bending over to pick it up. Heading straight to her kitchen, she grabbed the gallon jug of water she kept there and drank until her belly felt bloated from the water and nausea washed through her. She still felt dehydrated, but she set the jug down and searched for something to put in her empty stomach.

Settling for a piece of toast because she didn't feel up to doing anything else or waiting, she dropped weakly onto one of her stools and nibbled at it, trying to wrap her mind around the weakness and the sense of disorientation.

Memories flooded her mind, horrendous images. Shuddering, she pushed them from her mind with an effort. Feeling a little better once she'd eaten the toast, she got up and fixed a pan of soft scrambled eggs, another piece of toast, and grabbed a glass and filled it with juice. Despite the fact that she felt like she was about to starve to death, she didn't manage to eat much more than half of what she'd cooked.

Still feeling weak, and miserable beyond that from her full stomach, she considered going back to bed. Reluctance immediately assailed her, though, and instead she headed into her living room and collapsed on her couch, trying to summon enough energy to boot up her computer and work. She struggled with the need to work and the need to rest for a few moments and finally settled her head on the arm of her couch and dozed off.

The room was full of light when she woke the second time, making it clear that it was nearly noon or maybe even past that. Jolted by that realization, she sat up, rubbed her eyes to shake off the dregs of sleep and booted her computer.

She was a little startled when she logged in to her orders file and saw how many orders she'd had—startled and excited until she saw the date. She stared at it in disbelief for several moments and finally moved her cursor to the corner of the screen. Instantly, the day and date popped up.

That couldn't be right! It should be Tuesday, not Wednesday!

She'd gone to bed Monday night and woken on Wednesday?

How could she have lost an entire day?

It abruptly occurred to her how thirsty and hungry she'd been when she'd woken up, ravenous. She'd thought that was because her rest had been disturbed, though!

Disturbed by What?

Getting up abruptly, she prowled the house, searching for any sign of intruders. Nothing looked out of place, though—nothing except the burned candles from the ritual she'd performed and the pentagram she'd drawn on the floor with 'magical' sands.

Shaken and confused, she returned to the couch and stared at the screen for a while, her mind on the dark memories.

As dream-like as it had seemed, it couldn't have been, not when she had physical proof that it was reality in the soreness and stiffness!

And yet, there was no sign that anyone but her had been in her house—none! That defied belief. She might be able to swallow the possibility that one man had crept into her house and left no sign—beyond the invisible signs she *felt*!—but she couldn't accept that three men had been in and left no sign that they had.

And she was absolutely certain it was three!

A thought occurred to her abruptly, but it was simply too wild to accept. She struggled with it for a little while, but then it dawned on her that if it was true she'd been completely out of it for two days, that also meant she hadn't gone to see her mother.

That thought was enough to make her dismiss everything else. Bounding from the couch, she dashed into her room to dress. She felt a pang with every movement, but she resolutely ignored it. Grabbing her purse when she was dressed, she hurried back into her living room and scanned her bookshelf for a book, just in case, then headed out and drove to the hospice where her mother was to spend her last days on Earth.

The nurse on duty gave her a disapproving look when she let her in. "She's asked for you. I told her you were tied up, but you'd be here when you could."

Cara felt her chest tighten with a mixture of remorse and fear. Nodding, she headed to her mother's room and went in.

Chapter Three

Disappointment flickered through Cara when she reached her mother's room and discovered she was sleeping. Shame immediately followed. It was the only time her mother was completely free of pain, she knew, regardless of her mother's attempts to pretend she was fine.

Settling quietly in one of the easy chairs in the room, she took the book out that she'd brought and opened it, studying the table of contents. Ordinarily, she brought a magazine or a novel to read—either to her mother or to herself if her mother was resting. The ritual she'd performed the night before was still very much on her mind, though, and she'd grabbed a book of the occult to see if she could figure out what, if anything, she'd done wrong.

Aside from allowing herself to believe in hocus pocus when she ought to know better!

When she'd read back over the description of the summoning ritual, though, she couldn't see that she'd failed in any part of it—with the exception that she hadn't waited for the full moon.

Very likely that was all it had taken, she thought angrily. The author of the book was insistent about that point—that the gateways of the other worlds could only be opened at specific times and under very specific conditions.

Unless there'd been something impure about the candles she'd used, or the paint for the pentagram or, horror of horrors, the sand she'd used to mark the protection boundary!

Deciding she'd have to check all of them when she returned home, she turned to the section describing various demons that people had dealt with in the past—what they were capable of, what motivated them, or seemed to, and how to avoid their trickery. A strange feeling swept over her when she reached the section describing the incubus. Her skin prickled all over and more importantly, the hair at the base of her skull.

Shivering in reaction, she paused, searching her mind for why she might have such a reaction to what was, after all, nothing more than voodoo whodo. She didn't *really* believe in this tripe!

Ok, so she was willing to keep an open mind to an extent—the extent that she was desperate enough to try anything at this point—but it certainly hadn't worked!

Of course, she acknowledged that she hadn't followed procedure to the letter and there was a tiny bit of doubt that lingered in her mind that it hadn't worked for that reason, but that still didn't explain the reaction. *All* of them should creep her out!

She realized after a moment that it wasn't just reading about the incubus that had caused the reaction. Reading about it had triggered something buried deep in her subconscious. The problem was, she couldn't grasp it and it seemed the harder she tried the further she was from reaching it.

Breaking off the search in the hope that it would come to her when she stopped struggling to reach it, she focused on her reading again. The errant thought flitted through her mind again after a few moments, this time prompted by the statement that the incubus generally appeared in one's dreams.

Frowning, Cara paused once more, wondering if that was the answer to the strange sense of ... almost familiarity. Had she dreamed about it? Was that the nightmare she couldn't remember?

Her mother diverted her from pursuing it. Hearing a change in her breathing, Cara glanced at her sharply, feeling her heart leap uncomfortably.

Her mother smiled wryly, but apparently decided not to address the fact that Cara grew alarmed any time her breathing changed. "How long have you been here?"

"How long have you been asleep?" Cara countered.

"Why? So you can tell me you've been here the whole time?" her mother asked with amusement.

Cara grinned. "It hadn't crossed my mind!"

"Right!" Her mother chuckled a little breathlessly, but her expression grew sharp as she studied her daughter. "You look awful today. Are you coming down with something?"

Cara rolled her eyes. "Gosh, thanks, mom! That bad, huh?"

"Maybe you're working too hard. You look tired."

"I wish! Business is good but unfortunately not good enough to work me to death. I just didn't sleep well last night."

Her mother eyed her skeptically. "You're sure that's all it is?"

Cara smiled with an effort. "I'm sure."

"So ... how were sales yesterday?"

"Good." Cara frowned. "I'm wondering how reliable our source is for those ritual candles, though."

Her mother's brows rose. "I checked him out myself. You've had problems?"

"No, not really. I had a complaint ... but they probably just didn't perform the ritual like they should have. You know how some people are! They think they can take short cuts and still have the same results."

Her mother looked uneasy. "You need to be careful who you sell to. I know we need the money, but this isn't anything to mess around with. It's potentially dangerous. You shouldn't sell to anyone who isn't serious about these things—and by serious I mean really careful."

Cara smiled with an effort. She'd never really understood how her mother, who was so level headed about most things, could believe in the occult like she did.

She was almost sorry she didn't have the same conviction! Maybe that was why the ritual hadn't worked, she thought in disgust? Maybe it had to be performed by a true believer?

What sort of magic was that, though? If it only manifested for 'believers' then how could anyone else believe in it?

"You know I'm always careful to run a background check on anybody that orders the hard stuff. I was just ... concerned. Do you think any of the stock might have gone bad? I mean deteriorated or anything?"

Her mother shook her head. "It isn't like bread, Cara! It doesn't get stale or rot! I'm sure everything's fine."

They discussed business for a while longer, avoiding any discussion about her mother's illness as they generally did. The expression on her mother's face when she launched into a discussion about expanding once she got better unsettled her. She knew what was coming when her mother fell silent. "Cara ... you know I'm not going to come home again, don't you, sweetie?"

Cara felt a lump the size of her fist swell in her throat. "Don't talk like that!"

Her mother fell silent again. "Baby, it doesn't help to bury your head in the sand. I don't have long now. You need to prepare yourself."

Cara fought a round with her emotions. "Can we talk about something a little more cheerful?"

Her mother bit her lip, seemed to consider for a few moments and finally nodded. "Met anybody of interest?"

Cara uttered a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. Where was she supposed to meet anybody? The business they'd once run together took every moment of her time. She couldn't actually afford the hours she spent with her mother everyday and they both knew it. "I saw a hunk when I went out for groceries last week. I think he might be the new store manager."

Her mother looked suitably impressed. "Married?"

"I didn't get close enough to see a ring," Cara admitted. "Well, I did, but I was too preoccupied to notice if there was a ring."

Her mother smiled. "He must be good looking!"

"I said he was a hunk, didn't I?"

Her mother seemed inclined to fantasize about the make believe manager she'd invented and Cara went with it since it seemed to make her mother more lively and cheerful.

"You should consider doing a love spell—I mean, if you see he isn't taken already."

"Maybe I will," Cara said, deciding to end the visit on that note since she could see her mother was tired. "We'll talk about it when I come tomorrow. I need to get back and finished filling all the orders."

Despite the cheerful discussion toward the end of their visit, Cara felt her shoulders slump with dejection as she left. Every effort had been made to make the hospice a cheerful, homey place, but it was an impossible task when no one ever left to go home once they arrived.

As she usually did, she focused on her work as soon as she returned home. She'd developed a powerful ability to concentrate and block out unwelcome thoughts by simply shuttling them to the back of her mind each time they arose. She was so intent, in point of fact, that she didn't even think about her suspicion that she'd had a nightmare about an incubus again until she settled to eat her solitary supper.

Her skin prickled all over as it had before the moment the thought popped into her mind. Her stomach muscles clenched, too, although not in a way she could consider a fear reaction, particularly when her nipples stood erect at the same time. It was purely sexual.

Shaking her head at herself, she struggled to dismiss the thought and the reaction it had prompted. Maybe her mother was right? She really did need to get out!

Actually, she was more inclined to think she just needed to get laid! Now certainly wasn't a time to consider a romantic liaison, even if she'd actually had someone in her sights—which she didn't. She was having a hard enough time dealing with her mother's illness without also having to deal with relationship issues! Especially considering her previous failed attempts!

Not that she'd ever had a really serious relationship. She'd dated quite a bit in high school and throughout college, but although she'd felt an obligation to carry many of them to the next level, that was when it petered out—earlier if she didn't feel any interest in carrying it to the next level. They were too demanding of her time and too selfish to reciprocate. She supposed if she'd actually cared, it would've hurt when she discovered they demanded complete faithfulness from her while they had at least one other girlfriend on the side, and some of them more than one. Instead, it had simply pissed her off. It had seemed to her that the guys she was most inclined to consider on a more permanent basis were the worst about cheating.

Deciding finally that she just had a streak of self-destructiveness where men were concerned a mile wide, inevitably choosing the worse, she'd decided to focus on building up the business for a while. That had been several years earlier and, although she'd occasionally run across a man that piqued her interest, nothing had come of it. She'd reached a point in her life where the most desirable had already been selected and she didn't have any interest in marrying merely for the sake marrying—because it was traditional and expected.

She didn't think it would've crossed her mind again for a long while, if ever, except that her mother had begun urging her to find someone.

She knew why. Her mother was as worried about leaving her alone in the world as she was fearful of being left alone. She was almost tempted to try to find somebody and get married just to give her mother peace of mind, but by the same token, she knew it couldn't be right for her. She didn't feel like she had the time to devote to it and, in any case, she was so deeply in debt now no man in his right mind would want to saddle himself with her.

The idea of getting laid had some merit, though. It was a great stress reliever—when it was good. Unfortunately, when it was bad it only created more stress.

Maybe she should check out some of the hook-up sites online and see if she found any interesting possibilities?

It was dangerous, of course, but what wasn't these days? You could get killed in your own bed in your own home if some psycho decided to break in.

That thought prompted memories she'd been working to suppress—the strange 'dreams'. She'd managed to pretty well put them out of her mind once she'd convinced herself that there was no way that anyone could have been in the house with her. She still didn't think it was possible that it could've been real, no matter how real it had seemed. What would the point be in such a thing? Rapists didn't generally come in threes or even in pairs and except for trying to make sure they couldn't be identified, she didn't think they made much attempt to cover the fact that they'd been there.

It couldn't have been real. She knew it couldn't. But then, how to explain the soreness? Had it been such a powerful wet dream that she'd acted it out? Done it to herself?

She found that hard to swallow. As far as she knew she wasn't prone to doing anything in her sleep. She felt sure her mother would've spoken about it if she had any tendency to move around in her sleep and she doubted such a thing would've gone undetected all these years.

Maybe the soreness was just the results of having come so hard? She didn't remember much of it very clearly, but she did remember that she'd had an explosive climax. It actually seemed like there'd been more than one, but she thought that was probably just a trick of the subconscious mind. One, she could believe considering how long it had been for her. More than one seemed to be stretching it a little too thin.

Dismissing it finally, she cleaned up after herself and went into the living room. After staring at the remains from her ritual a few moments, she decided to clean up the candles at least. She didn't see the point in removing the pentagram when she would be trying the spell again when the moon was full and even the thought of removing the protective circle made her uneasy in an indescribable way.

It was as she collected the book of spells that was, for some strange reason, across the room from the circle where she'd performed the spell that a memory abruptly surfaced. It was across the room because she'd thrown it—and that was also why so many candles had been overturned. A shiver skated through her. Moving back across the room, she stared down at the circle of protection or, more specifically, the *broken* circle.

The book had skidded through it when she'd flung it away in anger, she remembered abruptly. She'd been too upset to really notice it at the time or care. Her uneasiness intensified as she stared down at it, though, and remembered what her mother had said about it being too dangerous for skeptics or the unskilled novice.

She struggled to dismiss it for a few moments, trying to tell herself it was ridiculous to feel so alarmed about what was really nothing more than scattered sand. She couldn't shake the jitters, though, and finally searched the spell book until she found one regarding the repair of a protective circle.

It had a ritual, but it also emphasized that repairing the circle might be a matter of too little too late—closing the barn door after the cows had already escaped.

The spell hadn't worked, though, she reminded herself, feeling a little less uneasy. Getting up decisively, she went to her workroom to gather what she needed and set about re-establishing the protective circle. She was tired when she finished, but she felt better, however silly she knew it to be.

After checking all the doors and windows, she headed into her room, took a long, hot shower to help her relax and climbed into her bed. Within moments, she felt herself drifting toward oblivion.

A mixture of dread and anticipation coiled inside her when she found herself floating on the edge of awareness again. She struggled to decide whether she was dreaming or if she was actually awake, or nearly awake.

Déjà vu wafted through her when she realized she was lying face down and that the surface beneath her felt far too hard to be her bed. She was struggling to figure out why it seemed familiar when she felt her arms move, seemingly of their own accord, out to her sides until they were parallel to her body. When they stopped moving, she tried to continue the movement and curl them beneath her head only to discover that they felt disconnected from her mind, refused to obey the command. She was still trying to figure that out when she felt a compression of her breasts that seemed to defy any of the laws of physics. They should be flattened tightly against her chest when she knew for a certainty that she was lying on her stomach.

Regardless, the pressure increased until her breasts felt as if they'd been squeezed into an almost tubular shape, until it became uncomfortable enough she tried to shift to ease it. The discovery that she couldn't move made her heart begin to pound a little harder and when it did, she felt the blood begin to pulse hard enough in the ends of her breasts to make it clear that only

the base of her breasts were compressed. Her nipples tightened, stood erect and then began to feel more and more swollen and more and more sensitive.

Despite the tendency her mind seemed to have to float in an almost disconnected way, she struggled to focus on moving her torso to relieve the pressure as it grew more and more pronounced. She was distracted by the movement of her legs. Like her arms, they seemed to move of their own will. Her knees bent under the pressure and still her legs slipped upward until her thighs were parallel to her body just as her arms were, pulling against her cleft until the moist flesh there parted. Something clamped on the fleshy outer lips of her sex, sending a jolt of surprise through her. It didn't feel like hands, or fingers—she wasn't certain what it felt like, but it peeled them back until her clit was fully exposed and, once it had, she felt something encircle her clit, compressing the flesh at the base. It made the blood pool in her clit in the same way that the compression of her breasts had made the blood pool in her nipples—except worse. It swelled tightly far more rapidly, becoming so sensitized that when something hot and moist clamped on to it, it catapulted her toward deepest darkness, knocked the breath from her. Her mind screamed at the intensity of the sensation but as with any dream she discovered that she couldn't make a sound. She could only struggle to make sound, gasp for breath, feel the torment of screaming nerve endings and have no way of escape.

It felt like a mouth, she decided when the sensation had dulled enough to allow her mind to function—not enough to give her much in the way of relief. Her body, contrary to logic or her will, responded by opening itself to the stimulation, pumping more blood into those areas most sensitive already. The muscles along her sex quaked, pushing a flood of moisture into her channel.

She'd managed to catch her breath when twin tormentors latched onto her nipples with the same ferocity as her clit had been seized. Like a yoyo, she was pitched toward the brink of complete unconsciousness only to be snatched back. Her skin prickled all over as her body abruptly convulsed in orgasm. Before it had the chance to complete the cycle, she felt pressure against the mouth of her sex, but the warning was brief. Whatever it was impaled her so swiftly she barely had time to register the sense that she was being ripped apart before it slammed into her womb and was withdrawn almost as swiftly only to be driven into her again and again.

Pain and pleasure pelted her from every direction until her mind seemed incapable of determining which she felt most or which to react to. The quaking from her first climax had barely receded when her body began to tremble on the verge of another. The rise was rapid. The pull on her clit and breasts and the pounding thrusts of the shaft drove her upwards and into fresh spasms of rapture before she could even assimilate the rise.

Another thick shaft penetrated her rectum even as she began to fall toward Earth again. She groaned, tried instinctively to evade the pain and failed. For many moments, the fear filled her that her body couldn't take both and yet it did and it responded by building toward another climax as they thrust into her frenziedly.

She reached a surfeit of what she could endure in the way of pleasure and pain when she hit her third climax. Darkness swallowed her.

She didn't believe she'd had much respite. When she coasted toward consciousness again, everything on her body was still sizzling and pounding. Slowly, her body cooled enough to take the edge off of her discomfort. Almost the moment she achieved that state, the mouths clamped onto her breasts again, sending a shockwave through her. She gasped, struggling to catch her breath. A cock was shoved between her jaws. Before she could decide whether to merely allow it to slide in and out, she felt the muscles of her mouth tighten around it, her tongue curl to cup it and she was sucking at it almost as frantically as the mouths tormenting her were pulling at her breasts.

The cock jerked a warning just as her clit was seized. Mindlessly, she sucked at the cock as if it was a lifeline. Fluid filled her mouth as he ejaculated. Surprisingly, it seemed to boost her own arousal higher, lift her closer to climax. The taste wasn't like come—not like any she'd ever had in her mouth. It sent a dizzying wave of warmth through her when she swallowed, almost as if she'd gulped a shot of strong alcohol.

The cock that was rammed into her sex drove the thought from her mind. She began to climax almost before it fully penetrated and was withdrawn. Her mind seemed to fragment. She was aware of all of the stimuli at once and, at the same time, unable to focus. Pleasure seemed to roll over her in ways almost too intense to bear. She thought it *was* too powerful and yet she couldn't escape. There was no choice but to endure.

And when she finally succumbed to darkness and emerged on the other side, she was taken to the same nearly unbearable heights again and again.

* * * *

It was a nightmare that jolted Cara awake and yet the moment she awakened, it began to fade and by the time she'd struggled toward full awareness all she was left with was the sense that something horrendous had happened.

And weakness.

And soreness, as if she'd been through a meat grinder.

She was too tired even to groan in her misery. She lay staring at the light against her eyelids for a while, too unnerved to consider trying to seek sleep again and too tired to feel like staying awake. It was thirst that finally drove her from the bed, the sense that she would die of dehydration if she didn't quench it.

Realizing as soon as she sat up and her head swam that she was in no condition to make it to her kitchen, even crawling, she staggered into the bathroom, filled her hands with water and drank until she could feel it sloshing in her stomach. Nauseated from filling her cavernously empty stomach with water, she made her way back to the bed with an effort and sprawled out again. She wove in and out of slumber for a time, wanting to sleep, needing to, and yet afraid to yield to it.

After a time the nausea passed and some of the disorientation. She was still empty, though, and since she felt like she might make it to the kitchen, she got up and left her bedroom in search of food. She didn't feel like preparing anything when she got there but she found a pack of salty crackers and munched on a few while she waited for the frozen dinner she'd thrown into the microwave to heat.

The food improved her considerably. She still felt unaccountably weak and battered, but a hot shower chased a good bit of that away. Unfortunately, it also made her feel weak again.

By the time she'd managed to dress herself and drag herself into her living room, she discovered it was nearly noon. Settling on the couch, she propped her elbows on her knees and used her hands to support her head, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with her. She felt like she'd been on a ten day drunk and gotten the shit kicked out of her sometime in the rounds.

She hadn't drank anything at all, though.

And she'd lost a day. Again.

That discovery alarmed her but the sense of urgency to rush to her mother that accompanied it pushed the churning thoughts to back of her mind. The nurse condemned her with her eyes when she rushed into the hospice, flooding her with both resentment and guilt, but she ignored that, too.

To her relief, her mother seemed no worse than the last time she'd visited—no better, but it was a relief even to discover that she hadn't gotten worse. Her visit was a trial, more difficult than usual. Her mother was alarmed at her appearance and Cara spent most of the time trying to sooth her mother's anxiety and divert her—when it was her mother who was so terribly sick!

She was so distressed by the time she left, she indulged in a crying jag in her car before she could compose herself enough to drive home. By the time she'd reached her house again, though, she'd arrived at a conclusion about her state and her missing time that replaced her distress with a healthy dose of both fear and anger.

Chapter Four

Cara found it difficult to accept the idea that flickered through her mind like a ghost but it returned over and over, becoming more solid each time as it brought bits and pieces of memories with it. Parking her car in her drive, she stared at the house for several moments as if she actually had the power to divine what was inside, what might be waiting only for her to enter the dream world to have her within its power again.

The house looked unchanged, however. It was the home she'd grown up in, tiny, beginning to show its age, but basically the same.

Getting out of the car after a few minutes, she headed inside with a purpose. She thought she actually *had* gone off the deep end, but she didn't see that it was any more insane to do what she had in mind than it had been to perform a summoning ritual to start with.

It occurred to her that she might have underestimated the danger from the beginning. Just because, deep down, she didn't really believe such things existed, it didn't necessarily follow that they didn't. Even science now generally accepted that there were alternate worlds, alternate universes where anything might be the norm.

If she considered it from that perspective, then she had to accept that it was at least possible—but could she also accept that the rituals and charms had any validity?

That was much harder to swallow, but the fact remained that something strange had been happening to her and it had begun directly after she'd performed the summoning ritual. Maybe it was a psychotic break, but if it was, then maybe she needed more 'magic' to protect herself anyway?

She shook the thoughts off as she passed through her living room and headed directly to her workroom. It was dusk. She seemed particularly vulnerable when she was sleeping and she wasn't going to sleep again without first doing her utmost to conjure some sort of protection, no matter how crazy it seemed to her.

Settling on the stool in front of her worktable, Cara took the spell book and flipped through it, searching until she found a protection spell. Marking the spot, she began going through the other books her mother had collected over the years, comparing notes until she finally decided she'd found the strongest charm that seemed likely to fit her particular situation.

It was a shame she didn't know the name of the demon she seemed to have summoned—or even what sort of demon he was, although she was pretty sure it had to be an incubus because it seemed to be using her dreams as a conduit. It would've made it easier to banish the bastard, but she would get around to that in time. First, she had to protect herself.

Taking one of the necklaces she'd designed that contained a particularly flawless piece of quartz, she gathered candles and began to recite the protection ritual, focusing it on the piece of jewelry. When she'd repeated it the third time, she saw to her surprise that the quartz seemed to be glowing. Certain she must be mistaken, she reached for it, carefully touching it with her finger and discovered it was not only glowing, it was warm to the touch.

It comforted her, made her feel as if the spell had actually worked. Unfastening the latch on the chain, she carefully placed the charm around her neck. She felt better, safer, the moment she'd fastened it and smoothed the chain so that the quartz settled between her breasts.

Getting off the stool, she gathered candles, the special paint and the protective sands and headed into her bedroom. She considered the bed for several moments and finally decided to crawl under it since the room was too cramped to move it. The cramped quarters, the dust bunnies, and the dim light made it difficult to paint the pentagram, but she finally completed it. After studying it to make certain she'd done it right, she inched out from under the bed again and set the paint and brush aside.

The urge struck her when she'd stared at her bed for several moments to draw the protective circle around the entire room—or better yet, the house. She discarded the idea after a

moment. The larger the circle, the weaker it was. She wanted something strong. She had a bad feeling that she needed something really strong. After lighting the candles and setting them on every surface around the bed, she opened the spell book and began the ritual chant, slowly circling the bed and pouring the sand in a thin stream along the floor. When she reached the head of the bed, she discovered a miscalculation. She hadn't thought to move the bed away from the damned wall!

She considered it for a moment and finally decided she couldn't afford to break off the ritual at this point. Instead, she sprinkled the sand behind the head board and kept going until she'd completed her first circuit. Beginning again, she made a second and then a third circuit, chanting and pouring the sand.

She felt strangely drained when she'd finished, almost lightheaded, but she dismissed it. Clearly she hadn't been getting much rest or she wouldn't look as if someone had punched her in both eyes, and beyond that, she'd lost two days over the last four—missing a lot of meals in the process. Adding that to the burden of stress she was already carrying around, it was small wonder she didn't feel worse.

Gathering her paraphernalia, she returned everything to her workroom and headed into the kitchen to fix something to eat. She needed something substantial and strengthening, she decided once she'd studied the contents of her freezer. She took out a steak, examined it for freezer burn and then tore the packaging off and sprinkled it with tenderizer. Turning her broiler on to heat, she tossed a potato into the microwave, fixed herself a salad and headed into her room to take a quick shower.

She was on the point of removing her charm when it suddenly occurred to her that it certainly wouldn't do her any good if she wasn't wearing it! She didn't particularly want to bathe with it on, but she did. Drying off afterwards, she slipped into a robe and headed back to the kitchen to finish up her meal, settling with it on her coffee table instead of at the kitchen table.

Eating alone only emphasized her mother's absence and she rarely ate in the kitchen any longer, preferring the company of the TV occasionally, but usually her computer. Business first, she decided, booting the computer. The steak cooled while she worked, but she ate more than half, most of the potato and the salad, and she felt much better when she'd finished—physically, anyway. The orders she'd gotten weren't anything to get too excited about. After studying her website, she decided she needed to introduce some new products and settled to examining possibilities at her supplier's site. When she'd finally made her selections and ordered, she got up, cleaned up the mess from her meal and checked the doors and windows.

It was obsessive, she knew. No one lived in the house now except her and she rarely opened a window since she had central heating and cooling, but it was a comfort thing to check the doors and windows nightly—just in case she'd unlocked one for some reason and forgotten—and also to make sure no one had tampered with any of the locks from the outside.

Reassured on that count at least, she turned out the lights and headed to bed. Uneasiness began to gather inside her as soon as she entered her room. The temptation to leave a light on as she had when she was a child smote her and after wrestling with it a few moments, she yielded to it, flipping the bathroom light on and leaving the door slightly ajar.

She wasn't used to the light and she discovered that although it comforted her on one level, chasing away the deep shadows in the room, it was distracting, making it even harder to relax than usual. Eventually, perseverance, the hot shower, the heavy meal, and too little rest joined forces against her uneasiness and she found herself drifting toward sleep. It seemed she'd barely reached that peaceful plane when something woke her. Her eyelids felt like lead when she tried to lift them, but after a brief struggle, she managed it.

The apparition at the foot of her bed sent a jolt through her. His gaze locked with hers the moment her eyes opened. Fury emanated from him. "What is this?"

Cara was too frightened to begin to understand the question. In horror, she watched the demon pace around her bed. He paused when he reached the foot of the bed again, glaring at her furiously.

"You think this puny protection spell can keep me out!" he roared at her.

Cara blinked, dizzy with the jolt of fear that went through her when he bellowed at her, but as it receded a tiny spark of rebellion arose. “Obviously it has or you wouldn’t be standing there, you bastard! You’d be in my bed trying to fuck me to death!”

Something flickered in his dark eyes. She had the feeling her counterattack had taken him by surprise, but he showed little sign of it for all that. In fact, the taunt seemed to enrage him more. “You summoned me, mortal she-dog!” he growled.

If he hadn’t called her a bitch, her fear might’ve overcome the spark of anger. The fact that he had only made her angrier. She sat up. “I summoned you to heal my mother, you son-of-a-bitch! *Not* because I felt like I needed a demon to fuck me! I could get a man for that, and it would be a hell of a lot more satisfactory and not nearly as wearing!”

“I made you come as you never have before!” he bellowed at her. “I gave you pleasure such as no mortal could!”

“Funny, but I don’t actually remember any of that,” Cara said coolly. “I just remember being sick the next day!”

She could tell that didn’t go over well. That time, he merely roared at her, as if he couldn’t find words to express his fury. “Remove the spell! Give me what you summoned me for!”

“No.”

His eyes narrowed. “You will regret denying me.”

Cara narrowed her eyes back at him. “I don’t think so, you treacherous son-of-a-bitch! We had a deal! You make my mother well and *then* you can have whatever you want! Otherwise, I’m going to banish you back to the world you came from and find someone who *will* honor the deal!”

He looked a little taken aback. “I will do it ... in my own time! First, I want to taste what you’re offering and see if it pleases me!”

“You *tasted* all you’re going to you son-of-a-bitch! In fact, never mind! I don’t trust you. I can see you can’t be trusted at all. There’s a full moon next week. I’m going to send you back and find a demon that’s a little more trustworthy.”

The comment enraged him all over again. “You think I’m at your beck and call because of your little chants and charms? You think you can banish *me*? Do you know who I am, woman? I am *Baelin*! The most powerful of all incubi!”

Cara studied him almost dispassionately. “Good to know. If the protection spell works on you, then, it should work on the rest of them. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to tell me if the others would be powerful enough to heal my mother?”

“You will not find out, you arrogant little mortal bitch! I will not allow you to open the gateway! I will prevent any others from crossing over! And I will make you rue the day you crossed me!”

“You *are* a nasty bastard, aren’t you? *I’m* arrogant? Because I expect you to earn your damned pay? I sure as hell wouldn’t have been dabbling with this shit if I hadn’t been desperate to find help for my mother! It sure as fuck wasn’t because I was anxious for a demon lover to suck the life out of me!”

He narrowed his eyes at her thoughtfully. “If I give you what you want, how can I trust you to give me what I want?”

“How could I trust you not to take it back?” Cara countered. “You’re right. This isn’t going to work. I thought it was a simple enough bargain. I was willing to do whatever you wanted for your help, but you’ve broken my trust and I don’t want anything else to do with you! Go away! Go back to where you came from!”

Flouncing onto her side, she punched her pillow and settled down again, pulling the cover over her head. She could hear him muttering under his breath and stalking back and forth around her bed. Uneasiness wafted through her that he was chanting some spell that would counter the one she’d woven but after a few minutes, he seemed to vanish. Cautiously, she lowered the cover and peered around the room. When she didn’t see any sign of him, she relaxed fractionally, but she discovered she was too shaken from the encounter to truly relax. Eventually, her weariness got the best of her and she slept, but only fitfully.

* * * *

As tired as she was when she woke up, Cara realized very quickly that there was a world of difference between the way she felt that morning and the times before—since she'd summoned the demon. It made one thing patently clear. Her mother was right. She had no real idea of what she was dealing with or how dangerous it was.

Not that her mother knew *she* was the idiot who'd been playing with the spells when she didn't know what she was doing—thankfully!

As angry as she still was over the fact that the bastard thought he could take 'payment' without performing the service she'd asked for, though, she realized she'd also underestimated exactly what she was giving in payment. She'd been so relieved when she discovered he—Baelin—wasn't anxious to kill her and collect her soul it hadn't dawned on her that fucking a demon wouldn't even *begin* to compare to an affair with another human! She'd figured it wouldn't be pleasant. They were evil creatures after all. It *had* occurred to her that she was very likely to find it more torturous than pleasant or even bearable, all things considered. It *hadn't* occurred to her, though, that he would be sucking the life out of her bit by bit while he was at it!

She'd read that—somewhere. It just hadn't made an impression on her—because she'd thought it was ridiculous! If only a few days of playing with the demon could so exhaust her, however, she had to seriously rethink her bargain!

The entire thing was pretty much an exercise in frustration and futility otherwise. Her mother would be spared—maybe—not the terrible, slow death she was enduring now, because she'd already suffered so much—but she would live and it still seemed worth it to her to promise almost anything to give her mother the years she would be deprived of otherwise. How happy would her mother be, though, if *she* was alone?

In some ways, she thought she preferred leaving her mother than being left, but she realized that was purely selfish, especially when the idea was to prevent her mother's suffering. Leaving her with grief, maybe even guilt if she realized what her daughter had done to save her, wasn't ensuring her mother's health and well-being.

She had to think of a way to pay that would still allow her to have some semblance of a life with her mother. The problem was, nothing actually came to mind. She didn't recall any kind of spell in any of the books that seemed to fit what she needed—semi protection. They all seemed to be all or nothing. She could prevent Baelin from getting to her by wearing the charm and sleeping within the protective circle, but that was just going enrage him and it didn't allow for the 'payment' she'd offered. And regardless of what the bastard thought, *she* was honest! She paid her dues!

She considered the threat she'd thrown at him, but, truthfully, she doubted she would be able to summon anything better. He might be less trustworthy than the rest of them, but everything she'd read seemed to indicate that none of them could really be trusted to do anything except try to trick whoever summoned them. So what to do? Just give up? Send him back and try to accept the unacceptable? That she'd finally found a ray of hope for her mother but she lacked the skills to manipulate that damned demon even if she *could* summon one?

She didn't think she could. She hadn't been able to accept when she'd thought there was no hope at all. How could she simply give up, now, when there *was* some hope?

After going through every book they had on the subject, however, frustration began to get the best of her. She hadn't found anything she thought would work and, unfortunately, the only person she knew who might know of something that could help was her mother.

It took her a while to come to the conclusion that she really had no choice, but when even several hours spent on the internet searching had turned up nothing, she decided she was going to have to risk it.

Before she left for her visit with her mother, though, she went back to her workshop and wove a protection spell around a locket she'd bought for her mother the week before. After wrapping it, she collected her purse and a book and went outside to cut a few flowers in the garden to take with her.

Her mother was awake when she entered her room and sitting up in bed. Hope instantly surged through her that Baelin had actually decided to honor the bargain they'd struck, but it

plummeted as soon as mother spoke. "I know you don't walk to talk about these things, Cara," she began as soon as they'd exchanged greetings and she'd settled in the chair she usually used, "but we've avoided it as long as we can, darling."

Cara stared at her mother unhappily, realizing her mother was just as determined to talk about final arrangements as she was to avoid discussing them. "We still have plenty of time to talk about things like that, mom, and it's depressing. I came to cheer you up. Look! I brought some flowers from the garden."

To her relief, her mother smiled happily at the sight of the flowers, taking them and sniffing each one to enjoy the scent, studying them, touching the velvety petals. "They're beautiful," she breathed with pleasure.

"I'll get rid of the last batch and fill the vase with water," she chattered anxiously, hoping to distract her mother. "The roses are doing fabulously. The bushes are full of buds. I'll bet I could bring you a new bouquet almost every day."

Her mother sent her a look that made her heart sink when she returned with the vase. Deciding to ignore it, she focused on arranging the flowers in the vase. "I brought you something else, too."

"Really? What?"

Cara threw a smile over her shoulder. "It's a surprise. I'll get it in just a minute."

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral?" her mother guessed.

Cara chuckled at her mother's playful mood. "Hmmm. I guess mineral would be closest."

"Bigger than a bread box?"

"Smaller."

She frowned thoughtfully. "Mineral and smaller than a bread box," she repeated musingly. "A rock?"

Cara smiled. "It was one on it."

"Something to wear? Or something to look at?"

Cara considered it. "Both."

"Oh! Give me a better hint."

She knew her mother was exaggerating her excitement about the gift, but it still lightened her spirits. "Why don't I just give it to you?"

Moving to her purse, she took the small package out and sat down carefully on the edge of the bed, handing it to her mother. Her mother quickly unwrapped it and then stared at it a little doubtfully. "A broken heart?"

Cara bit her lip. "It's a locket." She shrugged. "It was actually designed for lovers—two halves of a heart, one for each to wear, but it's for love so I figured it was just as appropriate for us. I have the other half." She pulled the chain up to show her mother and then took her mother's necklace and showed her that it opened. "I put a tiny picture of me in yours and you in mine. And this is my birthstone."

Her mother's chin abruptly wobbled with emotion. She covered her mouth with one hand. "It's beautiful, baby! Thank you so much."

Cara thought she was going to break down and cry, too, as she hugged her mother tightly. Sniffing, she released her and leaned away. "Let me help you put it on."

Her mother sat still while she pushed her hair out of the way and put the chain around her neck. When she'd fastened it and leaned back to study the effect, her mother smoothed a hand over the chain and touched the locket, smiling. "I don't need this to keep you close to my heart, darling, but I love it. Thank you."

Cara had been afraid she was about to ask her to make sure she was buried with it. She was so relieved when she didn't she had to struggle with her emotions all over again. As much to head off her mother before she could turn to the subject again as to distract herself, she launched into the tale she'd woven. "I needed to ask you something."

Still studying her locket, her mother flicked her a questioning look.

"It's business. I have this weird customer that has an even weirder problem and I've looked through everything trying to find an answer for her and come up empty. I thought you might know something I could recommend, though."

"Something about a spell?" her mother guessed.

Cara rolled her eyes dramatically. "Yes. She bought a summoning spell a while back for this problem she had and now she says she has this new problem. She summoned a demon to take of her problem, but the demon won't do it unless she agrees to ... uh ... have sex with him. She's willing to do it, but she knows she can't trust a demon and she wanted to know if there was some way to protect herself without warding."

Cara's belly clenched when she met her mother's gaze.

"You haven't been playing with the black arts, have you?"

Cara felt her face redden. "Oh come on, mom! You know I don't believe in any of this mumbo jumbo! Seriously! I need it for a customer. I mean, aside from the possibility of making another sale—which is always good—I feel responsible since I sold the idiot the summoning spell to begin with—especially when you'd told me not to sell anything that powerful. Swear to god I checked her out thoroughly before I did it!"

Her mother frowned, clearly scanning her memory for anything useful, although it was also clear that she didn't entirely believe the story Cara had cooked up and wasn't happy with it even if it was true. "I don't know," she said finally. "The trouble with messing around with demons is that it always leads to *more* trouble!"

"Yes, I know they're evil."

Her mother sent her a sharp look. "In a sense. In a way they're no more 'evil' than a mortal who's completely selfish—they just don't consider how the things they do effect the mortals they play with. Don't get me wrong, they're just as apt to purposefully do harm. They have ungovernable tempers and no one to even come close to controlling them, or punishing them for giving free reign to their tempers—except their masters. But there again, you have to consider just how prone people would be to do whatever they pleased if there weren't any consequences. I'm afraid mortals really don't have the right to pass judgment. If any of them had that sort of power they'd be just as dangerous and just as thoughtless of others.

"I'm more inclined to think of them as being like ... an overgrown toddler in their terrible twos," she added with amusement. "They're used to getting their way and they throw some terrible tantrums when they're thwarted. They *are* dangerous—all of them. Some of them *are* pure evil, but I think a lot of them are just ... self-centered and careless."

Cara felt a flutter of uneasiness as her mother's comments resurrected her memories of her encounter with Baelin. She supposed she could see her point—He *had* behaved rather like a sulky child denied his treat—but it was really hard to think of something that damned scary, muscle bound and probably six and half feet tall, as 'toddler like'. She supposed emotionally speaking, that description might actually hit the nail on the head. He was a toddler grown up into a great, big scary savage that had never had any nurturing or discipline.

He might also be pure evil.

Unfortunately, she had no idea whether he fit into the pure evil category or the thoughtless savage category.

She frowned almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind. He'd certainly displayed an ungovernable temper when she'd thwarted him but aside from tossing out unnamed threats—that were scarier, maybe, because she didn't know what he might do—he'd seemed far more focused on getting his 'treat' than punishing her for denying it. If he'd been evil, wouldn't he immediately have focused his wrath on her mother?

It made her feel like throwing up when she realized that, but she'd made it clear how important her mother was to her and her mother had been vulnerable. She hadn't even had enough sense to make a protective talisman for her mother *before* she'd challenged him!

It didn't matter that she hadn't actually believed any of it. She'd summoned a dangerous being from the netherworld without first seeing to her mother's protection!

Maybe he'd just been too pissed off to think about it, though? Or maybe he had thought about it but didn't want to give up the leverage?

She didn't think she should allow herself to begin to think he wasn't pure evil. Self delusion could be a very dangerous thing, especially in her current situation.

"I don't dabble in the black arts, myself. You know how I feel about that!" her mother said after a few moments, redirecting her mind to the conversation. "Of course, if the customer lives halfway around the world, this won't be any help at all, but there is Lazarus."

Cara blinked at her mother. "Lazarus?" she repeated blankly.

Her mother shrugged. "I feel guilty even to recommend him. She'd be dealing with someone almost as bad as the demons—maybe worse. He knows the black arts, though, better than anyone else I know. He'd have a lot better idea of how to deal with demons."

"He lives around here?"

"Oh no! Well, not close. He lives in Augusta. Of course, he might not agree to see her anyway and, if he does, he'll want payment up front and he's really expensive! But he does know his stuff."

Cara's belly tightened with nerves. Dangerous *and* expensive and she was so broke already! Well, it wouldn't hurt to contact him and see if she could afford his services. "How would the customer contact him?"

"Oh, his site is on the favorites list. You could get the link there and send it to her."

Disconcerted at that discovery, Cara studied her mother curiously for a long moment. "Well, I have to go! I hate to rush off, but I have a lot of errands to take care of that I've neglected. I'll be by to see you tomorrow."

Despite her anxiety about the man her mother had told her about, Cara's spirits were higher when she left than they had been in a while. Rushing home, she booted her computer, found the link, and contacted Lazarus, staring at the screen and waiting hopefully for a quick response.

Chapter Five

The drive to Augusta took longer than Cara had anticipated, mostly because she got pulled over for speeding. Sulking over the damned ticket, she pulled back onto the road when the bastard left and watched her foot and the speedometer the rest of the trip. It was still nearly dark when she reached the edge of the city and since it was unfamiliar to her, she wandered around for a while before she finally found the house she was looking for.

It was a creepy old Victorian and seemed the perfect setting for a man that considered himself a warlock and practiced black magic.

Expecting someone who looked like a lunatic, Cara was startled when a neatly dressed man who looked no more than thirty answered her knock.

"I'm looking for Lazarus."

He scanned her from head to toe. "You're 'in desperate need of help controlling a demon'?"

Cara nodded jerkily. "I'm the one that wrote to you."

He stepped back and gestured for her to enter. When he'd closed the door, he led her to the front parlor—as the Victorian's referred to them. It looked like it had the original furnishings if it came to that. Obeying his silent invitation, she settled on the edge of the sofa, clasping her hands in her lap nervously.

"Before we get down to this"

Thus prompted, Cara opened her purse and handed him the roll of money he'd requested. Instead of counting it, he stared at it a moment and then pushed it into his pants pocket.

"Now, as I was saying, before we get down to this, I need some background information."

"What sort of background information?" Cara hedged.

"Everything about your dealings."

Cringing inside, but with the reflection that he was a stranger she never had to set eyes on again, Cara explained.

Instead of looking at her like he thought she'd gone off the deep end as she'd more than half expected, or laughing, he frowned thoughtfully when she'd told him all she could remember. "And he referred to himself as Baelin?"

"He said that was his name."

Lazarus smiled faintly. "Doubtful. Their name is powerful in itself and they don't share their true name."

Dismay flickered through Cara since she knew it *was* important. It was far easier to banish one and keep them from returning if one knew their real name. "Oh. It didn't occur to me that he'd lie about it."

Lazarus' dark brows rose. "You don't have much practical experience, do you?"

"Uh ... actually, no. My mother is the one that's 'in' to this sort of thing."

"Well—it's done now. My question is, are you absolutely certain that you want to try to control this demon? You'd be much better off to simply banish him. I can't emphasize enough just how dangerous attempting to control them is."

Cara dragged in a shaky breath. "I know. If I hadn't been desperate to start with, I wouldn't have even tried summoning him. I need to be able to control him."

He narrowed his eyes speculatively. "In general, people that summon demons are more interested in having their needs fulfilled and getting rid of the demon as quickly as they can."

Cara frowned at that. "Well, maybe that's why they don't trust humans," she said a little tartly. "If they're always getting cheated in a deal. I'm willing to pay. I thought it over before I summoned him. I just ... I can't let him have free reign. I don't think I'd live very long. And besides I think I need it just to get him to do his part of the deal."

Lazarus shrugged. “Well, you have the right idea in that, at least. I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes if he manages to slip the leash, but it’s possible you can leash him—not easy, but doable.”

Cara glanced at her watch.

“In a rush?”

She smiled a little uncomfortably. “Sorry, but yes. I made a protective charm, but I’d feel a lot better being within the protective circle at home before I go to bed, if you know what I mean.”

He nodded. “Alright then—there are two possibilities and both of them are highly risky and nearly impossible to achieve. Probably the most dangerous of the two is also the one most likely to succeed. You’ll have to ... uh ... seduce him.”

Cara gaped at him. “Uh ... ok.”

“What you’re after is a lock of his hair. With that, you can weave a control spell and the easiest way to get a lock would be while he’s ... uh ... occupied. Now, the reason I suggest seduction is that you aren’t at all likely to get what you need if you simply remove your charm and allow him to come to you. Demons tend to be rather brutal beasts and the incubus in particular is a sexual sadist. He receives nourishment, if you will, whether his ... victim is enjoying what he’s doing or not and, since mortal women don’t typically enjoy sex that’s quite that rough, they tend to bind them with their magic so that they aren’t bothered by the woman’s attempts to fight them or escape. If he binds you, you’re screwed, literally and figuratively. You won’t get the chance to touch him and you won’t get the chance to get the hair you need.”

It was really stupid that her heart rate sped up at the description he’d given her of the ‘love practices’ of demons. She would’ve felt better if she could’ve indentified it as pure fear, but it was hard to dismiss the fluttering of her kegel muscles. “So ... you’re suggesting I hide a pair of scissors under my pillow and wait until he’s busy ... uh ... fucking, and snip off a lock?” she asked doubtfully.

“Pull it out,” he said dryly. “I don’t think the scissors are a good idea at all.”

“Pull his hair out?” Cara echoed.

He nodded. “In the throes of passion, of course. Believe me, once he’s focused he isn’t likely to notice you plucking a few hairs. The trick will be to be convincing enough he actually thinks it is passion. If he’s suspicious, he’ll notice the attempt to get his hair and he’ll know exactly why you want it.”

Cara nodded, but she actually didn’t feel a lot more confident now that he’d explained it. There was a strong possibility, as far as she could see, that just trying to get a way to control him might be the end of her, especially since she’d have to give up the protection she had to go after it. “You said there were two possibilities?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure there’s even any point in telling you. It would require a ... sharing, a blood binding in a sense, although it needn’t necessarily be blood as long as it’s essential bodily fluids. I don’t think it’s likely he’d go along with pricking fingers and making a pact but, in essence, that’s what you’d be trying to do—except without his knowledge.”

Cara blinked at him. “Like a kiss, you mean?”

He made a snorting sound that might have been a laugh. “Demons have no interest in kissing, believe me! They don’t make love. They assault. In any case, I don’t know that that would qualify. It certainly wouldn’t be as effective—unless I suppose it might work if you managed to bite yourself hard enough to bleed. Then it would, basically, qualify as a blood bond, particularly if you also bit him.”

“Yuck!”

He shrugged. “We are talking about having sexual intercourse with a demon,” he pointed out dryly. “They’re beasts, highly dangerous beasts. Alternately—and even less likely, his semen would do, but I’ve actually never heard of an incubus coming, so that’s really reaching—actually they *do* reach orgasm, but they don’t produce semen. Their orgasms work in reverse to our own. We expel energy and usually bodily fluids in the process. The demon sucks the energy we expel as their nourishment.”

Oddly enough, the moment he said it an image popped into her mind—highly carnal. Had she dreamed it, she wondered? Or had Lazarus planted the suggestion and her imagination done the rest?

She frowned. “I don’t see how that would work for making a talisman.”

“It would actually work better—if it was doable. Then you’d have the essence of the beast inside you, captive, and all you’d need to control him would be a spell and a ‘safe’ word, a word that would thrust him away when you needed to. You wouldn’t even have to utter it aloud. It would be sufficient to invoke the word in your mind. The hair would work, but there’s always the possibility, if he’s a particularly strong demon, that he could get it away from you—and that would be ... disastrous for you. About the only thing that enrages them more than not getting their way is being controlled by a mortal.”

Good to know! She didn’t know if he was trying to scare the piss out of her or not, but he’d certainly succeeded. Collecting the control spell and the instructions on invoking it, she left and headed home. It was a long, hard drive and she was so exhausted by the time she finally got back in the wee hours of the morning that she could barely drag herself inside. Almost as soon as she hit the bed, Baelin woke her.

“Where have you been?”

There was suspicion as well as fury in the demand. Cara managed to lift one eyelid high enough to pinpoint him and verify that he was completely enraged. “Well, god! Like it’s any of your business!” she said testily. “Go away. I’m tired and I want to sleep.”

“Do you think you can dismiss me like a ... *servant* with impunity, woman?” he bellowed furiously.

She lifted her eyelid to look at him again. “Please? I’m really exhausted. I know you’re a demon and you probably don’t understand because you probably don’t get tired, but I’m a feeble mortal and I do.”

Briefly, he looked disconcerted. “You did not tell me where you were,” he growled a little sullenly.

“I went to see a man.”

“You gave a mewling mortal man what you will not give me?” he roared, instantly furious again.

“I said I went to see a man,” Cara said testily. “I didn’t say anything about fucking! Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“What did you go to see this man about?”

Cara struggled to gather her wits. “Supplies for my business,” she lied.

“What is this business?”

“I sell occult stuff online.”

He apparently drew a blank. “Sell stuff? For what purpose?”

“To make a living. We can’t conjure what we need, in case you haven’t noticed. We have to work, get paid, and use the money to pay for things we need—like medical care.”

“You went to see your mother.”

Surprised, she opened her eyes and looked at him. “I go see her every day—except I missed a couple of days last week—because of you!” she ended angrily.

He was silent for several moments. “You took her a protective charm,” he said tightly.

“Yes, I did,” she admitted, closing her eyes again. “I don’t trust you not to hurt her to get even with me because you’re mad with me.”

“I cannot heal her if I cannot touch her,” he said tightly.

That got her attention. She sat up and looked at him hopefully for a moment before it occurred to her that he was probably just dangling a carrot. “I’m not falling for that again.”

“I never agreed to the bargain!” he growled.

Cara’s lips tightened. “Fucking me was part of it, damn it! I had every reason to expect you to hold up your end of the deal when you crawled into my dreams!”

He narrowed his eyes at her. She narrowed her eyes back at him. For a split second, she thought she saw a gleam of humor in his eyes but it vanished so quickly she decided she’d

imagined it. "I've decided that I will heal her a little for what you already paid. But you will have to remove the protective spell if you want this."

Cara gaped at him. "A little?" she asked tightly.

"You only gave a small payment."

She struggled with the urge to call him a conniving bastard and finally suppressed it. "So we're talking about a payment plan, now?" she asked tightly.

"I will make her a little better each time you give to me what I need."

Cara studied him speculatively. "How many payments?"

He looked outraged and then furious. "How much is your mother's life worth to you?"

Cara felt the blood drain from her face. She really didn't have a lot to bargain with and he knew it as well as she did. "You were the one that suggested payments."

"Only as a means to establish trust in this bargain," he retorted.

"So what you're saying is that I'd keep right on paying forever? Until I'm dead or don't appeal to you anymore?"

"I did not say that you appealed to me now," he said coldly.

That was a deliberate slap in the face if she'd ever heard one. "Don't make me cry!" she said tightly. "You don't honestly think I *want* to appeal to you or that it hurts my feelings that I don't?" Of course it did, but it was a wound to the ego, she assured herself. She'd live—maybe, if she could tie a knot in her tongue and stop provoking the bad old demon that wanted to do horrible things to her every time she pissed him off.

"It is not important to you?"

She shrugged. "Ok, so we're talking about apples and oranges. I get it. You just want to feed and I'll do. It's no more personal than a choice between a hamburger and hot dog. So I don't know why you're so pissed off that I'd like to have some idea when I stop being dinner! I told you before that I was willing to pay the asking price, damn it! I just want to know what the asking price is."

"Everything I want," he growled, clearly still angry. "I do not understand why you would ... haggle over it when you enjoy what I do to you."

"You keep saying that, but I don't remember. All I do remember is feeling like hell the next day—or rather when I finally manage to come around—which, to date, has been the day after. And I was so ... drained and sore I could hardly walk! If that's any indication of what it's like getting fucked by you, then it worries me! You clearly don't plan on taking many payments or you'd be a little more careful when you're feeding!"

He looked disconcerted. "You are not that ... fragile," he said a little doubtfully.

"I beg your pardon? I think I'm a better judge of that than you are!"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I would be willing to give you two days to rest."

"A week?" Cara demanded, outraged.

"A month."

"I wouldn't last a damned month!"

He glared at her. "What seems reasonable to you?"

"A couple of times a week."

"To rest?"

"To fuck."

"That is not enough!" he snarled. "Five times a week."

"Three. That's every other day—basically."

His lips tightened. "Four."

She studied him speculatively. "Look, I might get used to it if you weren't so damned heavy handed and you'd give me a little time to recover between times! If you're looking at something long term, you're going to have to take that into consideration! Every other night is pushing it, damn it! Two or three nights between, at least at first, would be better."

He turned away from her angrily, pacing back and forth around the perimeter of her bed. "Every other night," he growled finally.

Cara considered trying to argue for better terms and finally discarded the notion. It was something that he'd at least considered her frailty at all! "Alright. Agreed."

His eyes lit. "Remove the protection spell."

Cara gaped at him. "Nothing doing! Damn it! You agreed to make my mother better! It was *your* suggestion! And so far I've made at least two payments and you haven't done anything except ... feed!"

"I am hungry now!" he bellowed.

"I want my mother to be better!" she yelled back at him.

His lips tightened. He began to mutter and pace again. "Then come. We will go and I will take some of her pain and then I will feed."

"I can't go in there at this time of night!"

"I can take you there."

Cara debated. As badly as she wanted to go directly to her mother, though, she realized she simply wasn't up to the challenge of trying to leash Baelin at the moment, and she didn't dare simply remove her protection. "I'll go at my usual time tomorrow," she said implacably. "You can meet me there."

"It will not help her to see me!" he growled. "I must visit her dreams."

"She usually falls asleep before I leave. You can come then."

"Why can we not do it now?"

"Because I'm too tired to face it at the moment. I told you I was exhausted."

After glaring at her furiously for a long moment, he vanished.

* * * *

Cara was still tired when she woke the following morning after her long drive and Baelin's visit. Despite that, she felt more hopeful than she had for a long time. She tried to quell it, tried to caution herself against allowing herself to get too hopeful, but it was largely a useless effort. She rushed through both her household chores and the business related tasks that needed attention.

When she'd finished those, she settled to studying the spell she would need to cast and checking to see that she had everything she needed to perform the ritual. Satisfied when she saw that she was as prepared as she could get, she fixed herself a light lunch and retired to her bedroom in hope of getting a nap that would help her be more alert later—when she knew her wits would have to be sharp.

She wasn't in the habit of napping, no matter how much she felt like taking one, and she didn't really expect to fall asleep. She supposed she was a lot more worn out than she'd realized, though, because she not fell asleep, she slept for nearly two hours. Alarmed by that discovery, she rushed around getting ready for her visit with her mother and dashed off.

Her mother was already drowsing when she arrived. Disappointed, she pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat down, holding her mother's hand and talking quietly to her until she drifted off. As hard as she'd worked to bury her head in the sand, she knew her mother was slipping away a little more every day. The morphine they gave her kept her asleep more than awake—which was something to be grateful for even though it didn't allow them much time to visit because it kept her relatively pain free. It was still hard to accept that she'd begun to spend far more time watching her mother sleep than visiting with her.

Wondering if Baelin would keep his word, she bent her head, resting her forehead on her mother's hand, hoping against hope that he wanted her enough to fulfill his end of the bargain.

She shouldn't have allowed her temper to get the best of her, she thought morosely. It was all very well to excuse herself on the grounds that she was stressed by her grief, her money problems and very little rest, but she couldn't expect Baelin to excuse her on any grounds.

She'd begun to think that she might have made him so angry the night before that he wouldn't show when she lifted her head and discovered that he was standing on the other side of her mother's bed, watching her. In spite of everything, she felt hopefulness surge through her again. "You came!" she gasped, smiling at him gratefully.

He tilted his head, looking at her strangely. "I can do nothing with the protection spell," he reminded her after a moment.

Cara jolted to her feet and reached for the clasp of the necklace. She was about to remove it when a terrible fear seized her. She looked at Baelin, realizing she had no reason to

trust his intentions and every reason to distrust. “You won’t hurt her?” she asked, intending to demand it. Instead, she felt her eyes fill with tears and her chin wobble as it came out as a plea.

He frowned. “I agreed to the bargain between us.”

Cara swallowed with an effort, still hesitant to remove the protection and leave her mother vulnerable. “Swear to me that you mean it! That you’re here to help. You won’t hurt her.”

Anger flickered in his eyes. “On what?”

Cara felt a jolt run through her. What would a demon swear on? “Anything that is dear to you—or at least important.”

His gaze flickered over her. “I swear on ... you. I want you and if I fail your trust, I know you will not give me what I want.”

His comments sent a shockwave through her, but relief along with it. She removed the talisman and stepped back, watching uneasily as Baelin moved closer. Lifting his hand, he lightly touched her mother’s face and then her chest and finally her belly. “It’s uterine cancer.”

He flicked a look at her. “It is everywhere.”

Cara swallowed with an effort. “I know. It spread.”

Touching her mother’s face again, he nudged her jaw down and leaned close. For a moment, Cara thought he meant to kiss her. Instead, hovering a scant few inches away, he inhaled deeply. Confusion flickered through her. She didn’t know what she’d expected, but this certainly wasn’t it. The second time he sucked in a deep breath, she saw what looked almost like a vapor or smoke drifting from her mother’s mouth and drawn into Baelin’s. It was a sickly greenish hue. He swallowed, exhaled and sucked in another deep breath. More of the vapor poured from her mother, thicker now, becoming more solid in appearance.

When Baelin straightened abruptly, she glanced at him. Alarm flickered through her when she saw his face had taken on a greenish cast. He looked around a little desperately and strode into her mother’s bathroom. She grimaced, feeling her stomach churn when she heard him begin to hack and then gag and vomit.

She glanced at her mother, more because she was afraid his distress would rouse her than because she expected to notice any difference. She was stunned when she did. The grayish pallor had vanished from her face. She was still pale, but Cara could see, very lightly, a more normal pinkish color to her skin—and not just her face. When she’d examined her arms, hands, and upper chest, she saw her skin tones had improved there, as well.

She didn’t think it was just a trick of the light or merely imagination. She could see with her own eyes that the shadow of death had lightened its hold on her mother. A thrill went through her that made her dizzy. She glanced at Baelin when he emerged from the bathroom.

He scanned her face. “You are satisfied?”

Sucking in a joyful gasp, she rushed around her mother’s bed and flung herself at him, intent upon hugging him in her gratitude. He jolted away from her. Dismayed at the rejection, Cara sent him a look of hurt, which was when she saw he’d clamped a hand against his chest. “What happened?” she gasped.

His lips tightened. He dropped his hand, displaying a burn in roughly the shape of the talisman she was wearing, although it took her several moments to link the two. She clamped a hand over her mouth, flicking a quick look at his face. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to do that! I wasn’t thinking!”

The anger left his face, replaced with a look of confusion for several moments, and then speculation. “You are satisfied?” he asked again.

Cara smiled at him abruptly. “Yes! She looks so much better I can hardly believe it.”

He gave her a look.

She stared at him blankly. “Oh!” She felt her face redden. “I’ll meet you back at my place.”

Chapter Six

Cara was reluctant to leave her mother despite the promise she'd made to Baelin. She hovered for a little while, staring at her, struggling with the doubts that began rise almost as soon as the first excitement began to wane. She wanted desperately to stay until her mother woke up so that she could see if there was an improvement as she thought.

Finally, though, realizing that it was likely to anger Baelin if she made him wait too long, she gathered her things and headed back to her house, struggling with the emotional roller coaster she was riding. Throughout the drive, she teetered between doubt and certainty, between exhilaration and fear, between enthusiasm and depression.

She hadn't considered Baelin might actually be waiting for her as she'd suggested. Even when she'd told him she'd meet him at her house, she'd thought he wouldn't come to her until she was asleep. He was standing in her living room when she entered the house, though.

Joy filled her the moment she saw him. Closing the door behind her, she pulled her charm off and dropped it blindly on the table near the door, rushing across the room as she had in the hospice and flinging her arms around him to hug him tightly in thankfulness. He stood stiffly in her embrace for a moment and finally settled his arms around her a little awkwardly.

Remembering she'd burned him with her protective charm earlier, she lifted her head and kissed the spot even though it had already vanished. She discovered when she looked up at him that he was staring down at her with a look of utter confusion. Her heart twisted in her chest and warmth flowed through.

He didn't understand, she knew, because he had no concept of love, but demon or not, bargain or not, he was her hero. He'd helped her mother when no one else could. On impulse, she lifted her hands to cup his face in her palms and then pushed upward on her toes until she could match her mouth to his. He stiffened when she pressed her lips to his, but even as she began to pull away, Baelin opened his mouth over hers. A jolt of surprise went through her and scattered in the wake of the heat that poured into her. She didn't know if it was desire arising from profound gratitude or simply a chemical reaction to him as his essence poured through her, but it didn't matter. His mouth on hers felt good. The bold rake of his tongue along hers felt better than good. His taste and scent were euphoric drugs that made the heat rise swiftly and the hunger of his kiss made it permeate every pore and set fire to her nerve endings.

She'd forgotten Lazarus' warnings and his promptings until one of Baelin's sharp teeth nicked her tongue and the taste of her blood briefly mixed with his taste in her mouth. A mixture of guilt and doubt flickered through her, guilt for even thinking about plotting against him after what he'd done for her and her mother, and doubt as to whether she should still distrust him.

She dismissed both from her mind almost immediately, too focused on the heat he created in her to think straight at that moment, to want to think at all. The heady desire was too much temptation to enjoy to the fullest to ignore. When he broke from her lips to suck in a harsh, ragged breath, she focused on his neck, nibbling, sucking at his skin and then moved lower, stroking her hands over his smooth skin, enjoying the hard bulge of the muscles beneath.

When she'd thoroughly explored his chest and arms with her hands, she stroked one hand down his belly and grasped the thick member nudging her belly. It sent a flicker uneasiness through her, but far more hunger when she discovered she couldn't curl her fingers all the way around it. Her mouth went dry. Her throat closed, prompting her to explore his cock with her mouth.

He began to tremble ever so slightly as she worked her way down his belly with her lips, encouraging her to a boldness she might not otherwise have felt. Settling on her knees at last, she studied the mammoth cock in her hands for a moment and then leaned toward him to take it in her mouth. He made a sound when her lips closed around the head as if he'd been punched in

the belly. The sound spawned a rash of Goosebumps, made her belly clench and moisture fill her channel.

After sucking greedily at the knob of flesh for a moment, stroking the ridge around the head with her tongue, she pressed it deeper into her mouth. Using both hands to stroke the length of his shaft that wouldn't fit in her mouth, she pulled on the flesh that would eagerly, becoming more feverish as her own heat surged hotter and hotter. He clamped his hands on either side of her head, tightly, stilling her movements for a moment and then relaxed, allowing her to pull at his cock with her mouth.

Dizzy, consumed with a need to draw his pleasure out, to bring him to culmination, she worked his cock in and out of her mouth more and more feverishly, stroking with her hands, sucking with ravening fervor until he abruptly stiffened. His cock jerked in her mouth. Her heart hammered harder in her chest and she began to suck harder. Abruptly, a warm fluid jetted into her mouth. The taste was indescribable—nothing like she'd experienced before, sweet and salty at the same time. It inflamed her. Swallowing, she tried to draw more, lapping at it until he'd begun to shake so badly she thought he might collapse.

Abruptly, she found herself on her back on the floor, naked, sprawled beneath him, completely disoriented since she couldn't recall how she'd gotten there or when he'd removed her clothes. He moved over her in a sort of maddened frenzy, biting and sucking at the flesh of her neck and upper chest, pulling fiercely at her breasts. A flicker of alarm went through her at the savage passion she'd unleashed, but the voice of caution drowned beneath his onslaught as the muscles along her channel began to clap together in climax.

She gasped, arching upward against him as it shook her. It seemed to jar him from his focus on merely gnawing on her. He caught her knees, pressing her thighs toward her chest and then outward and spearing the head of his cock into the mouth of her sex. The flesh strained to engulf him and failed. She slipped along the floor. It seemed to madden him further. The next time he thrust, she felt as if she'd been glued to the floor. Her flesh yielded screamingly to the force he exerted, knocking the wind from her lungs as he impaled her in one powerful stroke.

The burn of her tortured flesh consumed her mind for many moments while he pumped into her feverishly. It eased after a few moments, however, and her flesh began to respond with pleasurable ripples to the steady abrasion of his cock along the walls of her sex. She caught his shoulders, struggled to curl her hips to meet his lunging thrusts, and felt the tight hold on her ease until she could counter his powerful thrusts. Almost at once, she felt the muscles along her channel quake threateningly. Lifting her head, she bit down on the flesh of his shoulder as her orgasm exploded through her, uttering keen cries of rapture.

He shook all over, released a deep, rumbling groan. She felt his hips jerk with the force of his own climax. He pressed deeper, almost as if trying to climb inside of her, curling his big body around hers as he shuddered and jerked with the power of his release.

For many moments after they finally stopped shuddering, they lay tightly entwined, gasping hoarsely from their efforts. Cara's heart had barely returned to its normal rhythm and her lungs ceased to labor for breath when he pulled his cock from her and shifted downward to cover her mouth with his.

It was no lover's salute. There was hunger in his touch, almost as much as before. Cara groaned inwardly, weary enough all she wanted to do was to lay like a slug and enjoy the aftermath of the most explosive climax she'd ever experienced. It occurred to her forcefully, though, that the hunger she felt in his kiss wasn't mere passion. It was the need to consume her energy to renew his.

Still, she protested when he finally released her mouth and made it possible. "Could we move this to the couch? This floor is murder on my ass."

He jolted away from her to stare at her blankly for a moment and then lifted his head, scanning the room, she thought. Before the thought had completed the circuit in her brain, however, she felt herself sinking into the cushions of the couch. Twice more, he roused her to heights she'd never before attained, carried her through three more explosive orgasms and then dropped her into a deep pit of complete exhaustion.

Confused by her lack of response, Baelin lifted his head to stare down at the woman, Cara, somewhat resentfully. It didn't abate when he discovered she was asleep. It escalated. The impulse instantly swept over him to enter her dreams and continue but almost as quickly as it struck him a strange sort of reluctance followed. He wanted her to touch him as she had before. He wanted to feel her moving with him, striving to attain release, pushing him toward his own.

Dismissing the urge to enter her dreams after a moment in favor of rousing her to fill his need for a response, he went back to sucking at her soft skin hungrily. She made a whimpering sound, but she remained perfectly limp and he stopped again, debating whether to enter her dreams after all or not.

He discovered it wasn't nearly as desirable to him now that he'd tasted the passion she'd willingly given him. That realization confused and annoyed him, but he realized he couldn't dismiss it once it had occurred to him.

She'd said she was willing to give to him every other night if he would heal her mother. He hadn't realized in what way she meant to give. Truthfully, he'd thought she only meant that she would remove her charm and allow him to feed. He hadn't expected her to rush to him, to kiss and fondle him and drive him into such a frenzy that he'd spilled his essence into her mouth.

That memory caused a flicker of alarm. He narrowed his eyes at her sleeping face speculatively, suspecting treachery for the first time. Truthfully, he hadn't had enough mind about him before to even consider it. Now that he had, he wondered if her sleeping meant that she was innocent of plotting against him or if it indicated nothing beyond the weakness of her mortality.

Closing his eyes, he felt her with his mind and discovered with a touch of dismay that her energy was far weaker than he'd expected.

Resentment followed. He wanted more, gods damn it! He still hungered!

It occurred to him after a moment, though, that he had never known a moment when he didn't hunger and that he felt far closer to complete satisfaction than he ever had before. Was it worth it to risk her fragile life force by feeding more? Or would he discover that he had irreparably damaged his play thing?

Did he want to wait a full day for more?

He didn't. He particularly didn't when he knew that he must expend more energy in healing her mother before she would give to him again. It wasn't much of a bargain considered in that light. She was only giving back what he'd expended to earn her favor.

He considered that sullenly for a few moments before it occurred to him that it wouldn't take more than a few sessions to pull the malignancy from her mother and maybe one or two more to repair enough damage that her body could do the rest. Then he wouldn't have to expend himself at all. He could simply feed on his Cara and enjoy.

Unless she turned on him and sent him back through the gateway.

She would find that very difficult, however, once he'd fed on her for a time. Already, despite what he'd expended on her mother, he was stronger. Beyond the gateway, he'd had to subsist on the little energy that filtered through and that had been pure torment, barely sustaining him, giving him just enough to keep his hunger raw.

He wouldn't give up the comfort of feeling so fulfilled after so long a time of torment!

It flickered through his mind that he was in her world now. Even if he fed on her so recklessly that she withered and died, there were others—many others that he could feed on.

He focused on her again, considering it, wanting to try to appease his hunger completely for once. That odd reluctance gripped him again, though. He struggled with it a few moments and finally flung himself away from her angrily. Mayhap she'd woven some spell on him? He searched, but aside from the fact that he detected a minuscule amount of his essence within her, he could find nothing.

Dismissing it finally, he abandoned her. He needed distance, he decided, to consider whether he wanted anything else to do with this bargain. He was free to decide. She hadn't bound him when she'd brought him through.

* * * *

As weak as Cara was in the aftermath of Baelin's 'feeding', her spirits were high when she readied herself the following day and rushed the hospice to see her mother. The nurse's face was tight when she arrived and her heart sank. "She's worse?"

Confusion flickered in the woman's eyes. "I don't know. She's in more pain than she's been for a while, but her vitals seem to have improved a little."

Anger warred with Cara's anxiety as she left the nurse and headed into her mother's room. She saw immediately that the report was all too true. She had only to look at her mother's face to see that she was struggling with pain. Her anger escalated as she moved to the bed and took her mother's hand, scanning her pale face anxiously. "How are you today, mom?"

"Fine," her mother lied.

"Do you need more morphine?"

Her mother shook her head. "No. I've had enough. I'm alright, just a little more ... uncomfortable than I was yesterday. Don't mind me. How are you doing?"

Cara struggled with her anger and her worry and finally managed to beat both back enough to focus on trying to distract her mother. It was wearing, though, and she was so relieved when her mother finally drifted off to sleep that she had to struggle to keep from bursting into tears and wailing like a frightened child. With the best will in the world, though, she couldn't keep the tears from gathering in her eyes and running down her cheeks.

She was so blinded by them she didn't even notice Baelin at first. He'd already moved to the bed to peer down at her mother before she realized he'd come. Instantly, her anger surged upward. "What did you do to her? You were supposed to make her better! She's in more pain now than she was yesterday!" she hissed at him furiously.

He stared back at her, his own face hard with anger. "She is more *alive* today than she was yesterday," he growled. "If you want her to be free of pain then allow her life force to escape the vessel that feels it."

Cara stared at him with a mixture of hurt, outrage, and doubt for several moments and finally turned to study her mother's face. The lines of pain had softened as she slept and Cara realized that she could still see a far healthier pink to her mother's skin than before. For almost a week before Baelin had helped her, her skin had had a sickly bluish-gray pallor, a sign, she knew that death was near.

Swallowing a little convulsively, Cara met Baelin's gaze again. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "I shouldn't take out it on you just because I'm worried about her." She bit her lip. "It hurts me to see her in pain, but you're right. There's no way to avoid it if she's to get better."

Baelin looked disconcerted. "You feel pain when she does?" he asked curiously.

Cara smiled wanly. "I love her. It makes me hurt when I see she's in pain, but I don't feel her pain. I wish I could. I wish I could take it and make it mine so she wouldn't hurt so much."

"If you could take her pain you would also take her place," Baelin said harshly. "Do you want that?"

Cara felt her chest tighten with fear. Did she? Could she endure what her mother had? "I'm afraid," she admitted finally. "A coward, I guess. I should be willing, shouldn't I? If you truly love someone you should be willing to sacrifice your life for theirs."

She saw that Baelin was studying her curiously when she met gaze again, not with condemnation. "You were willing. You offered it to me to save her."

The tightness in her chest eased. She smiled at him, although her eyes filled with tears again. "Thank you."

He frowned. "For what?"

She shrugged, brushing the tears from her eyes with her hand. "I don't feel quite as bad about myself."

He shook his head at her. "You confuse me, mortal."

Cara sniffed, but she couldn't help but chuckle at his expression. "I know. There's really no explaining it, you know. It's just the way I feel and I don't know how to share that so that you'd understand."

Anger flickered across his features briefly, but he seemed to dismiss it. "Remove the talisman and I will take more of her sickness."

Cara hesitated, wondering if it was safe to remove so much so quickly, but she reached for the catch on the chain when she felt Baelin's piercing gaze and removed it. He stepped closer as soon as she did, sucking the sickness from her mother's ravaged body as he had the day before. This time when he stumbled into the bathroom to expel it, she felt more than the revulsion she'd felt the day before, though, wondering for the first time how much it cost him to do it when it made him throw up so violently. Removing her own charm, she dropped it on the bed and met him when he came out, curling her arms around his waist in an embrace meant to comfort. "It must be very hard for you," she murmured.

He'd stiffened when she embraced him, but he settled his arms around her lightly. "What?"

"Taking her sickness. I hadn't considered it, but it must hurt you."

She heard him swallow convulsively. "It does not hurt that much," he said slowly.

She tightened her arms around him and turned her head to place a kiss in the center of his chest. "I don't like that it hurts you at all," she murmured, "but I appreciate it more than I can say that you're willing to do it for my sake."

She heard him swallow again. He lifted one hand and settled it a little heavily against her skull, almost as if he was trying to urge her to kiss him again.

"It is a reasonable exchange for what you give me," he murmured a little hoarsely.

Cara smiled against his chest and then rubbed her cheek against him and placed another kiss there. "Is it?"

"Yes."

He sounded ... almost uneasy and Cara felt a flicker of amusement. Pushing herself up to her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek. "I'll meet you at my place."

He frowned, looked as if he might say something and then apparently thought better of it. Heat flickered in his eyes. Abruptly, he vanished.

Cara grinned. He thought she'd forgotten their deal—that he had to let her have a day of rest between his 'feedings'. It pleased her that he'd even considered reminding her, and she was certain he had even though, in the end, he'd dismissed the urge.

She discovered when she turned to look at her mother that her eyes were half open. Wondering if her mother had just awakened or if she'd seen Baelin, she searched her face. It occurred to her, though, that her mother couldn't have seen him. It would certainly have alarmed her if she had!

"I thought you were sleeping."

Her mother's eyes closed again. "I had a strange dream," she murmured.

Relieved, Cara moved to her and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Rest. I'll be back to see you tomorrow."

* * * *

Cara studied the spell Lazarus had given her, trying to decide whether she really wanted to cast it or not. She had what she needed to do it, but did she really and truly need it?

Despite the fact that Baelin had betrayed her trust when she'd first brought him through the gateway, he had done as he'd promised after they'd wrangled over it. Sighing after a few moments, she set about preparing for the ritual. She didn't feel as if she needed it, but she didn't think she could trust her feelings any longer. From the moment Baelin had first begun to pull her mother's sickness from her, he'd become a hero in her mind, someone to worship and shower with adoration.

It was no hardship at all to be his lover, as wearing as it was, as certain as she was that he was consuming her life force each time and might well drain her completely if the mood struck him. He hadn't merely been boasting. He gave her far more pleasure than any lover she'd ever had of the mortal variety.

He was still a demon, however, and still contemptuous of mortals. Regardless of how she felt about him, she knew she meant nothing to him. And that meant he might tire of her and discard her or he might tire of her and simply take everything before he moved on.

She needed the protection of the spell even if it made her feel guilty to cast it after all Baelin had done for her. Even if it didn't matter to her that his motives were purely selfish and didn't change the way she felt about him, the very fact that she *did* know his motivation was self-serving should have relieved her of any sense of guilt. It didn't, but she had her mother to think about. She was bound to have a long convalescence even if he succeeded in removing all of the cancer. Her mother might never really regain her health after what the cancer had done, and that meant that she was needed and had to consider more than her own wishes.

She didn't feel any better when she'd finished casting the spell, any less guilty of betraying Baelin's trust, but she set it aside. She had no intention of actually using it unless she needed it to protect herself.

If she never had to use it, he never had to know, and if she did then there would be no reason to feel like she'd betrayed him, she reasoned.

The piercing look he gave her when he appeared at her mother's bedside that evening sent a fresh wash of guilt through her, though, until she realized that he'd noticed the absence of her protective charm.

Stupid, she mentally berated herself! Why hadn't she considered that it might make him suspicious?

She looked away, focusing on her mother as he lifted his gaze, wondering if she had aroused his suspicions. If she had, though, she couldn't see it in his expression when she finally looked at him and he curled his arms around her readily when she went to him after the healing session. When she finally stepped back and looked up at him, he caught her face between his palms and leaned down, covering her mouth in a kiss just sort of savage.

Her heart was beating so fast when he lifted his head again it felt like it would beat its way out of her chest. "Meet me at my house?" she said a little hoarsely.

His eyes gleamed with the heat in them. "No."

Surprise jolted through her. She stared at him in confusion. "No?"

He shook his head slowly, his gaze flickering over her face. "Rest. I'll come to you on the morrow."

Cara studied him anxiously, wondering if he was already getting tired of her. "You're sure you don't want to come tonight?" she asked a little plaintively.

A faint smile curled his lips. "I am certain I do, but I am also certain that you need to rest, my fragile little mortal."

Cara smiled back at him, feeling a little better—still worried that he'd figured out what she'd done or that he was growing tired of her—but somewhat appeased. She should've just been relieved, she thought wryly. She'd been with him three nights running and every day she woke feeling weaker and less rested than the one before.

She couldn't quite convince herself, though, that he hadn't instantly figured out that she'd woven a control spell for insurance.

Chapter Seven

Feeling a presence hanging over her, Claire opened her eyes. It would've been a lie to say that she didn't feel a jolt of alarm ripple through her, but it passed quickly and she studied the demon with wary interest. She'd never actually seen one, although she'd certainly read a great deal about them.

In a way, he looked pretty much as she'd thought one must. He was tall enough and brawny enough to seem like a giant although she doubted he was much more than six feet tall, possibly as much as six four. His flesh was the angry red of a blistering sunburn, his eyes black as were the five inch horns protruding from his scalp, the bat-like wings curled against his back and the long, board straight hair that hung several inches past his broad shoulders. He was not only humanoid, he was appealingly proportioned in the length of arm, leg, and torso, and had the bulging, ropey muscles of a body builder.

Not entirely proportionate, she mentally amended when she'd scanned his length. He was hung with the damndest dong she'd ever seen on any male animal! It looked downright lethal! Wryly, she decided, considering what he was, it shouldn't have come as such a shock. Dragging her gaze from it with an effort, she scanned his torso to his face.

That certainly was nothing like she would've expected. If she had to describe it, she would've said he was sinfully handsome. It certainly wasn't the sort of face one would expect a monster would hide behind. But then maybe he looked the way he did because of what he was—a predator of mortal women? Maybe it was a glamour and not his true face? Then again, she couldn't dismiss the possibility that the incubi were naturally handsome in the way predators were inclined to adapt to their needs. It must certainly make it far easier to captivate mortal women with a face as flawlessly beautiful as his that was also undeniably male and as enticing in that sense as the body that went with the face, promising delight to the senses.

She seriously doubted he was in the habit of giving delight, regardless. He was an incubus, after all. "You're the demon Cara summoned to help me," she said after a few moments when he said nothing, just continued to study her as if he was trying to understand something about her and couldn't quite grasp it.

Something flickered in his eyes, surprise she thought.

"I am the incubus, Baelin."

She lifted her brows at that, tilting her head curiously. "That isn't your true name, though. Is it?"

His gaze moved over her face. Instead of answering, he posed a question of his own. "Cara told you that she'd summoned me?"

Claire smiled, uttered a snort of amusement and irritation. "Of course not! She thinks she's fooled me. She worked so hard, I let her think so. She ... worries too much already. I didn't want to add to her distress." She frowned. "What did she offer you to help me?"

He frowned, his lips tightening. "The bargain is between me and Cara," he said in a low growl of warning that he wouldn't tolerate interference.

Claire's lips tightened. She released an irritated breath after a moment. "I can guess. You're an incubus, after all," she said dryly. She bit her lip. "Would it ... sway you even a little if a mother asked you not to harm her foolish, impetuous child?"

Confusion flickered over his face. "Cara is no child."

Anger flickered through Claire. "I know you don't understand, and you're right, she's grown now—but she's still my child. She'll always be my child and I'll always worry about her welfare. I'd banish you to protect her if I could, but you and I both know I can't or you wouldn't be here." She studied him frankly for a moment when he didn't offer the assurance she'd hoped for. "Why are you here?"

He frowned. Turning away, he paced restlessly back and forth across the room several times and finally stopped again, scanning her face. "Cara has your face."

Claire smiled in spite of her anxiety. "Except younger—because she's my daughter. It's like that with mortals as often as not, although just as often a child looks like exactly what they are—a cross between their mother and their father."

"She is not like you, though."

"No," Claire agreed. "Just a little, but she's more like her father—especially her impetuosity."

He seemed to be struggling with a question he wanted to ask. She couldn't decide if that was because he couldn't quite decide how to phrase it or if he just wasn't certain of what he was looking for. "She welcomes me into her body because she is impetuous? Or because she is grateful?"

Claire felt her face heat with discomfort. "Oh! I'm not sure I want to have this discussion! In fact, I'm sure I don't even if it was wise, and I don't think it would be. Besides, I'm entirely certain Cara would be furious with both of us if I did, even if I thought it was safe to discuss it with you."

"Why? You know I'm an incubus and what my needs are. She knows this, too."

Claire bit her lip. "It's far too complicated for me to explain. You wouldn't understand it anyway. You aren't human and this concerns feelings and emotions you've never experienced."

Anger twisted his features. "I'm no stupid beast, regardless of what either you or your spawn believe!"

Claire was taken aback both by his anger and the confusion that had caused it. "I don't think you're a stupid beast and I can't believe Cara does either. Truthfully, there are so many things that figure in to such things that it's really hard for us to understand and even harder to explain. Suffice to say, Cara and I have always discussed pretty much everything—even to relationships with men. But there's a line neither of us cross because we respect each other's privacy. Sex isn't the same for humans. It's an expression of love and desire, or simply passion, or a need to find release from stress." She thought it over and shrugged. "I suppose to us it's almost a feeding, as well. It certainly lifts our spirits!" she finished with a touch of amusement.

He frowned. "You are saying you don't know why? Or that you do know and don't want to tell me?"

"She hasn't confided in me," Claire said pointedly. "She's been trying hard to keep me from finding out what she did to save me. I could guess, but it would only be a guess."

"And yet you know her," Baelin said shrewdly.

Claire considered his question. It occurred to her after a moment that it wasn't likely to create problems for Cara even if she did tell him what she thought. Cara was sensible—most of the time. She would've gone to Lazarus for the spell she needed to protect her. "I think it's a little of both and also desire for you," she said finally. "I think she's just impetuous enough to show her gratitude with enthusiasm but, however grateful she is, she feels more than gratitude or she wouldn't continue to welcome you."

"Not even to honor our bargain?" he demanded sharply.

Claire sighed. "It's really hard to summon enthusiasm for something you don't really want, no matter how grateful you might be to a man," she said dryly. "She might try to fake it to spare your feelings, but there would be no real warmth. You'd know that as soon as you ... uh" She shifted uncomfortably. "When a mortal woman desires, they ... uh" She stopped again and cleared her throat. "They're wet to help a man enter them."

He looked thoughtful. It was almost amusing to see the gears turning in his mind. She would've been willing to bet money that he'd been so consumed by his own interests that it was something he hadn't noticed.

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to tell so much? She still didn't see what harm could come of it, though, beyond the fact that he would know whether Cara truly wanted him or not, and that might not be a bad thing for him to realize she didn't. He seemed just a little too ... possessive of Cara to suit her.

As tender hearted as she knew Cara to be, as vulnerable as she'd been when she'd thought she was facing being alone in the world, she didn't think Cara could possibly have developed any sort of attachment. She sincerely hoped not! She was doomed to misery if she had. Regardless of his curiosity, Baelin was a beast—not a stupid one, certainly—but definitely in the sense that he had no humanity. He was a creature as far beyond human understanding as humans were to him.

Baelin left the woman, retreating to a place that he'd found that suited his desire for solitude, far enough away from the humans that their noises, their chatter, and the noises of their machines didn't disturb him. He'd gotten the answer that he'd gone for, but he wasn't certain what to make of it, mostly because, try though he might, he couldn't recall that Cara had ever been wet for him. He was almost certain she had not for he could not recall a time when entering her had been easy.

That angered him until it suddenly occurred to him that he wasn't a man at all! Her body hadn't been designed for his but for puny man dick! Not that he'd ever seen one, or cared to, but her sweet little cunt was far too tight to have been designed for anything approaching his girth! He thought he could safely assume from that that man dick was puny beside demon dick!

That thought pleased him so much he forgot about being angry for a span of time, until his mind wove its way back to the question he still didn't have an answer for. He would've simply dismissed it as immaterial save for the bigger question in his mind.

Once he had completely healed the mother, would the daughter turn upon him and try to banish him again? Or, nearly as bad, weave a protection spell around herself that he could not overcome?

He dismissed the last. She had a sweet little cunt and it pleased him a great deal, but there were many more, he was sure, that were as sweet and would be just as satisfying. Why should he care if she would have him no more?

The more important question was whether she would continue to feel enough gratitude to refrain from trying to send him back.

He realized that he had been hopeful the mother would say that Cara felt love for him. He'd seen what she was willing to do for love and he knew if she felt it for him then he needn't concern himself that she would banish him once he was done—or try.

It was a delicate situation and damned confusing when he could not tell how Cara felt about him! He couldn't stop healing her mother or Cara would be angry and she wouldn't lavish him with the kisses and touches that he'd begun to hunger for almost as much as driving his cock into her until she came and he was bathed in the energy she released. He wasn't certain *why* he hungered for it except that it seemed to feed him as her energy did.

But if he continued to heal her mother she might stop anyway.

It angered him that he couldn't think of a solution that would make him easy in his mind. Finally, he decided that he would have to focus more on Cara the next time he was with her and see if he could tell if her desire was real or feigned. The love He couldn't think of any way that he could determine whether she felt any of that or not.

He realized he had no choice, though, but to continue as he'd begun. Disappointing her seemed the surest, and fastest, way to lose what he wanted.

It infuriated him to know that, to acknowledge that he felt powerless when he would've far preferred to demand what he wanted. Despite the fact that he was absolutely certain that she hadn't woven a magical spell around him like a noose, though, he *felt* like he was bound and he didn't like either that feeling or the gut churning anxiety that swept through him every time he thought about how angry she would be if he disappointed her.

He almost felt as if he would *prefer* to be banished than to see accusation in her eyes instead of the warmth he'd come to consider his due, or if she turned away from him and wouldn't kiss him or touch him anymore. It was disgusting that he did, but he couldn't think of any way to change the way he felt about it.

* * * *

Cara couldn't help but be relieved that Baelin had insisted that she rest. He'd agreed that he would only expect her to welcome him every other night, allowing her a night's uninterrupted

sleep, and then promptly ‘forgotten’ it, and she hadn’t wanted to turn him away. She wasn’t exactly sure of why she hadn’t wanted to. It certainly wasn’t because she was needy. He never failed to satisfy her to the point of being nearly comatose. She was beyond well and truly satisfied. She was exhausted from being satisfied.

She didn’t think it was even because she was worried that displeasing him might make him decide to leave and renege on their bargain.

In all honesty, and as crazy as it sounded even to her, she was worried that she wasn’t giving him what he needed to sustain him, partly because she didn’t like to think of him suffering and partly because she couldn’t dismiss the fear that he’d find someone who *could* handle his appetite.

She didn’t actually acknowledge that, however, until he failed to show the following night. One day, she could feel relieved about. Two deeply worried her. If she could’ve just convinced herself that he was being considerate it wouldn’t have been so bad, but she wasn’t sure he actually believed she was as fragile as she claimed.

Not that she *was* fragile! Not on the human scale, anyway. She was sturdy, strong, and healthy. She just didn’t stack up all that well to a demon.

* * * *

The shock was so sudden, cut so deeply, that Cara felt like she’d hit an invisible brick wall when she stepped into her mother’s room and saw that the bed was empty. She stared at it unblinkingly for a split second and glanced toward the bathroom. The door was standing ajar and the room clearly empty. Afraid to allow the thoughts struggling to form in her mind, feeling as if she was crumbling to dust, Cara turned and exited the room in a daze.

The hallway was empty. She headed blindly toward the entrance. Thankfully, the nurse was at her station although she hadn’t been when Cara came in. She stopped at the desk, struggling to form words. “My mother?” she croaked finally.

The nurse looked up at her and jolted to her feet when she saw the look on Cara’s face. “It’s alright! We sent her over to the med center for some tests. I tried to call, but I didn’t get an answer.”

Cara leaned weakly against the desk, struggling to right the world that seemed to have turned upside down. The nurse helped her to a chair. Flopping weakly into it, she leaned down and covered her face with her hands. “She’s alright?” she managed, her voice shaking with the tears of fright already clogging her throat.

“They’re running tests. Let me get you some water.”

Cara nodded, but she barely heard her. Her mind was still scrambled by the shock of seeing her mother’s bed empty and the fear that had instantly lanced through her. She dragged in deep, calming breaths, trying to get her runaway emotions under control. It was the only thing she could grasp and hold on to—the need to protect herself. “Where did you say they took her?” she asked when the nurse returned and cupped her hand around the paper cup filled with water.

“They should be bringing her back shortly.”

Cara stared at her. “Shortly?”

The nurse studied her for a few moments. “Let me make a call and see what I can find out for you.”

The cup shook as Cara lifted it to her lips and drank, her mind focused on trying to decipher what she could hear the nurse saying in an attempt to learn what she was told. The nurse looked at her uneasily when she’d hung up and Cara felt her heart sink right down to her toes. “What did they say?” she gasped.

“They’re still running tests.” She paused, seemed to wrestle with herself. “The doctor said to send you over and he’d talk to you as soon as he’d studied the results.”

Cara jolted to her feet almost before the woman had finished speaking. The nurse blocked her path. “Why don’t you sit down for a few minutes and collect yourself before you go? I don’t think you should be driving.”

Cara tried to look ‘normal’. “I’m fine,” she said, glad now that she’d managed to keep from having hysterics.

The woman actually looked concerned. “You don’t look fine.”

"But I am," Cara said tightly, pushing past the woman abruptly and heading out of the hospice. She wasn't, though. She was crushed. She didn't understand, not all! Her mother had seemed to getting better every day!

A surge of hopefulness flooded her at that thought. Maybe that was it? She'd improved so much they'd decided to run tests?

She was afraid to let herself believe that even though she thought it was a good possibility.

What else could it be, though, she wondered as she unlocked her car and got in, staring blindly through the windshield? A relapse? Was she frightening herself for nothing?

Abruptly, she wished that Baelin was there, that he would hold her and make her feel better. She didn't want to face whatever was waiting at the med center by herself.

It was crazy. He was a demon. He wouldn't understand her need for comfort—at all. He wouldn't know how to give it. And even if he was willing to go with her for moral support, it wasn't as if she walk in to a hospital with a demon!

She wanted him, though, so badly she couldn't breathe. The tears she'd been struggling with broke through the dam and filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "Baelin," she sobbed. "I need you."

She'd barely choked the words out when he materialized in the seat beside her. It flickered through her mind how shocked anyone would be who chanced to see him, but she dismissed it, surging toward him and burrowing against his chest. To her relief, he curled his arms around her.

"What is wrong?" he growled sharply, an edge to his voice that she knew instinctively meant that he'd expected to find her in trouble—and not of the emotional kind.

"I don't know!" she wailed.

Clearly he couldn't think of anything to say to that. "Why are you weeping?" he asked after a prolonged pause. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "It scared me ... so ... so bad!"

"What?"

Cara sniffed, trying to bring her emotions under control. "They took my mother to the hospital for tests. I didn't know and when I went in her room and she was gone I thought ... I thought"

"You thought?" he prompted.

"I thought she was gone!" she wailed, sobbing all over again.

"You said that she was gone," he muttered, clearly confused.

Cara dragged in a shaky breath and lifted her head to look at him blankly until it dawned on her that he hadn't instantly grasped her fear that her mother was dead because he didn't think in those terms. She sniffed, swallowing convulsively, mopping her face with her hands. When she looked at his chest, she saw she'd wept all over him and mopped the moisture off his chest, as well. "I'm sorry." She settled her head on his shoulder, feeling the shock and fear and grief slowly fade. "I just needed to be held."

He was silent for several moments. "You summoned me because you needed to be held?"

Put that way, it sounded a little lame even to her. She sniffed again. "I was upset." She lifted a hand to one hard pec, stroking it lightly. "I needed someone strong to make me feel ... stronger. This was a bad idea, wasn't it?" she muttered, realizing as she calmed down that he was tense, maybe even angry that she'd summoned him when he couldn't understand why she'd done so.

He glided one hand lightly along her back, almost as if he was hardly aware of the action. "Your mother is better," he said finally, his voice gruff, as if he more than half expected her to challenge the statement. "I know this."

She'd thought so—until she'd found her mother's bed empty. She supposed she'd lived with that fear at the back of her mind so long that that was why she'd instantly leapt to the conclusion that her mother had died the moment she took her eyes off of her. It was amazing that it took no more than his assurance to convince her she'd had hysterics over nothing. "The

nurse didn't know anything except that they'd taken her to run tests. I think I could've gotten a grip if that hadn't instantly made me think bad thoughts." Sighing shakily, she finally pulled away from him, meeting his gaze with a good deal of discomfort. "I didn't really think you'd hear me or that you'd come. I didn't mean to ... alarm you or anything."

"I was not alarmed."

Cara studied his face doubtfully. "Are you pissed off with me?"

He looked at her curiously. "I'm not angry."

She thought he had been, but it was a relief that he wasn't anymore. "I should go. The nurse said the doctor would tell me something when I got over to the hospital."

He frowned. "You do not ... need me any longer?"

She studied him a little wistfully. "I wish you could come with me. I know you can't," she added hurriedly, smiling faintly. "The hospital staff would pass out if I showed up with you."

His gaze flickered over her face. Abruptly, the demon, Baelin, vanished and she found herself staring at a man wearing a suit. She blinked several times, wondering if she really had lost her mind. "Baelin?"

"It is a glamour to make me appear human."

She gaped at him. "You can ... of course you can! You'll go with me?"

He smiled faintly. "That is the reason I donned the glamour."

Cara smiled back at him. "Thank you! I didn't want to go alone just in case ... in case it's bad news."

As distracted and on edge as Cara was, she noticed everyone stared at the two of them as they went into the hospital. She couldn't say that she was surprised. Baelin was a handsome demon and, with a human glamour, he looked movie star gorgeous. The doctor flicked an assessing look at him when they finally found their way to a consultation room. Cara hadn't even noticed she'd been gripping his hand frantically since they'd entered the hospital. "This is ... uh ... my fiancé."

The doctor nodded and extended a hand. Baelin stared at it for a long moment and finally mimicked the gesture to Cara's relief. When Baelin took a seat, she planted herself as close to him as she could get, grabbing his hand again and staring at the doctor anxiously while he studied the folder he'd brought in. The doctor finally shrugged and met her gaze. "We have some good news for you so you can stop looking so anxious. Your mother's cancer seems to have gone into spontaneous remission."

Cara gaped at him in disbelief. "Really?" she managed finally.

The doctor looked more confused than excited. "I've never seen anything like it." He paused. "Quite honestly, I don't know what to make of it. But, we've run the tests several times. There doesn't seem to be a mistake."

Cara sucked in a joyous gasp. Squelching the impulse to fling herself at the doctor and hug him with an effort, she turned to Baelin and hugged him instead.

The doctor looked troubled when she finally looked at him again and her heart sank. "Don't ... don't get too far ahead of yourself. It looks good, but"

Cara swallowed. "But?"

"Cara ... Your mother was in the last stages. There's a lot of damage ... a lot. I'm not sure how much of a difference this is going to make. It might give her more time, and I feel like I need to emphasize that—*might*. I'm going to keep her here at the hospital for now so we can run some more tests and keep her under close observation."

Cara nodded a little jerkily. "But she's better?"

The doctor studied her with empathy. "Don't get your hopes up too high, Cara. These things ... well, we've seen spontaneous remission before and sometimes the patient recovers fully. That's not going to be the case here. You need to try to accept that. Even if the cancer disappears completely, we're looking at some serious problems with a lot of her vital organs." He frowned. "At the moment, it might be the least of our worries, but she's also addicted to morphine and she'd have to be treated for that eventually."

When the doctor left, Cara looked at Baelin hopefully. “Can you ...? Do you still think you can ... make her better?”

His gaze flickered over her face. “Yes.”

Relief flooded her. She leaned against him, rubbing her face on his shoulder. “I knew you could.”

The tension returned, however, when they went up to see her mother. She hadn’t thought beyond having Baelin with her for moral support. It occurred to her the moment the doctor encouraged her to go up to visit her mother, though, that she might well have screwed up royally by introducing Baelin as her fiancé. All the doctor had to do was mention him casually, and she would be facing an uncomfortable interrogation from her mother.

Beyond that, she didn’t know how to politely dismiss Baelin so that she could visit without coming up with another explanation for her mother—assuming she was awake. She’d practically begged him to go with her. She didn’t want to turn around and rudely dismiss him. She worried over the situation during the entire trek, however, hoping she’d discover that her mother was asleep and she wouldn’t have to come up with a lie.

That hope went unfulfilled. Her mother was awake and smiled welcomingly when they entered her room. “You’ve brought a friend!”

Cara sent Baelin a panicked search for help. He stepped forward immediately and extended his hand to her as he had the doctor. “I’m Baelin ... Cara’s fiancé.”

Chapter Eight

Cara was still in a state of pandemonium when they reached her house. She'd been thrown completely off kilter the moment she leapt to the horrible conclusion that her mother's bed was empty because she'd lost her and she hadn't really had a chance to gather her wits since. She'd needed comforting, thought instantly of Baelin, and he'd come. He *had* comforted her, and yet that episode had been nearly as unsettling because she hadn't thought beyond the need, hadn't considered that he wouldn't—*couldn't* really understand a purely emotional need when he was a demon. The doctor had taken her on another emotional roller coaster ride and then Baelin had turned everything completely upside down by introducing himself to her mother as her *fiancé* of all things!

The visit had been short—she thought. It had instantly taken on the nightmarish quality of seeming to move in slow motion while she tried to field her mother's interrogation with a pack of lies she hadn't had time to prepare beforehand. She'd begun making excuses for why they had to rush off directly after his announcement, though, and they hadn't even sat down, so she didn't think it could possibly have been as long as it had seemed.

Her mother had still managed a 'where, when, how, and who' session that had her stammering the first thing that popped into her mind. And the worst of it was that the lies had popped out as soon as they left her mouth and she couldn't remember half of what she'd said.

She didn't have time to address the issue with Baelin, either. The moment they were through the door, he drew her up against his length, tangled his fingers in her hair to drag her head back, and covered her mouth. She struggled briefly to hang on to her wits and gave up the effort as his heat scoured her, sent her tumbling almost instantly into a dark, dizzying whirlpool of liquid fire. Dimly, she realized she'd needed this as much as anything else to bring peace to her world. The hunger of his touch banished the doubts that had been plaguing her over the past several days when he'd failed to come to her.

"I removed the protective circle from the bed," she gasped dizzily when he broke from her lips to gnaw on her throat and neck.

The disorientation increased briefly when she felt a falling sensation and then felt herself settling into the softness of her mattress beneath the weight of Baelin's body. Briefly perturbed over the transition from living room to bedroom in the blink of an eye, she dismissed it in the next moment along with the discovery that he'd disappeared her clothing and discarded his glamour. He sought her lips again, exploring the sensitive cavern of her mouth with his tongue and then thrust it in and out rhythmically when she closed her mouth around the muscle and sucked.

He lifted his head after a moment, sucking in a harsh breath, and pushed himself downward. Claspings a breast in each hand, he sent hard rushes of pleasure through her as he divided his attention between them, sucking and pulling at her nipples with his mouth until she was teetering on the brink of orgasm.

Baelin was so thoroughly caught up in the dark miasma of his feeding frenzy when he felt Cara's body gathering to expel her energy that he almost missed the opportunity he'd been waiting for. Her little breathless gasps finally triggered the memory, however, piercing his absorption and he released one of her breasts. Shoving that hand down between them, he teased her clit briefly, and then rammed his thick middle finger into her sex. The muscles along her channel instantly closed around his finger, spasming. It distracted him briefly, diverting him to the sudden desire to explore the tight little cavern that gave him so much pleasure and he sawed his finger in and out along the passage. The discovery that the walls were velvety soft to the touch inflamed him, set his mind to reeling so that it was a moment before he realized the muscles clinging to his finger weren't just warm. They were moist and coating his finger with that moisture.

She arched her back abruptly, crying out, and he felt the walls of her sex convulse around his finger, almost like a throat swallowing. It sent him spiraling out of control. His own body responded, answering the siren call of hers. His balls seized. His belly tightened convulsively, drawing into him the energy pouring from her body in delicious waves. He curled around her, struggling instinctively to form a tight ball in defense against the intense pain/pleasure that assaulted him, made more excruciating by the fact that her body wasn't cradling his flesh to ease the strain.

A sense of triumph began to filter through his mind even before his body ceased to convulse. He pulled his finger from her channel, examining the moisture that clung to his flesh almost with a sense of awe that it was for him—*him!* She desired him! Feeling the sense of victory mount, he lifted his head to look at her face. His chest tightened for no apparent reason as he studied her, making it hard to breathe. He swallowed convulsively several times in an effort to dislodge the strange sensation. "You are so wet for me, my Cara," he murmured hoarsely.

She lifted her eyelids a fraction to study him lazily. The tightness in his chest grew more pronounced as she lifted her hands, curling them on his shoulders and trying to draw him closer. He didn't yield to the summons. He succumbed to the need it gave rise to, the hunger to claim what she offered. She was his, he thought with a mixture of pleasure and incredulity as he covered her mouth and relished possession of it, drinking in her essence, her taste, with the knowledge that she was giving it to him.

He'd thought he relished conquering above all else, enjoying taking what he wanted, however reluctantly yielded, maybe more because they couldn't deny him. He discovered that receiving what was given with enthusiasm made him feel far more powerful, drove him beyond the heights of ecstasy he'd found before. He couldn't seem to get enough to fill the aching void he hadn't even known was there.

He lost awareness of everything in his maddened pursuit. It wasn't until it finally penetrated the fog of his mind that she felt far too cool to his touch that he came to himself enough to truly focus on Cara once more. Pure horror engulfed him when he did, sending him spiraling into panic. Gods! He'd taken too much from her! Her life force was so weak it frightened him. He stared at her bleakly, too shocked by what he'd done to think straight.

"Cara? Wake up, my precious!"

Rage surged through him when she didn't respond, when he saw no rise in the weak light left in her. "Why did you let me do this? You *know* I'm a mindless beast! Why didn't you protect yourself? *Why*, gods damn it?" he demanded, shaking her.

For several moments, the panic threatened to swallow him whole. He struggled with it, trying to think how to infuse strength into her. She needed food to sustain her, he realized after a moment, and then discarded it when he realized she was too weak to attain consciousness let alone eat.

It dawned on him abruptly that he'd gotten so carried away with enjoying her several times that he'd lost control and yielded his essence to her. If he hadn't, she wouldn't have gotten what she needed to create the protective spell that had so enraged him when he discovered it, that had cost him so much rest while he worried over when she would use it against him.

She hadn't, though. She hadn't used it when she'd needed it, gods damn it!

He thrust that thought aside, realizing that the only way he could preserve the life force that was so precious to him now was to give back some of what he'd taken. Curling one arm around her, he lifted her limp form to him, cupped her face with his other hand and covered her mouth with his own. Yielding his essence, he discovered, when it was not something he was accustomed to doing, was harder than he'd expected made harder by the fact that she was too weak to pull it into herself. Nevertheless, he persevered, forcing his energy into her until he thought he detected a rise within her.

He stopped to rest, studying her worriedly. The paleness of death had lightened its hold on her, enough that he felt a stirring of her subconscious mind. A little warmth had stolen back into her along with the color. He considered for a moment and shifted her and himself, pushing his cock into her mouth. Her mouth remained slack around his member for several moments, but

as he stroked her cheek and slowly pumped in and out, he felt her tongue curl around his cock, felt her mouth close around his flesh as she swallowed. It was enough to make him hard for her. Focusing on gathering his essence for her, he began to thrust a little more quickly. The moment he felt her begin to suck weakly instead of merely swallowing, his body erupted. A choked grunt of agony was forced from his chest as he forced his essence to flow from his body and into hers. He groaned as the convulsion eased, grunted again as the suction of her mouth produced a response from his body and another hard convulsion twisted at his guts.

He was shaking all over and bathed in sweat by the time he decided he couldn't endure anymore and tried to extricate himself. She yielded reluctantly, tightening her mouth around his member and sucking harder, hard enough to draw more from him before he succeeded in freeing himself. Spent, he collapsed weakly against the bed, struggling to catch his breath. When he finally decided his lungs weren't going to collapse and his heart wouldn't explode, he rolled onto his side to study her.

Relief flooded him when he saw her chest rising and falling, saw warm color in her cheeks. The feeling that swept over him threatened to crush his chest again. Swallowing convulsively against the tightness, he gathered Cara against his body, so profoundly grateful to feel the strengthening of the life force within her that it sent him into a turmoil nearly as disruptive to him as the fear and panic of before.

Regardless, as badly as he wanted to escape, to leave her in the hope he could leave the troubling feelings behind, enough anxiety remained that he hadn't given her enough, that she would sink again toward the abyss if he didn't stay, that he couldn't bring himself to let go of her. A strange sort of calm stole over him after a time as he lay staring into the darkness with Cara curled against him. It was almost as disturbing as the roiling emotions of before, though, and just as incomprehensible to him.

When he realized it was nearing dawn, he pushed the tumultuous thoughts from his mind and focused on Cara again, discovering in the process that he had been absently stroking his hands over her as he held her. Disconcerted, wondering if he had been subconsciously mimicking the way she so often touched him or if he had been prompted by his own need to reassure himself that she was not slipping away from him, he stared at her, feeling a flicker of anger take hold of him along with the certainty that she had *done* something to him.

He didn't know *what* she'd done, beyond turning him inside out and thoroughly rattling him, but it was *her* fault! He'd never experienced such fear, such total panic in his life and he would be happy never to experience it again! He would not have felt it at all if she had done what she should have, he reminded himself. She had the protection spell! She should have used it, gods damn it! Why leave it in his hands when she had to know that he was a mindless beast when he was feeding!

To *make* him feel those things, he realized abruptly! She'd done it to torment him! She'd *tried* to scare the life out of him and she'd damned near succeeded!

If he had not come to himself when he had, she would be dead now and *then* who would have the last laugh! It would have served her right!

Slipping from the bed when she sighed and rolled over, he glared at her sleeping form for several moments, resolutely ignoring the relief he felt that she was sleeping naturally, and then transported himself beyond the confined, suffocating walls of her dwelling and flew off. He expended just enough anger and angst circling high above the city and glaring down fiercely at the mortals beginning to stir and run about like ants to feel hollow and tired and thoroughly confused all over again when he settled in the crumbling, abandoned factory that he'd claimed as his lair.

* * * *

Cara yawned and stretched, wincing at the sore muscles the movement caused her and then smiling to herself as the memories of the night before flooded back. The smile vanished after a moment and she frowned at the discovery that darkness shrouded the memories. She couldn't remember falling asleep in the middle of Baelin's lovemaking, but she decided she must have since the very last thing she remembered was coming the third time in their third, wild session.

Cringing inwardly, wondering if Baelin had left angry, she pushed herself up, fighting the familiar weakness and thirst that always followed a night with Baelin. It took an effort of will to drag herself through her morning ritual and into the kitchen to find something to chase the weakness. It disturbed her that it persisted even after she'd packed enough food and liquids into her stomach to feel bloated and nauseated. Usually, she began to feel a little better as soon as she'd eaten something and quenched her thirst.

Dismissing her concern after a moment, she focused on rushing through her tasks so that she could make a trip to the hospital to check her mother's progress. Dismayed when she discovered she'd lost an entire day, she abandoned everything, however, and dashed off.

It was a damned shame she was so panicked to get to the hospital and make certain her mother was alright that she didn't devote any time to the story she needed to cook up to explain her *fiancé*! Her mother was far more alert than she had been then when she arrived. She knew she was in trouble the moment she saw the militant glint in her mother's eyes.

"I was worried about you when you didn't come yesterday."

"Oh, mom! I am sooo sorry! I've just gotten so behind with everything that I was trying really hard to catch up and lost track of the time. I should've called."

Her mother studied her speculatively. "It didn't have anything to do with your new *fiancé*?"

Cara gaped at her in dismay, feeling the blood rush from her face and then surge back in a fiery tide while she scrambled to come up with a story her mother might swallow. "About that ...," she said, uttering an unconvincing chuckle, "he's really hot, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes he is!" her mother agreed. "Was that a glamour or does he always look that yummy?"

Cara blinked at her mother, scrambling to find her footing. "He does look glamorous, doesn't he? Almost like a movie star."

"I didn't say he looked glamorous. I asked you if that was a glamour. Never mind. I know it was—not that he isn't a handsome specimen in his true form—but what were you thinking to summon him?"

Cara looked around for a chair since she didn't see that it would be at all helpful to run. She'd have to face her mother sometime, after all. "Uh ... I'm not sure I know what you're getting at," she persevered when she'd plopped weakly into a chair.

"Cara, really!" her mother said testily. "I'm sick. I'm not feeble minded. You and I both know my cancer didn't just ... go into remission without some help."

"Isn't it wonderful!"

Her mother frowned at her, but she relented after a moment. "Cara ... don't think I'm not grateful. I am. And I completely understand how hard this has been on you, but how do you think it makes me feel to know you risked so much for me? That you put your own life in jeopardy?"

Cara stared at her a moment. "Dearly loved?"

Her mother struggled with her emotions a moment and burst into tears, lifting her arms toward her. Sniffing at incipient tears herself, Cara surged from the chair and into her mother's arms, hugging her tightly. "Yes, it makes me loved, but it also makes me feel terribly guilty and afraid for you," she said when she pulled away to look at Cara. "Did you at least go to your father for that protection spell?"

Cara gaped at her. "My father?" she repeated blankly. "Lazarus? That weird man is my father? Good god, mother! He's barely older than I am!"

Something flickered in her mother's eyes. She pursed her lips sourly. "He's as old as I am! I told you he dabbled in the black arts! That's why I left him."

The discovery threw Cara into turmoil. She'd always assumed her father was dead—or a very bad man. Her mother had never actually explained the absence of a father. She'd simply tried to reason through what might have happened by herself when her mother evaded her attempts to find out about him.

"You did go to him for the spell?" her mother prompted.

“Yes,” Cara said absently, turning everything over in her mind and trying to picture the man she’d met with her mother.

“And you performed the ceremony?”

Cara blinked at the prompting, realizing abruptly that her mother must have seen right through the tale she’d woven about a customer in need. “You knew it was me?”

Her mother shook her head at her. “Cara, darling, you are the most transparent person I know! You couldn’t make a poker face if your life depended on it! Everything you feel shows on your face. Of course I knew it was you! And you didn’t answer me!”

Cara nodded uncomfortably. “I actually felt guilty about it. Baelin’s ... well, we got off to a rocky start but he’s really very trustworthy. I don’t actually think I need it.”

Her mother sighed with irritation. “Baby ... he’s a demon,” she said gently. “There’s no such thing as a trustworthy demon. I’m just glad you had enough sense to weave the spell.”

Anger welled in Cara. “He isn’t like that! He’s ... you’d have to get to know him to understand. I agree he’s a little rough around the edges and he’s pretty thoughtless at times, but when I was so upset the other day because I found you gone and didn’t know what to think about it, I called him and he came right to me. And he just held me. He didn’t expect anything for it. He has the capacity for gentleness whatever you think.”

Claire looked at her daughter in dismay. “Of course he came, sweetie! You summoned him. That’s part of the binding spell you use to control them when you open the gateway.”

Cara stared at her mother uneasily. “The binding spell?”

Claire turned white. “You didn’t open the gateway and summon a demon without the binding spell, Cara! Tell me you didn’t!”

Cara looked away uncomfortably. “Of course I didn’t!” she lied. “I wasn’t thinking about that when I summoned him—that he *had* to come. He was still just as sweet as he could be!” she added stubbornly. “He wasn’t even very mad when he realized I wasn’t in trouble, like he’d thought, just upset. And I think the only reason he was angry at all was because it scared him when he thought I was in trouble.”

“Cara ...,” her mother began hesitantly, “you haven’t ... grown attached to him, have you?”

Cara felt her face redden. “Of course not! That would be stupid, wouldn’t it?” she responded, swallowing a little convulsively. It occurred to her forcefully that it wasn’t a lie, precisely. She hadn’t grown attached. She’d fallen in love with him in spite of his wealth of imperfections—maybe because of them. She didn’t know. Until her mother had suggested the possibility, she hadn’t actually acknowledged how much he’d come to mean to her, not even when he was the first person she’d thought of when she was so upset.

He needed her, though. Maybe he didn’t think so, but she knew he was the way he was because he needed someone like her to love him—needed *her* to love him. How could he understand something he’d never experienced if he had no one to teach him?

She discovered her mother was studying her in patent dismay when she emerged from her thoughts. “You can’t tame this beast, Cara. You can’t gentle him. He will never care about you. You’re nothing more than a meal to him. He might be fond in that sense, but that wouldn’t stop him from discarding you without a thought if he grew tired of you. It wouldn’t make him hesitate even a moment if he perceived you as any kind of threat. Even if it was possible, and it isn’t, he is not of this world. He doesn’t belong here and you certainly don’t belong in his! He could never truly understand what it is to be mortal because he isn’t. Your entire life will be no more than a moment to him, and just that insignificant.”

Dismay flooded Cara as she acknowledged that everything her mother had said was true. She nodded. “I know. It’s just ... I’m so grateful to him for giving you back to me when I thought I would lose you. I am fond of him ... because of that, you know, not the way you’re worried about.”

Her mother looked cautiously relieved. “I thought as much! You’re too sensible to act like an idiot like I did with your father. He was so very charming, though!” she said wistfully. “And great in the sack.”

Cara gaped at her mother, horrified. “That’s way too much information!”

Her mother blushed, but shrugged. “We’re grown women—both of us now. You aren’t harboring illusions that I’m not a woman just like you are?”

She rather thought she preferred harboring her damned illusions! “Of course not! It’s just ... well you haven’t really had any relationships in my memory. It’s a lot to absorb.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be dragging men in when you were little and confusing you. Besides, the few I dated seemed to resent you and I couldn’t have that. Anyway, I never really got over your father. It wasn’t as hard to live without a man in my life as it might have been if I could’ve found anyone who compared. I was a little lonely at times, but I had you.”

Cara smiled with an effort, abruptly seeing history repeat itself. She knew her mother was right about Baelin. She’d always known he would leave eventually, but she was certainly never going to find a man that stacked up to him. And the worst of it was that she wouldn’t even have a child for solace!

It made her feel like crying to realize that, but she resolutely pushed it from her mind. “It’s not too late,” she said, as much to distract herself as her mother. “You’ll be well soon. Baelin promised and I know he’ll keep that promise. You could always renew your acquaintance.”

Her mother blinked at her. “Oh! I couldn’t do that! He plays with really scary stuff! That’s why I left him to start with. It was just too ... nerve wracking, and I lived in dread that something awful would happen to him because of his practices.

“Besides, the son-of-a-bitch looks younger than me now! Even if I still appealed to him, which I doubt—you can imagine how tongues would wag if we were seen together—with him not looking much older than my daughter!”

Cara shrugged. “They do that these days, actually. I can’t say that very much has changed over the years, but there are plenty of women who date younger men today. And why shouldn’t they? Men have never been constrained by the age thing! Nobody makes their life miserable over it.”

Claire shook her head. “I’ve let you guide me completely off topic! I’m relieved that you have the sense not to be taken in by Baelin. They are tricksters! But you need to be very careful in your dealings with him. Regardless of how much you’ve grown to trust him—which you certainly shouldn’t!—despite your gratitude, don’t hesitate to use the spell your father gave you if you feel threatened. It won’t hurt him. It *will* repel him and protect you.

“Assuming he does actually keep his word and I get well enough to go home, I’ll handle the banishment. I know how tenderhearted you are and how much it would crush you to do it, especially if he managed to convince you it was harmful to him—which it isn’t! If I don’t, if he betrays your trust and I begin to sicken again, you’ll have to do it, but I don’t think it’ll be as hard for you under those circumstances.

“Don’t wait, though! Don’t give him a chance to use his wiles against you. They’re very clever and very good at manipulation and although I know you’re clever, you’re very susceptible to users like him.”

Chapter Nine

No amount of pondering, Baelin discovered, brought him any closer to understanding any of the things plaguing him and, since it didn't, it also didn't bring him any closer to a solution for ridding himself of the emotions that churned in his belly until he could find no rest. If it wasn't bad enough that he'd turned to pure jelly with the terror that had seized him when he'd thought that he had destroyed his frail little mortal, he relived it over and over in his mind as he paced, trying to think. And it wasn't one whit easier to deal with in retrospect than it had been when it had happened!

As many times as he thrust the thoughts away, they came back and each time, he felt the same stomach churning nausea, the same frightening sense of helplessness. If he'd felt *any* of that while he was draining the life out of her, he wouldn't have to endure torturing himself with what he'd done.

It wasn't even logical, by the gods! He'd certainly *almost* drained her of her life force, but he hadn't. She'd still been alive—barely—but still alive! Not so far gone that he hadn't been able to rekindle it and feed it with some of his own energy to bring her to safety! Why torture himself with something that had *almost* happened? It hadn't! It wasn't reasonable! He'd stopped in time.

He'd noticed his little flower was wilting because he was such a greedy bastard he'd tried to take more than she had to give!

That was why he felt so sick with ... guilt and remorse every time the memory presented itself again, forced him to look at what he'd done, he finally, reluctantly acknowledged.

He was still inclined to blame her for the whole damned mess! He was a demon! He couldn't help what he was, by the gods! If she hadn't known, it would've been different, but she did know. And what was more, she had the means to protect herself! She could have stopped him. She *should* have!

She'd done it to spite him! He wasn't sure what for, but he knew that must be it. Mortals were spiteful creatures! Punishing others for their flaws! Or maybe she'd done it to teach him a lesson?

It would certainly have done so, but it would not have done *her* any good! Aside from that, how would he have put the lesson to use once he'd destroyed her? He couldn't show her gentleness when she was dead! He couldn't show her that he'd learned to control himself. He couldn't prove to her that he finally, completely understood the consequences of his selfishness and his unwillingness to control himself only because he felt like he had the gods given right to behave just as he pleased at all times! He couldn't tell her that he understood that he had been given a mind to make decisions even while he had been created as a beast that fed upon mortals!

Tired of pacing, he finally crouched beside the wall, cradling his aching head in his hands. His stomach rumbled. He'd been so distraught that he'd burned up his energy and now he was hungry again! If that wasn't the outside of enough, he didn't know what was!

Was he not miserable enough already, by the gods! Now he must be hungry, too?

It was all the thinking about Cara, he thought morosely. He had only to think of her and he wanted her, even when he wasn't particularly hungry.

And that was her damned fault, too! As *if* he could retain any willpower whatsoever when she ... *flung* herself at him each time he saw her as if he was one of the gods instead of a demi-god, one of the spurned ones!

And he did not trust himself to go back. Even now, as miserable as he was about what he'd done, he was afraid he still wouldn't be able to control himself.

Beyond that, he was uneasy about his welcome. He did not think that she would be able to remember, but she would not need to! She would know when she woke that he had used her cruelly. She was soft and delicate, his little Cara! She would be sore and weak and she would

know what he'd done. He didn't think he could face seeing wariness in her eyes instead of the light of welcome. He knew he would not be able to bear it if she looked at him with fear or hate! She had never done that! Even in the beginning when he had behaved so badly, she hadn't cringed away from him. She'd bellowed back at him! She'd been angry, but she hadn't looked at him with fear and loathing!

Would she now? Or would she forgive him as she always had?

He massaged his aching head with his hands, trying to think what to do. He wasn't compelled to return to her, not by any spell. He didn't have to go back. Why risk it—the possibility of being banished to the netherworld again or facing Cara's condemnation—when there was no reason to?

His chest tightened instantly with angst. He wasn't certain if the thought of banishment had caused it or the thought of leaving Cara, but it was a short, unpleasant road to discovery. He thought he was more angry at the thought of being banished than anything else, though he couldn't dismiss apprehension entirely. It was a miserable place for all condemned there, a special torment designed by the gods they'd offended when they'd rebelled long ago, but it was especially hellish for those like himself who depended upon mortals for survival. The occasional soul migrated there to be fought over until one them emerged victorious, but otherwise the only sustenance to feed upon was the weak energy mortals released that filtered through the gateway, and the constant hunger could be maddening.

It was small wonder they couldn't contain themselves when they escaped into a world filled with mortals!

The thought of leaving Cara made him more miserable by far, however.

Anger followed the pain that stabbed through him and he surged to his feet and began to pace again. There were no gods damned choices that appealed to him at all! He would be miserable if he stayed. He would be *more* miserable if he left, and if he stayed and was banished, he would be miserable *and* hungry and he was *sick* of being hungry!

He would be better off if he left, he thought abruptly. He was not used to so many emotions churning in him that he could hardly think! His life had been simple before! He'd had nothing to think about but the pursuit of sustenance—which was all the gods damned pleasure he needed! He did not want this *need* that had been growing inside him to go to Cara! He did not want the constant battle between his instincts and his fear of hurting her!

He *would* go, he decided furiously. He would find another mortal to give him what he needed who would not *also* twist his guts into a knot! He would find a dozen! Why limit himself to one when there so many? He was hungry now, gods damn it! Why should he be hungry when he was surrounded by mortals? There must be as many different flavors to chose from as there were women!

He was on the point of dashing off to find his first when it dawned on him that he hadn't healed Cara's mother. He'd told her he would.

He did not owe her anything!

Mayhap he would, though, just to show her that he was magnanimous? *Then* he wouldn't have to worry about his conscience bothering him that he'd broken a vow!

* * * *

For the first time since her mother had gotten sick Cara was tempted to simply call and chat with her on the phone for a little while instead of making a personal appearance. Not that she hadn't dreaded every single visit while her mother was sick! She had. There had been days when it was all she could do to make herself go and watch her mother slowly fade away. In a way, she thought part of the reason she hadn't missed a day—until Baelin came into her life—was because she'd felt a need to punish herself because she was alive and healthy and mother wasn't. That certainly hadn't been the main reason, though. She'd gone despite the dread she'd faced each time that she'd get more bad news and, toward the last, because she'd feared each visit would be the last.

In spite of the doctor's doubts, though, her mother had steadily improved since she'd been transferred to the hospital and Cara's doubts about Baelin's ability and his willingness to

help had long since been laid to rest. She didn't feel that she needed to be there for moral support and she'd stopped expecting hourly to discover her mother had died.

She was reluctant to make the trip because she expected her mother to be coming home any time and she had a zillion things that she'd neglected that she wanted to take care of before that.

She was also reluctant because of the lecture her mother had given her the last time about Baelin. She hadn't seen him since and she was too upset about it, she was sure, to keep it from her mother's eagle eyes.

She'd tried to convince herself that he hadn't come because he wanted her to rest up and recover from the last time. That worked the first day. It mostly worked through the second. She had no reason to think he wouldn't come to her that night and yet she just *felt* that something was wrong.

Possibly because, although Baelin seemed to have the best of intentions, he wasn't a very patient man. The last time he'd told her to rest, he'd appeared the very next night. She'd fully expected him to this time—but he hadn't. Reminding herself that it was the first time since the beginning that he'd gotten so carried away that she'd lost an entire day, she decided that explained why he was a no show the following night. He just thought she needed more rest, and really she had. The weakness had persisted. She still didn't feel one hundred percent and that worried her, too, but not enough that she wasn't anxious to see him again.

Except she had a terrible feeling that she wasn't going to, that something had happened. That thought prompted her to go visit her mother after all. If it was purely imagination that something had happened to prevent him from returning, then he would also have missed visiting her mother—she thought.

At least if she did go and speak to her mother, she had some possibility of finding out something. If she didn't and he still didn't show up she would be worried sick.

Her mother was sitting up in bed eating when she arrived. She jolted to a halt at the sight. Her mother had been fed through tubes so long it was stunning to see her eating actual food!

She wrinkled her nose when she spotted Cara. "Clear liquids—blah! I'm hungry enough to eat real food!"

Cara smiled. "The tubes are all gone!"

Her mother nodded toward the door. Thus prompted, Cara closed it and moved to the chair closest to the bed, looking at her mother questioningly.

"Baelin fixed everything," she said in a low voice that was almost more mouth movement than sound. "The staff is having apoplexy right now. I think they're convinced somebody screwed up and misdiagnosed me and they're trying to find somebody to blame."

Cara felt a dizzying thrill go through her. "You're serious?"

Claire shrugged. "Just guessing. They've been all abuzz since they ran tests on me this morning. They keep coming in and staring at me, like somebody switched patients on them." She giggled.

Cara bit her lip, but her mother's amusement was infectious and she was near delirious with joy and relief besides. "He fixed everything?"

"Seems like. I don't think they would've gotten nearly so up in the air to discover the cancer had gone away—although that did give them a jolt. Anyway, they wouldn't have taken all the tubes out if I'd needed them. And I feel fine—better than fine, actually. I don't know if it's been so long since I felt good that it feels wonderful just not feeling bad anymore, or if I just feel wonderful. I mean energetic, like I could turn cartwheels or something!"

The excitement inside Cara took an abrupt nosedive as that sank in and she realized what a tremendous leap her mother had made. It hadn't even been a week ago that they'd discovered the cancer was in remission and the doctor had lectured her about getting too hopeful. Now she was free of cancer and everything that had been damaged was healed?

Not that she wasn't still thrilled speechless at her mother's recovery! She was. It was just that it also occurred to her that Baelin had fulfilled his end of the deal ... and he hadn't come back.

"You don't look very excited."

Cara shot her mother a guilty look. "I'm thrilled beyond words! It's just ... so much to take in at once. I'd thought the best we could hope for was a few weeks of convalescence. Of course, Baelin is amazing, but I hadn't really thought he could completely heal you so quickly!"

Claire eyed her assessingly. "You're worried that he tried to do too much at once and something happened to him."

It was a statement not a question. The worst of it was, she hadn't actually formulated that fear until her mother put it into words. She swallowed a little convulsively. "Oh, I know he wouldn't do that! He *is* a demon, after all," she said with only slightly forced confidence.

"Exactly!" her mother said bracingly. "You aren't fooling me, Cara. You're worried and it's silly. Beyond the fact that they're far too self-centered to do anything that might harm them for the good of anyone else, he's an immortal. Besides, he looked fine when he left—maybe a little tired, but he didn't have any trouble disappearing."

"You saw him? Last night?"

"Like clockwork—every other night since you two made the bargain."

Cara frowned.

"What?"

She shrugged. "It's just that ... well, he usually comes to see me afterwards, but he didn't last night." Or the night before. "You're sure he looked alright? I mean, the times when I was here he looked terribly ill after he'd pulled the malignancy out. He always threw up and he looked pale and weak afterwards."

"Well, he was expelling it—and who doesn't look weak and pale after throwing up? I don't imagine it's any more pleasant for them than it is us."

"I guess," Cara responded doubtfully and then determinedly dismissed it with the reflection that he probably just hadn't felt up to a visit after doing so much at once. "When do you think they'll let you come home?"

"Lord knows. They're in such a blind panic I don't think that's crossed their minds. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned in to a three ring circus. If anybody starts talking about miracles, though, I'm sneaking out! I am *not* going to get stuck trying to explain this!"

Cara got up. "Well, they're bound to let you out as soon as they've run every test they can think of and see that you're well. I should get home. I've got a lot to do before they turn you lose."

She hugged her mother and kissed her cheek. Instead of releasing her when she'd returned the embrace, Claire held Cara at arm's length. "I wouldn't lie to you, Cara, especially when I can see you're concerned. He was fine when he left and I'm absolutely certain that he's still fine."

Cara smiled with an effort and nodded, but she wasn't comforted or convinced. Beyond being worried about the effects it might have had on him to do so much at once, though, she was worried about what it might mean regarding their bargain. He'd seemed to imply that he expected payment for a very long time and when she'd confronted him about taking pay for work not done, he'd indicated that they would take it a step at a time. He would heal her mother little by little until he trusted her and take small payments until she trusted him.

Why had he abruptly changed the rules? She hadn't really thought he could do it all at once. That was one of the reasons she'd agreed to his terms. Clearly, he could've at any time, though, and he'd still made her only a little better each time because he hadn't trusted *her* to honor her word.

She supposed she should be happy that he'd finally come to trust her enough to make her mother all well, but somehow it didn't *feel* like trust. It felt like washing his hands of her, especially when he hadn't bothered to collect payment in two days!

Anger followed the hurt when he didn't come that night or any night after that. Cara tried her best not to think about it, focusing on work, focusing on all the tasks she'd neglected when she'd been dividing her time between watching over her mother and trying to make a living. She had indifferent success. When a week had passed with no sign of him and her mother called to tell her she would be released the following day, she finally gave in to her emotions and spent

most of the night crying. It wasn't as if she dared let down her guard once her mother was home!

* * * *

It was a very good thing he had discovered that he didn't particularly care for the first female he countered, Baelin decided. He'd abandoned her before he could do any harm and it had given him the time to consider his situation with a slightly clearer head.

Despite the fact that he had set out to lay waste, in a manner of speaking, he realized that that would be the surest way to attract the notice of the gods and they would descend upon him in a righteous fury and drag him back to the netherworld. He couldn't afford to behave as recklessly as he wanted to—and he had *wanted* to behave recklessly in the worst way! More cautious after that, he decided he also couldn't afford to confine his hunting grounds to an area for his convenience.

It was almost more work that it was worth, he reflected when a week's hunting had not turned up a single gods damned female that he found particularly appealing. *Not* that he bothered to examine them too closely! He wasn't taking any chances that he might become maudlin over another mortal female! But there was always something that just failed to please. This one was too plump and that one too thin. This one's skin was too rough, the next felt like raw dough. This was screamed enough to give him a blinding headache before he'd so much as touched her, and that one screamed and gave him directions of what she wanted until he couldn't even *focus* on feeding! He had been right in one sense. There were mortal females everywhere he looked, but it was far harder to find one that was just to his taste than he'd expected.

Finally deciding that he was just hunting in all the wrong places, he returned to the new lair he'd claimed—further from Cara—and considered his situation. Acknowledging finally that he really knew nothing about mortals beyond the tales told in the netherworld, which were clearly unreliable, and what he'd learned from Cara, he decided that what he needed to do was to study them. All he needed was a glamour to fit in and since he could change at will he could make certain that he fit in where ever the mood struck him to go.

It was no great surprise to discover that they were always in a rush to go somewhere. He'd noticed that particular behavior already and found it extremely tiresome. He supposed, though, that it had to do with the fact that they were mortal and didn't have much time. They *had* to rush to actually accomplish anything in the time they had.

That deduction disturbed him in an indefinable way. He found it more unsettling, though, when he'd tracked down the uneasiness to the source and realized it bothered him because Cara was mortal. He hadn't considered when he'd rushed off that he might discover if he decided at some point to go back—say to see how Cara was taking his rejection—that she might not be there at all. He tried to dismiss it. He told himself that he wasn't so oblivious of passing time that he would 'forget' and her time would've passed before he considered going back. He couldn't shake the fact that mortals were so fragile, though, and Cara had seemed particularly delicate to him. Truthfully, he'd found that that appealed to him a very great deal. He wasn't certain why unless it was because she was so completely opposite all that he'd known before, but it did.

Unfortunately, it also meant that he couldn't even count on her living the typical lifespan of a mortal—not that he had a clue of what that was beyond short, like a butterfly.

He discovered he couldn't get it out of his mind once it had entrenched itself firmly. Everywhere he went, he saw everything from tiny mortals just hatched to ancient ones creeping along with canes. They marked the time on the watches they wore on their wrists, counting minutes and seconds as if they couldn't spare a moment to merely stop. They had to rush, rush, rush or they would miss something.

He attended births, marriages, and funerals, trying to grasp their concept of time and what it meant to them. The only thing he discovered of any real interest to him, however, was that that strange word Cara had used—*fiancé*—was what the mortal women used to identify the male they'd chosen to marry.

He wasn't certain what to make of that or if it had any significance at all. It seemed—strange, though, that she'd chosen to refer to him as her *fiancé* when she might simply have said

a friend, a co-worker, or a boyfriend. They seemed to have any number of ways to describe what they referred to as their relationships and each one was different. Why had she decided to use that one when any of the others seemed to be perfectly acceptable and that one was the only one that meant they'd chosen a mate that they intended to stay with, to have children with?

Not that they did stay with them that he could see. Divorce was a common enough topic that it didn't take long to figure out what that meant and some seemed to get married and then divorced almost as often as others took and discarded boyfriends.

He was a little annoyed when he discovered that scarcely two weeks had passed since he'd left, which was almost no time at all even to mortals! He couldn't help but wonder if their concept of time, or all the rushing, had somehow warped his own sense of time. It had felt like *much* longer or he wouldn't even have checked!

He couldn't help but wonder, though, if Cara might have had time to get over being angry with him. He was tempted to find out, but then it occurred to him that she might be more than angry. He'd been worried that she might hate him now or be afraid of him and he was fairly certain two weeks wasn't long enough for her to get over either of those.

In any case, he reminded himself, he hadn't actually intended to go back at all. It might be true, and was, that he had enjoyed being with Cara more than he had ever enjoyed anything else since his spawning. He had been miserable almost as much, though. Well, in all honesty, not nearly as much, but it was true that he'd discovered that Cara could make him more miserable than anyone or anything else just as she could make him happier. He missed the first, but he was damned if he missed the latter! If he wanted misery, he had only to return to the netherworld!

By the time a full month had passed, Baelin had lost his appetite and ceased to go out and hunt at all until he reached a point where he knew he had to or perish. He'd sampled everything he came across with relish at first. He'd sampled with a growing sense of desperation after that, gluttoned himself enough times to discover what overfeeding actually felt like—as much misery as not having enough—and he still hadn't managed to appease the need that clawed at him night and day.

She hadn't even tried to summon him, he thought morosely. Despite the many miles he'd put between them he would've heard. He knew that could only mean that she was glad that he was gone, but *he* was not glad he was gone. He was more miserable than he could ever recall, and that saying something considering the misery he'd known!

He managed to rouse a spark of anger after mulling over it a while, to begin to feel abused. She had discarded him like refuse after he had done what she wanted! So much for gratitude! That sure as fuck hadn't lasted long!

The more he thought about it, the more outraged he was that a mere mortal had treated him with so little respect! He had power she couldn't even *begin* to fathom!

He could steal into her dreams and take what he wanted, by the gods! As often as he wanted it! She could do nothing to stop him. She wouldn't even *know* that he'd taken what she wouldn't give him anymore!

Chapter Ten

Cara knew she should be deliriously happy without a dark cloud on her horizon. Her mother was well and home again. She'd lost a lot of weight and she was weak from spending so much time in bed, but completely free of pain and growing stronger every day. In that regard, she *was* happy. It felt wonderful having her mother home again, sharing work with her as they had in the days before she'd gotten so sick, sharing meals, entertaining one another—sharing ideas. They'd always had a wonderful rapport and Cara thought of her mother as much as her very best friend in the world as she thought of her as a mother.

The problem with your very best friend in the world *also* being your mother, Cara reflected, was that there were times when she desperately needed someone to talk to when she couldn't talk to her mother. She wanted to. She would've been willing to, but her mother had already been very clear about how she felt about Baelin. She wouldn't listen and commiserate with her about her unhappiness and she wouldn't offer helpful advice. She would lecture her about falling for such a creature and tell her she had to send him back.

She'd asked Cara point blank as soon as she was home if Cara had banished him back to his own world.

Cara had lied through her teeth and assured her mother she had when the truth was she didn't have a clue of where he was and she wouldn't have banished him even if she could. She wasn't *going* to banish him either! For once, she hadn't lied to her mother to spare her feelings or because she'd worried about a scold or disappointing her mother. She'd lied to protect Baelin. She sincerely hoped that if he did come back she would be able to make her mother understand, but if she couldn't She didn't actually want to consider that, especially when it was beginning to seem as if it was a moot point.

He'd been gone a month! She'd run the gamut of emotions over it, afraid at first that something awful had happened to him, angry when she thought he'd simply tired of her and left, and then purely miserable because she missed him. She knew, though, that it was time she tried to put him out of her mind and go on with her life. For whatever reason, he'd decided he didn't want to be a part of life and he wasn't coming back.

She supposed it was because he was immortal and she wasn't. She supposed she could see his point in not wanting to hang around. She thought it was completely unreasonable when it would've meant so much to her and wouldn't have cost him a damned thing, wouldn't even have amounted to much of his time, but as her mother had suggested, she could see why he wouldn't spend a lot of time considering her wants or needs! But *she* had them the same as he did! As hard as it had been to try to get used to his sexual appetite, it was a hell of a thing that he'd decided to pull up stakes and take off just about the time she was *starting* to get used to it! Now, she was horny all the time, which was *his* fault, when she'd scarcely given sex a thought before.

But did he care? Was he worried sick about her? Obviously not! If he had been, if he'd had any damned consideration at all, he would've at least told her he was done and he was leaving! *Maybe* she would've wept all over him and begged him not to go, and he hadn't wanted to have to deal with it, but he could've left a damned message or something! He could've told her mother. She was sure her mother would've been glad to pass that along!

She'd been tempted, oh so many times, to call out to him and see if he would come as he had when she called him before. She hadn't quite been able to get up the nerve. As much as she'd wanted just to know that he was alright, she supposed, deep down, she knew he was because any time she thought about summoning him she thought about him reacting badly to it and changed her mind. He hadn't been especially happy when she'd summoned him before. He might be *really* angry if she tried it again. And wouldn't *she* feel like a complete fool?

Sighing, she switched her shower off and climbed out. It was the only place she could cry without worrying her mother would hear. She'd been taking a *lot* of showers over the past

weeks. Naturally, her mother had noticed and commented on it, telling her she should get something for her allergies since pills would be a lot less expensive than so much hot water.

When she'd dried off and blown her nose, she trudged into her room and sprawled on her bed naked. Thankfully, she was exhausted enough from her latest crying jag and from the hot water that she began to grow drowsy almost immediately instead of lying awake thinking. It almost seemed as if she'd barely sunk beneath the blanket of darkness when she felt the weight of it lifting from her. She drifted for a moment, wondering vaguely what had stirred her and then began to sink again. Feeling a light tug on her arms just before she was completely submerged, she floated upward again. She lost track of the movement almost as soon as her mind registered it, though, and began a slightly drunken internal search. Her arms were above her head, she discovered, crossed at the wrists.

Weird, she thought, almost as odd as finding that she was on her back. She didn't sleep on her back. She was still trying to figure that out and grasp why she couldn't seem to move back into a more comfortable position when she felt her legs slide upward until her limp knees bent. That was strange enough to make her attempt to rouse more fully. Discovery that she couldn't throw off the drugging, disjointed sensation of deep sleep made her heart surge, producing a single, hard beat that failed to pump any adrenaline into her system. It took an effort of will to perform an internal systems check and at that her mind was still wandering aimlessly. She'd just realized her legs were bent at a sharp angle to her body and spread so wide that she could feel cool air wafting over the tender inner flesh of her genitals when she felt a pair of hands coast along the exposed underside of her arms.

That was a circumstance that should have instantly pitched her toward full consciousness and yet she only noted the touch and the movement in an oddly detached way. A fine tremor seemed to move through the hands and into her as they traveled down her arms, along her sides from breast to hip and then up her thighs to her knees, stirring warmth in her belly, making the muscles along her passage palpitate. The hands disappeared for a moment, reappearing when they settled around her breasts, massaging for a moment and then tightening around the base hard enough to squeeze the soft flesh into conical mounds. Blood rushed into them, flowing into the tips until they rose, tightened, and then began to pulse, growing more swollen and sensitive with each heartbeat.

They'd reached a point of true discomfort when she felt a mouth settle over both, clamping onto them and sucking with a ravenous vigor that shot her entire body and mind into instant turmoil. Sparks of fire jolted through her breasts like flaming trails of electric current, charging her so that the fine hairs all over her body stood at attention, awakening every nerve ending. When the heat had snaked its way into her lower belly, a volcano erupted. And yet, she felt almost encapsulated, frozen within the confines of her body, unable to escape either physically or mentally.

She struggled to grasp what was happening when her mind seemed so sluggish and yet capable of registering the intense sensations pouring through her. Something flickered through her mind, and yet before she could grasp it a third mouth latched onto her clit and sent her spiraling toward the blackness that lay just beyond her reach. Instead of the blanket enveloping her, however, she seemed to bounce off of it and float upward again.

Something thick and hard pressed against the mouth of her sex, plowing through her flesh and burrowing deeply so fast her brain had barely registered the burn of flesh stretched almost beyond its limits when it was withdrawn again. That time her brain managed to connect one thought—Baelin. As if the name carried magic of its own, her body erupted in a flash fire. She struggled to suck in a breath as hard, orgasmic convulsions wracked her. The hard flesh pounding into her stopped abruptly as her body reached a crescendo. She could feel it vibrating within her as the quakes of her climax lost strength. Almost before the spasms stopped entirely, the thick flesh withdrew from her completely.

When it did, she felt the bed dip beside her. Warmth wafted through her from the body that settled next to hers. Her own body relaxed limply against the bed and yet her mind still seemed almost disconnected from her body.

"It isn't the same."

Anger threaded the harshly growled words, but Cara sensed confusion, as well. She struggled toward consciousness, felt almost as if she was swimming upstream against a hard current. Reluctance flickered through her even as she fought to throw off the bindings of her strange sleep, the fear that her mind had conjured a dream to appease her needs. As she emerged, though, she realized the weight next to her was becoming more solid.

Opening her eyes with an effort, she saw that it was Baelin lying next to her just as she'd hoped. He was lying on his back, one arm across his eyes. Remembering the anger she'd heard in his voice, she hesitated, not from fear but because it dawned on her that he was disappointed and angry because he was. After a moment, she curled her hand around his fist and lifted his arm a little so that she could peer at his face beneath.

He moved his arm, staring back at her, his expression hard. There was wariness in his eyes, though.

"Is ... something wrong?" Cara asked finally, unable to think of anything else to say, to uncertain of her welcome to yield to the urge to throw herself at him.

His face twisted. "Everything is wrong!"

Cara digested that with a sinking heart.

He lifted his hands and rubbed his eyes and then speared his fingers into his hair and squeezed his skull. "Send me back," he said hoarsely. "Banish me to my own world."

Cara felt her throat close. "You want to go back?"

He sat up abruptly and cradled his head in his hands. "I cannot bear it any longer!"

The anguish in his voice clamped around her chest like a vice even while his anger made her heart flutter uncomfortably. She discovered it hurt her to see his distress too much to ignore it, though. She lifted a hand and settled it tentatively on his shoulder. He stiffened, but he didn't pull away. "Tell me what's wrong, baby. I'll help if I can."

He dropped his hands so abruptly and whipped his head to look at her that it startled her. She jerked her hand away from his shoulder. His face twisted at the instinctive retreat. "You're afraid of me now. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Confusion flickered through her, but since he didn't seem to be angry with her, she lifted a hand to his cheek. "You didn't hurt me. What makes you think you did?"

He swallowed audibly, his gaze flickering over her face. "Why didn't you use the protection spell to push me away?"

More confusion poured through her, but uneasiness, as well. The urge to deny having a protection spell rose instantly to the tip of her tongue, but she realized it was pointless to lie when he obviously knew about it. "I only did it in case I needed it for protection."

He caught her arms, shaking her slightly. "You *did* need it! Why didn't you stop me?"

Cara blinked at him, feeling the sudden urge to cry. She couldn't for the life of her figure out what he was accusing her of. "I didn't want to stop you. I never felt threatened. Why are you angry with me? Is that why you left?"

He studied her face a long moment and pulled her roughly into his embrace, curling his arms so tightly around her it bordered painful and burrowing his face against her neck. "I nearly killed you!" he growled angrily. "I thought you were so far gone I couldn't bring you back."

Cara digested that with an effort, trying to remember. She couldn't remember much about their last night together, though. She hadn't been able to the following morning. She finally remembered that she'd been weaker than usual, though, that the weakness had lingered long enough she'd begun to worry that something was wrong with her. "You fed too long," she said finally.

He stiffened. "I lost control."

"And you're sorry?"

He dragged in a harsh breath. "I have regretted it every day since. It torments my mind."

Warmth filled Cara's chest and hopefulness. She lifted a hand and stroked his dark hair. "I didn't know. I wasn't hurt or afraid. I would never have known if you hadn't brought me back."

"I know. *I* would've known and it would have been more torment even than knowing what I had almost done. I don't think I could have borne it."

"It didn't happen, baby."

He lifted his head and gave her a strange look. "Why do you call me that, woman? I am an ancient!"

Amusement flickered through her. She lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. "It's a love word."

He searched her eyes and swallowed audibly. "It is?" he asked doubtfully.

She tilted her head back and nibbled at his lips. "What do you want me to call you?"

"It means you love me?"

She smiled against his lips. "It means I adore you."

He drew back slightly to study her face suspiciously. "That is the same as love?"

"Better," she murmured, pursuing his mouth relentlessly.

He took the bait abruptly, covering her mouth with fierce hunger and igniting the fire he'd only just extinguished. She moved restlessly against him, exploring him with her hands, beseeching, demanding. He shifted the two of them to the bed, wedging his narrow hips between her thighs. She lifted against him hopefully. Instead, he broke the kiss, burrowed lower, and suckled her breasts with tender savagery until she was gasping his name feverishly. He broke from her breasts as abruptly as he'd abandoned her mouth moments before, curling around her as he caught her mouth beneath his again and pressing his cock into the mouth of her sex at the same time. The double penetration as he plowed his cock inside of her ruthlessly and thrust his tongue into her mouth sent her scurrying up the mountain toward its peak in a heady rush. He'd barely set a rhythm when ecstasy exploded through her in white hot cascades of fire. She groaned into his mouth, shaking with the force of it.

He shook, as well, tearing his mouth from hers to suck in harsh gulps of air. To her surprise, instead of continuing after a moment as he usually did, he pulled free of her and rolled the two of them onto their sides. She snuggled against him gratefully, basking in the waves of bliss rolling through her. He wrapped his arms around her to hold her tightly against his length as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him.

She was slipping toward sleep again when he caught her hand. She felt something cool glide over her finger. Curious, she drew away from him and lifted her hand. A jolt went through her when she saw the hideously outrageous ring he'd slipped on her finger. The stone was nearly the size of her first joint! Speechless, she turned to look at him questioningly.

"It means you are mine," he said gruffly.

Cara's lips curled. She was about to point out that he was supposed to ask when there was a tap on her bedroom door that jarred her. She whipped her head toward the door, trying to see if she'd locked it. "Yes?" she asked cautiously.

To her horror, her mother took it as an invitation. Pushing the door open, she flipped the light switch on. Contrary to Cara's expectations she didn't gasp in horror. She folded her arms over her chest and leaned back against the frame. "I see the beast's back," she observed coolly.

Baelin and Cara both glared at her. Cara lifted her hand and waved the ring at her mother triumphantly.

"Good gods! You'll need a sling to carry that around."

"Mother!" She turned to look at Baelin apologetically. "I think it's beautiful."

"She thinks it's hideous. She's just saying that because she's madly in love with you and she thinks everything you do and say is wonderful and clever! You can't go out of the house like that, you know."

Cara snatched her cover up to cover her breasts.

Her mother rolled her eyes. "I was talking to him. He'll have to don a glamour if he plans to hang around awhile. The neighbors will be up in arms."

She shook her head at her daughter. "Now what was that you told me about sending him back?"

Cara bit her lip. "I didn't *want* to send him back. He wasn't happy there."

"Oh I expect he's much happier here—like a fox in a hen house. Been off hunting, have you?"

Cara turned to look at him. Baelin swallowed convulsively. "I was hungry."

She looked hurt and he felt like throwing up.

“You left me for somebody else?”

He frowned, confused. “I did not.”

Cara was confused then. “You just said ...?”

He wrestled with the realization that sex meant something entirely different to them than it did him—at least it always had before. “I did not feed much,” he offered uneasily. “I was hungry.”

Cara frowned at him and he held his breath. “Well! You can’t do that anymore! If I belong to you now, then you also belong to me. Got that?”

He blinked at her. “I don’t want to feed on anyone else. I never wanted to. I was so ... empty without you I could not think beyond trying to fill it.”

Cara’s heart melted. “That’s so sweet!”

Claire made a gagging noise. “Excuse me while I go throw up.”

“Go away, mom!” Cara said, nuzzling her face against Baelin’s neck. The door closed with a resounding click. “Now, tell me how much you love me.”

He pulled away and looked at her frowningly. “I did not say I did. I said that I needed you. I cannot fill the emptiness without you.”

Cara smiled. Curling her arms around his neck, she kissed each corner of his mouth and then the center. “Close enough.”

He closed his eyes. “This is what I hungered for until I thought that I lose my mind.”

“What? My kisses?”

“The sweet energy that flows into me whenever you touch me.”

“It’s called love, baby,” she murmured.

He held her, basking in the nectar flowing through him. “Will you let me give you some of my essence?”

She pulled away and studied him curiously. “I don’t know what you’re asking,” she said finally.

“I can give you some of myself and you can stay with me, just as you are, for many lifetimes.”

“Become immortal?” she asked doubtfully.

He frowned. “I don’t know. I only know that if I give to you then I can keep you with me, that it will renew you each time.”

“How would you do that?” she asked, sitting away from him to study him with a mixture of doubt and curiosity—pleasure, too, because as uncertain as she was that it was something she wanted, she *was* certain that it pleased her no end that he wanted it.

He grasped his cock. “I can give you my seed. If you will drink it, it is powerful magic.”

Cara bit her lip, torn between the suspicion that she was being teased and doubt. He seemed perfectly serious, though. “I’ve heard that one before,” she murmured. “As it happens, though, I’ve discovered it’s something I really enjoy.”

His eyes lit with triumph, making her more suspicious. “You will not mind being part demon?”

Surprise flickered through her. “Not if it’s what you want. Will you give me some of your magic seed to grow a baby demon?”

He looked startled and then torn. “I don’t want to share you,” he said gruffly, and then relented when he saw her face fall with disappointment. “In time if that’s what you want.”

The End