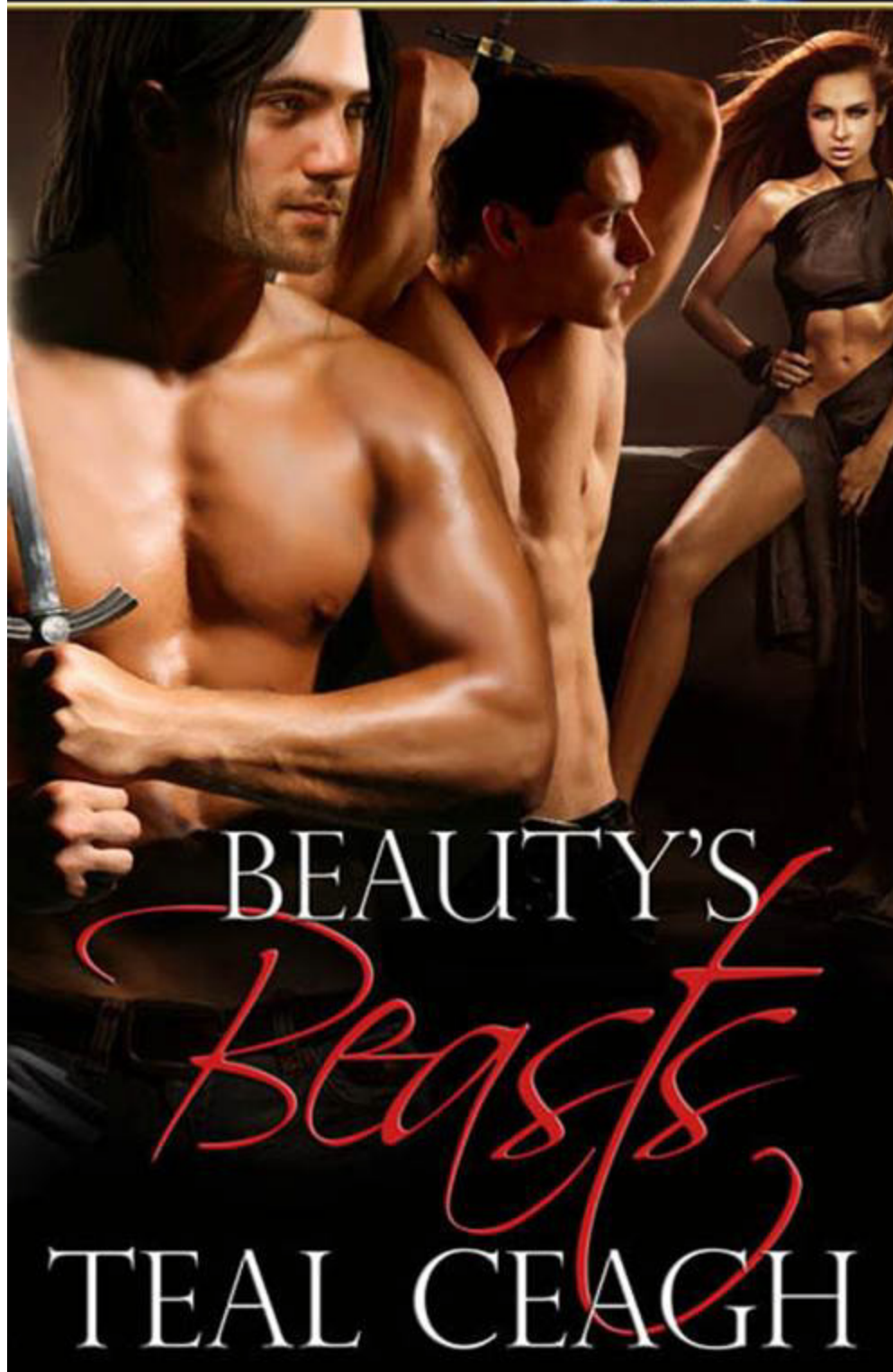


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Beauty's Beasts

Teal Ceagh

Riley Carson Connors is yanked out of Pittsburgh and coaxed to New York by two tall, sexy strangers. Nicholas and Damian are the only people in the world who know anything about her mother and father, and what they know is terrifying. She must face a powerful enemy who killed both her parents, who were the best at what they did.

But while the truth about Riley's family history is a powerful magnet, Damian and Nicholas prove to be even more compelling. Former lovers brought together because they gave their word to Riley's mother, the two powerful vampires play erotic mind games with her, each hiding a sexual agenda that Riley can't begin to guess.

But it seems to involve driving her out of her mind with the sort of pleasure only a centuries-old lover would know how to give.

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Beauty's Beasts

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Chapter One

Much later Riley wondered if anyone but her had ever greeted the moment that changed their life forever with intense irritation. But she didn't recognize her moment for what it was. Sabrina tapped on Riley's open bedroom door with her knuckles, down low, like she'd done a hundred times before. "Guy at the door for ya."

Riley dropped her pen on her notepad and sat back, stretching the small of her back with her hands planted on her hips. "God, not now," she begged. Unfortunately, guys rocking up unannounced at their apartment door asking for her was a way of life. Everyone in the apartment had developed a routine for dealing with men following Riley. Even new women—they couldn't risk guys as roommates—only took a week to adapt to the reality.

Riley pushed her bottom lip out and opened her eyes wide, staring at Sabrina. "Please?" she begged. "I've got an exam tomorrow."

Sabrina's pretty, Latino features, so unlike Riley's—so *exotic*—creased into a smile. "I'd take this one."

Riley hung her head for a moment. "Are you *ever* going to get it through your head that I have no interest in finding the perfect guy, Sabrina?"

"Nope."

Riley stood up. "We've talked about this, remember? Men are all *stupid*." She pushed her hands through her hair automatically and smoothed it down. "How do I look?"

Sabrina grinned. "Like Vivian fucking Leigh with green eyes and I hate your guts." She stepped away from the door. "Want me to come with you and run interference so you can toss the bastard after thirty seconds?"

Riley looked back at her desk and sighed. "You'd better," she said. "I really do have to study."

Sabrina snorted. "You've got an IQ of one fifty-two and you're pulling in better than ninety percent on everything. What the hell are you worried about?"

Riley bit her lip as she headed for the front door where her mystery guest was waiting. Sabrina wouldn't understand a concept that Riley was only just starting to formulate herself, so she didn't answer. She wasn't sure she could put it into words yet, anyway, but lately she had begun to wonder if this was all that life was really about.

The business degree she was so close to finally getting after years of struggle and crappy part-time jobs, mountainous student debt she was going to spend even more years paying off to earn the degree in the first place, a career she would earn with that degree, just to work even harder in the trenches to earn a corner office, where she

would work even *harder* to hold her tenuous position while younger, up-and-coming turks would try to climb up her back...was this really what she had spent years working her butt off for? She had worked so hard for so long that now the goal was rolling into view, she was finally lifting her head up and looking at it and going...*eeeeeww*!

Riley had lain awake nights trying to remember why she had got into this gig in the first place and kept coming up empty on an answer. And that was the scary part. Had she wasted five years of her life on a quest for a piece of paper that would push her into a position she didn't want in the first place?

All the soul-searching had made study harder and exams a genuine struggle. It was difficult to score in the high nineties when a voice in the back of your mind was constantly whispering, "*Why bother?*"

Sabrina trailed after her into the main room as Riley opened the door Sabrina had closed on her visitor.

The guy turned his head to look as the door swung open, alerted. He'd been standing patiently in the corridor, hands shoved in his coat pockets. Her first impression of him was height. He was easily over six feet. It was still early spring and Pittsburgh could be miserable in April, so the lightweight charcoal coat he was wearing hid details and emphasized his shoulders.

Riley was used to rapidly scanning and sizing up a guy in one sweep. She'd learned at an early age that most of their clothing and possessions said things about men that their mouths and words and hands didn't, and that the only way to protect herself was to read the clothing. Riley did it now.

He was wearing patent leather shoes, expensive ones. And there was barely any slush on them, which meant he hadn't walked far. That said he'd either used a cab, or his own car. He didn't look like a cab kind of guy, not with the rest of the clothing added in. The trousers were dark—too hard to tell in this light exactly what sort of material but she bet they weren't chain store, not over the top of those shoes. The shirt, what she could see of it from between the coat, was a good-quality collarless button-up shirt, but it was creased around the middle from long sitting.

His hair looked like it was intended to be short, but he'd not got around to getting it trimmed for a few weeks. It was shaggy and agreeably rumped in a way that made Riley want to push her hand through it. Black hair. European black with very European white skin. If she had to give him an age, she'd say mid- to late thirties, but she would be guessing wildly.

Not a businessman. Not an official of any sort. Not a student. And he'd been sitting a long time.

She put it together. Car. Long sitting. Travel. "You've come a long way to see me," she told him, and looked up at his face.

He was staring at her and for a second, she wondered if he'd even heard her. He had eyes the same sort of blue as they put on maps for oceans. Depthless. She let him stare and lifted her brow. "Hi," she coaxed. "You came to see me."

He blinked and refocused. "You look so much like your mother."

"Holy sweet Mary, mother of Christ," Sabrina whispered.

Riley reached out to Sabrina for help, to steady herself as her legs abruptly weakened. There was a roaring sound in her head. Dizziness swept over her.

But it wasn't Sabrina who helped her. The man was suddenly *there*. She sagged as he lifted her up like one does a child, with both hands under her arms, and deposited her in the one comfortable armchair in the room. Riley clutched at her arms, cold and shivering, staring at him as he stood back.

"Jesus fucking Christ, who are you?" Sabrina demanded, stepping between him and Riley.

"I am an old friend of Riley's parents. Have no fear. Do you have any soda? She needs sugar to combat the shock."

Sabrina glanced at Riley. She licked her lips, indecision plain on her face.

"Get the soda," the man said.

Sabrina pursed her lips and headed for the kitchen.

Riley looked at him. "Who are you?"

"A friend." He stripped his coat and tossed it over the back of her chair, moving quickly as if his time was limited. He pulled the old vinyl kitchen chair up close and sat in it. Beneath the coat, the shirt cuffs had been folded up and shoved back almost to his elbows, revealing strong wrists and forearms. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a pocket watch and looked at the time.

Riley's mental jaw dropped open, although she managed to keep her face smooth and polite. *A pocket watch.*

"I hope you don't mind, but I've asked another friend to meet me here," he said. "Someone who also knew your parents."

Sabrina hurried back into the room, a soda can in her hand. She thrust it at the man. He handed it to Riley. "Drink it all," he told her. "The sugar will restore you."

She grimaced, but popped the top and began to drink.

The man looked at Sabrina. "I would ask you to leave us. I need to speak to Riley alone."

Sabrina crossed her arms and shook her head. "Nuh-uh. You think we're stupid, mister? We have no fucking idea who you are."

He rolled his eyes. "You just left me alone with her to get the soda. I didn't kill her then. I'm just asking you to step out of the room, not the apartment. Riley can scream for you if I so much as cross my eyes at her inappropriately."

"Fuck you, mister, I ain't movin'." Sabrina cocked her hip with a *make-me* attitude.

Riley felt a warm glow.

The man sat back. "If you don't leave, I can't tell Riley about her parents."

Riley drew in a shaky breath. "Sabrina..."

Sabrina dropped her arms. "That's blackmail!" she protested.

"I'll risk it," Riley said. She stared at Sabrina, hoping that the stare would remind Sabrina that she wasn't completely helpless. After so many years of fighting off besotted men, she'd learned a trick or two.

Sabrina took a deep breath. "Well..." she said reluctantly. "If you're sure."

"I'll screech my head off if I need you," Riley promised.

"If you hurt her..." she told the man.

He looked her in the eye. "I can assure you that Riley is safer with me in the room than anywhere on this little planet of ours at the moment."

It was the weirdest thing anyone had ever said. But once Sabrina had processed it, she nodded. "Okay then," she said, clearly trying to hold her pride in place. She stepped out and shut the door.

The man turned back to her. "You have loyal friends."

"Just the one."

There was a tap on the apartment door.

"Finally," the man said. "My friend." He stood up. "May I let him in?"

"I suppose," Riley said reluctantly, her heart a runaway train.

He looked down at her from his great height. "I meant what I said. You are quite safe with me, Riley Carson Connors."

She drew in a shaky breath as he walked to the door. He moved smoothly and gracefully, which was unusual for such a large man. She wondered if he came by his grace naturally, or if it was the product of training. Then she realized she was trying to distract herself with trivial thoughts. She didn't want to deal with the fact that there was someone else in the world who knew her full name. She didn't give her second name out to anyone voluntarily. Not even Sabrina knew what the "C" stood for.

The man opened the door. "You're late." He whirled and came back to his chair.

The second man to step into her lounge room was simply gorgeous. He was over six feet, too, but an inch or two shorter than the first. Olive skin, black eyes and black hair falling in tangles around his shoulders. A strong nose and jaw. Long fingers that pushed his hair back impatiently as he stood up from dropping a heavy duffel bag on the floor next to the door. The duffel bag had United Airlines tags on it. Surplus army boots, pants and navy coat. Underneath he wore a black wife-beater.

"Fifteen minutes late, considering the distance I've traveled, is hardly—" He looked at her and stopped. His expression changed. His face was so mixed with emotions, Riley could barely read them all. Grief. Guilt. Shock. Horror. Even love. "Tally," he murmured.

"Damian," the other snapped.

He jumped, then glanced at the first man, then at Riley. "Forgive me," he said and she realized he had a slight accent. "You look so much like your mother, it was a shock." He bent his head forward, like a formal nod. "I am Damian."

"Riley," she murmured. She looked at the other one. "And you?"

"Nicholas."

She put the can of soda on the side table. It was dripping condensation beads into her lap. "So, now you've both come all this way, you've told me your names, you've both got over the shock of how much I apparently look like my mother. I've been polite. Now it's your turn to tell me what this is all about."

"You sound angry, Riley," Nicholas said.

"That's because I am." She clenched her hands between her knees. "My mother died when I was barely a year old. So that was just over twenty-six years ago. I grew up in the foster care system and no one—*no one*—has ever been able to tell me squat about my parents, my family, nothing. Until now, suddenly, you two guys pop up and start raving about how much I look like my mother. It's clear you knew her well enough to get all misty-eyed about it. But no offense, you're...what? Maybe forty at the outside, and that's pushing it. That means you were ten at the *most* when you knew my parents. What the hell could you possibly know about them and how they died? You were kids back then."

She clenched her fingers, as she felt the sweat between them. "If you think I don't know a guy trying to pull a con job on me by now, you're not nearly as smart as I took you for, and that disappoints me."

Damian and Nicholas looked at each other. Damian shrugged. "You tell her. You'll end up taking over the conversation anyway." He dropped onto the piano stool as if he were weary.

Nicholas leaned toward her. "We don't have time to be delicate and hedge around your human sensibilities, Riley. So I'm going to give this to you straight. I want you to just deal with it and move on. You are your mother's daughter. You can handle it."

She pushed herself up against the back of the armchair, alarmed. "What?"

"Nicholas..." Damian said warningly, from his perch on the stool.

Nicholas was staring at her, his blue eyes unwavering. He shot out his hand toward his "friend", palm out. *Halt*. His eyes did not move from hers. She felt like he was measuring her. Testing her.

"Your mother, Riley, was one of the greatest demon hunters this world has ever seen. The gifts and expertise she had for hunting runs in her blood. She met and married another great demon hunter, Carson Connors, and their love for each other was the stuff of legend in the underworld."

Riley could feel the questions bubbling up like a geyser, but Nicholas was not going to give her the luxury of questions. *We don't have time.* She thrust them aside and opened herself up to absorb what he was saying.

"Your father, Riley, was killed on the day you were born by a gargoyle called Lirgon, the leader of a rogue clan of gargoyles your mother had been hunting down. Lirgon was the last of the clan left, and the strongest. Your father perished. Your mother spent the next fourteen months hunting down Lirgon and when she found him, she killed him. But Lirgon was too strong even for the great Natalia Connors and she died from the wounds Lirgon gave her."

Damian muttered something and it wasn't English. A prayer?

Nicholas rolled his eyes at Damian. "The reason I know this is because I was there, Riley. I was your mother's partner, and I helped her hunt down Lirgon after your father died."

Riley swallowed. The math wasn't adding up. He knew it. She knew it. Nicholas nodded gently. "I know," he said softly. "Brace yourself, Riley." He reached for the soda can and handed it to her. Then he opened his mouth a little wider and two long, white pointed teeth descended a half inch below the others. "We are vampires, Damian and I. A matter of thirty years is a blink of an eye for us, considering the centuries we have already seen."

The teeth withdrew again.

Riley gripped the can, her breath coming in short, wheezy exhalations. Only Nicholas' earlier assurances that she was safe with him kept her in her seat. That and the pure unreality of what he was saying.

Except that she had seen his teeth descend.

Deal with it, he had said. *There is no time.*

"Why are you telling me now?" she said. "Why seek me out?" Her voice was bodiless. Weak.

He nodded. "There has been a series of killings in New York City. Have you been following them?"

She shook her head. "I work, I study. That's my life."

"You like roast chicken, Riley?"

"I'm a vegetarian," she said stiffly.

Damian laughed.

Nicholas smiled. "Very well. You know all those advertisements on TV for roast chicken. When they show someone tucking into a nice juicy chicken leg? They always bite into the rounded part first, hmmm?"

She nodded.

"Lirgon had a signature." Nicholas sat back, watching her, forcing her to work it out.

"Chicken legs?" she asked blankly.

"He liked...human legs."

The soda can crumpled under her fist. She moaned.

Nicholas lifted the can to her mouth. "Drink," he encouraged softly.

She drank.

And that was when it hit her. She had been sitting in this room with two men for five minutes and neither of them were drooling over her, or slobbering over her.

Well, they weren't human in the proper sense of the term. But they were male. Could they even have sex with women? Human women? If the erotic literature was to be believed, they could. But this was reality, not fiction, so...

And she brought herself up short again.

She was thinking about sex? Now?

Riley looked up at Nicholas as she took another sip. He was waiting for her, trying not to show impatience, but that was the only emotion evident in his features.

She glanced at Damian. God damn, but that was one beautiful man. He sat like Nicholas, his forearms on his knees, leaning forward, fingers laced together. There were thin bands of leather around one strong wrist.

"If Nicholas was my mother's partner, how did you know her?" she asked him.

"I was Nicholas' lover then," Damian said. He spoke flatly, without embarrassment. And in the past tense.

"Oh," Riley said. She couldn't think what else to say. "How long had you been together?" It felt like the polite thing to ask.

"Four hundred and thirty-two years." Damian straightened and sat back, shoving his hands in his pockets. End of subject.

"Four..." Riley felt her eyes widening. She turned to Nicholas. "When did you break up?" she demanded, suddenly suspicious.

Nicholas' face was like marble. "Damian left for Europe a week after your mother died. This is the first time he's been back. I wasn't sure he'd come."

"You weren't *sure*?" Damian stood up. "We swore an oath, Nick! I'm as bound as you!"

"We don't have time for this," Nicholas said coldly. He sat up straighter and looked at Riley. "You have your mother's genes. You inherited her gifts. You are a demon hunter, Riley, though you have yet to learn this truth. Time will determine whether you are as great a hunter as Natalia Connors." He got to his feet. "Something is killing people in New York City. I know it is Lirgon, for the thing is eating their legs, just as Lirgon once did. He has been resurrected, as your mother once feared he might be. Damian and I swore that if this day ever arrived we would protect you and do what we could to kill Lirgon once and for all."

Riley stared at the two men ranged before her.

“We need you to come to New York City with us,” Damian told her. “And there we can show you more about your mother’s and father’s lives.”

“And while you are there I will train you to kill Lirgon,” Nicholas added.

Chapter Two

Deal with it became Riley's mantra, because once she agreed to go with them to New York, Nick and Damian dropped their human façade and let her see their true natures. They kept the shield in place only long enough to let Riley convince Sabrina that she wasn't totally out of her mind to leave with them.

Sabrina took a considerable amount of persuasion before she unhappily accepted Riley's departure, but Riley refused to just leave without Sabrina's blessing. Sabrina was the closest Riley had to family in the world. She was her best friend and they had known each other for nearly ten years. They had met when Riley had graduated high school in St. Louis, Missouri, shrugged off the last set of foster parents and become officially independent. She had found a job at Starbucks for the minimum wage and a second at McDonalds across the street. Sabrina had been working at both places as well and within two weeks they'd moved into an apartment together, and acquired two other roommates. They'd been sharing apartments and roommates ever since.

Sabrina had been won over by the same two facts that had forced Riley to agree to travel to New York with Damian and Nicholas herself. They knew things about Riley's parents that Riley would give her eyeteeth to know and when they guaranteed her safety there was a flat sincerity in their tone that was more convincing than a bonded warranty. Sabrina had hugged Riley and bade her farewell with tears in her eyes...and had slipped her the can of Mace she normally kept under her own pillow. The practical touch was both endearing and typically Sabrina.

Damian and Nicholas were both terrifying and fascinating at the same time. Riley's first biggest shock was to learn the humbling fact that they considered her to be "merely" human and quite unintelligent. Both had assumed they would have to make allowances for her lack of processing ability.

As they stuffed Damian's and her hastily packed bags into the trunk of Nicholas' beautiful blood-red S-type Jaguar, Damian offered her the passenger seat but Nicholas curtly told her to take the backseat. "You will need your sleep. You won't sleep much once we arrive."

"You just don't want her sitting next to you," Damian accused him as they settled into the car.

"I want her in prime condition for training when we get there." Nicholas swerved the car into traffic with unconscious skill.

"You want her, is the primary condition," Damian corrected.

"Unlike you, Damian, I rose above petty distractions long ago."

"Tally wasn't a petty distraction and you were just as devastated by her death as I was."

"Hey, you *do* remember I'm sitting right here, don't you?" Riley thumped the back of their seats.

Neither of them replied.

"You both sound like a couple of schoolgirls," she told them. "You're not going to fire potshots at each other all the way to New York, are you?"

After a long pause, Nicholas said, "Just go to sleep, Riley."

"And what happens at sunrise?" she asked.

"Why?"

"I just want to know if I have to tuck you guys in or something."

She saw Nicholas' blue eyes in the rearview mirror look at her finally. She couldn't tell if he was amused or not. "That's just in stories," he said softly. "Daylight weakens us, slows us down. We prefer to relax and rest. But we don't burst into flames at the touch of sunlight."

"Bet you don't sparkle, either."

Damian laughed. It sounded like it was derisive.

Nicholas was still looking at her in the mirror, glancing away from the highway they were now on with the assured confidence of a racecar driver. "But we do have the keen sense of smell," he said. "And I can smell you, Riley Connors."

In one indrawn breath she grew aware of every sensation. Of the leather under her fingers as she gripped the edges of the seat on either side of her knees, of the slight smell of pine coming from the carpets on the floors and walls of the car, of the scent of musk and male from the two big men sitting in the seats before her—this surprised her the most, for she had thought it took a heartbeat and pulse and body heat to create human-type scents. Her body tightened, the tips of her breasts seemed to swell and she could feel them chafing gently against her bra.

Riley lay down on the seat and pretended to sleep, while her overloaded brain danced and her body zinged with newfound awareness. She wanted them. She wasn't sure which of them she wanted the most.

Since she was about thirteen or so, she had been aware that she was what the world considered "a beauty" and that most men would do almost anything in their power to have her. But "having" her meant only taking her sexually. Men never thought beyond that, and they didn't care what she thought about the idea. Usually, they had no permanent plans beyond the initial one of fucking her. It was enough to get their cock inside her.

If she had been as dumb as a box of rocks, they would have liked it better, she suspected. It would have made their job so much easier.

Fact was, though, Riley had a brain. In the thirteen years or so that she had been—euphemistically speaking—trying to date men, not a single man had noticed or taken an

interest in the fact that Riley was actually intelligent. They saw only her beauty and were caught up in the determination to fuck her so that they could say they'd had her. It was like a fever, and she had learned to spot it in their eyes and faces.

Neither Damian nor Nicholas had even so much as glanced at her that way. Damian had spoken of Nicholas wanting her, but in a tone that implied she was simply a desirable human. There was nothing of the fevered determination that drove so many men to the lying, the beatings, the schemes, the semi-rapes that she had suffered through in the past.

Damian's implication also answered another question she'd had. Clearly vampires could and did have sex with humans, and both Damian and Nicholas were bisexual...if such distinctions were even a consideration in their world.

Their almost indifference to her was a goad, she knew that. She was "merely" human, barely intelligent and only the daughter of the great Natalia Connors, not Tally herself. They were going through these motions only because they swore an oath to her mother, otherwise it appeared they could barely stand to be in the same room with each other. It made her want them with a power that she'd never felt before. After a lifetime of having men begging at her feet, the novelty of wanting someone—two someones—who seemed disinterested made her squirm on the seat.

"If it would help you relax and sleep, Damian or I could crawl back there and...help out," Nicholas said.

Riley grew very still, even holding her breath. Her heart accelerated.

"Why do you say that?" Damian said softly.

"She's aroused. Powerfully so."

Riley heard Damian take a breath, sniffing. Her cheeks heated. She turned her face into the arm of her coat, humiliated beyond reason.

"Ah, yes," Damian agreed.

Riley scrunched her face up inside the protecting crook of her arm and blew out the breath she had been holding. She kept very still for another few minutes, but when neither of them made a move, she relaxed again.

Somewhere around Somerset her sleep grew genuine and she woke to find her head pillowed on a smooth shoulder and chest, her face pressed against a strong neck and her whole body resting against a firm torso. There was a cocked knee behind her back and a hand soothing her temple.

She tried to sit up.

"We are ninety minutes from New York. Relax." Damian's voice. In her ear. Rumbling against her shoulder.

Her heart was pistoning. She was lying on top of Damian and he wanted her to relax?

The hand stroking her temple dropped to her hip. "You have unpleasant nightmares."

"I do?"

"You were not aware of this?"

"I know I don't sleep well," she muttered. Then she frowned. "I've been asleep for four hours?"

"More like six, actually," Nicholas said, from the front seat. "I had to stop for gas once and there was roadwork near Allentown. It's sunrise in about thirty minutes."

She tried to sit up again and this time Damian let her. "You let me sleep on you for *six hours*?"

"You were not sleeping well," he said, sitting up. He'd taken off his coat and the rounded caps of muscles of his shoulders gleamed in the low light of the car. "Your dreams were not being kind to you. We thought the touch of another might help you."

She bit her lip, frowning.

Damian lifted a brow. She could just see the movement in the growing light. "What?"

"I've never slept for six hours straight."

"You've never slept with a man before, have you?" Nicholas asked.

Riley could feel her cheeks burning again. "I'm not a virgin," she said stiffly.

"In this day and age, I would be astonished if you were. That's not what I'm asking." His blue eyes caught her gaze in the mirror. "I mean you've never had a man stay the night in your bed. You've literally never slept with a man in your bed."

Riley shook her head.

"Therefore, you've never had anyone around to point out your nightmares to you," Nicholas finished.

She rubbed her arms, suddenly cold. "I've never remembered them, either. I just figured I was one of those people who don't sleep."

Damian lifted her chin with his long finger and turned her face to look at him. "Apparently you're one of those people who sleeps better *with* someone." His smile showed even, white teeth. "That is something we can arrange."

Her whole body rippled with the warm promise in his voice.

"Now who's getting distracted?" Nicholas said, his voice a low warning rumble.

Damian glared at the back of Nicholas' head. Then he smiled at Riley. "Have you been to New York before, that you remember?"

She shook her head. "Although, I guess, I must have been at some time."

"You were born there," Damian confirmed. He waved toward the empty front passenger seat. "Why don't you sit up front? Enjoy the view. Let Nicholas prove he's above petty distractions."

Riley hesitated. She didn't want to get between these two. But Damian gently pushed her between the seats, so Riley eased her way between them, making sure she

didn't jostle Nick's elbow, and settled herself into the luxurious passenger seat and buckled the seat belt.

Nicholas glanced at her. "You look refreshed, at least."

She felt it. She would never have thought sleeping in a moving car could have been so relaxing, especially a car driven by a predatory creature designed to hunt humans for sustenance, while she slept soundly upon the top of another of them.

"Did you glamour me or something, back in the apartment, Nicholas?"

"More fiction." He shook his head.

"You engender trust, you and Damian. I don't hop into cars for interstate adventures with just anyone."

"You don't trust anyone enough to spend the night with them even after sex," Nicholas replied. "I know exactly how much trust you have placed in us. You want to know about your parents. We dangled powerful carrots."

"You dangled carrots that no one could possibly know about unless they had been there. And for all you pretend humans are just sheep you herd for food, I saw the look on your faces when you spoke about my mother. Both of you loved her in different ways. I don't care who did what, or what happened back then. You loved her. Deal with it, Nicholas."

He stared straight ahead through the screen. "Emotions are useless, grit in the grease. Look at where they got Damian."

"Fuck you, Nicholas." The bitterness in Damian's voice was deep.

Nicholas shook his head. "Vampires have no need of emotions. They just get in the way. They're a hangover from a human psychology we no longer have, a habit that can be discarded."

"Who are you trying to convince, Nick?" Riley asked. "Because it seems to me that after centuries of being a vampire, you still haven't kicked the habit."

Damian pushed his head between the seats. "I like this one," he told Nicholas. "If she keeps slapping you around like this, I'm going to keep her."

Chapter Three

Nicholas' apartment was a penthouse in an apartment block in Soho. Near the fire museum, Damian told her. It was a studio apartment and spacious. Because the building was one of the tallest around and Nick's apartment took the whole top floor, privacy was almost total. Sun filtered through the sash windows as Damian lifted a sealed box out of his duffel bag and put it on the table.

"I had incredible trouble bringing this through customs. I had to declare it as a museum piece, of course, and produce all the papers to prove it. It was part of the reason I was late." He glared at Nicholas as he put the long, pale wooden box on the table reverently. It was about four feet long by six inches wide, by ten inches deep, and opened across the long length, the lid folding back.

"You insisted on taking it," Nicholas said mildly, his arms crossed.

Damian broke the heavy plastic seals on the sides of the box by simply twisting them with his fingers. Then he released the hinges and folded the top back.

The inside of the box was lined in red velvet, and resting on tailor-made mountings was a Japanese sword with a white handle and delicate filigree guard, with a graceful curve to the blade, which ran for about two and a half feet. It seemed to be very short, for a sword. And the handle seemed to be quite long, too.

"Your mother's modified katana," Damian explained. "She went to Japan herself and had it made to order by one of the last surviving old masters."

"It looks too short to be a sword," Riley said.

"It almost is," Nicholas said. He picked it up, and gripped it in both hands. "The katana is a two-handed sword, which suits human women, who don't have the upper body strength to face large opponents. With a short blade like this, you can also stab and that makes this a superior weapon. It can be concealed more easily when it is this shorter length, too, and that was another reason for the modification." He held it out to her. "Try it."

She bit her lip. "Maybe later."

Damian picked up her wrist. "There is no later. This is not a game. People have died and will die again tonight. You might be one of them if you do not pick up this sword."

Her fingers convulsively curled around the grip at Damian's electrifying words. She looked at him. He guided her other hand to the base of the sword's handle. "Why would I be one to die?"

"You think your entry into New York with us has not been noticed? You think the whole demon world is not buzzing with the news that Natalia Connors' daughter lives?"

"They will test you as soon as they can find you," Nicholas added. "They will think that you are young and therefore weak and inexperienced and now is the time to deal with you while you are vulnerable." He straightened up the blade of the sword so that it was completely vertical and looked her in the eye. "And they will be right," he added.

* * * * *

Nicholas was a brutal training master. He gave her no respite and no mercy when they sparred. Using heavy bamboo poles instead of real swords to begin, he beat her, bruised her and pummeled her.

Damian watched, encouraged and gave suggestions. He never once suggested Nicholas take it easy on her. He handed her water bottles and towels to mop her sweat and pulled her up off the floor when Nicholas dropped her on it.

At noon, after over four hours of Nicholas' pounding her, Damian handed her the katana.

She hefted it. The difference was night and day. The sword was light and seemed to sing in her hands after the heavy, cumbersome pole.

From behind the back of the sofa Damian was sprawled upon, Nicholas lifted another sword, this one far longer. She straightened from her fighting crouch, blinking, astonished.

"No time to think before the fight begins!" he snapped and came at her, the sword blade whirling.

Longer blade, longer reach. She could feel all the calculations and strategies shifting in her head to compensate. *Heavier blade, slower reactions.* She parried almost without thinking, as she considered this new weapon. *He can still jab.* But only if she was down very low or up very high, or farther out...*so get closer to him!* She ducked the whirling blade and jumped two-footed closer to him. She saw his eyes widen fractionally. She had surprised him. She brought the point of the katana up against the soft underside of his chin, just touching. Enough to draw blood.

His fangs extended, as he hissed.

Damian began to laugh. "She got you! Oh, she got you good!" He fell back on the sofa, his head back, holding his stomach.

Nicholas let his sword drop and it thudded on the floor. The look he sent Damian could have liquefied metal.

Riley wasn't sure what happened next. She felt a sharp, hard tug on her hair, pulling her head back. A yank on her arm, something hard between her legs and over her shoulder.

Suddenly she was flat on the floor, her breath knocked out of her, her sword arm flung out, the sword plucked from her fingers. Nicholas had her pinned to the floor with his body, his hand hard against her arm, the blade of the katana across her throat. His eyes blazed as he stared at her. His fangs were out.

Before she could even draw a breath in shock, Nicholas' head was drawn back and the blade of his own sword was scraped under his chin. Damian brought his lips to within an inch of Nicholas' cheek. "Remember she does not heal as fast as we do." Mild words, intended to disarm Nicholas.

To bring him down.

They stayed frozen in that tableau for what seemed to be a century or two and Riley knew that some terrible balance was being fought for, one that she barely understood, except in gray, shadowy and fearsome outlines.

Finally, Nicholas' fangs retracted, and his eyes closed. "Let me go," he said quietly. Calmly.

Damian relaxed back on his heels, letting go of Nicholas' hair. He put the sword back on the floor behind him.

Nicholas flipped the katana over Riley's head and she heard it roll across the floor behind her. His weight shifted against her as he looked down at her.

She realized his hips were pushing into hers, and that the thin black sweats he was wearing and the yoga pants she was wearing were barely any barrier against her feeling every inch of him against her.

He was aroused. His cock was hard and thick and pressing against her pelvis. She could feel his testicles, too—a heavy, soft sac pushing between her legs.

Her breath hitched. She couldn't help it, even though she knew both of them would be able to read that tiny sound for exactly what it was. An open invitation. But even knowing they could read her arousal, smell it, seemed to catch fire in her mind and make her nerves burn even more with need for them.

And Nicholas wanted her. He was staring at her, his hard cock beating against her, an almost surprised expression on his face. His hand, the hand that had held the katana against her throat, lifted up and touched her lips, almost delicately, like he wanted to make sure they were real.

She nearly cried out at the touch. She didn't dare reach for him. Something held her back. Lust was surging through her, swelling in waves, but an instinct held her back, warned her that if she reached for him, she would lose something...

Damian shoved at Nicholas' shoulder, sending him rolling across the cleared floor. "Move your butt," he complained. "Riley needs food, or have you forgotten that particular human rite?"

He held a hand out to help Riley to her feet. She was grateful for the assistance. She was shaky. Very shaky.

"Bathroom is over there," Damian said, pointing to the corner where the studio had no windows, but three doors led to other small rooms. "Shower and change. I'll take you out to a late lunch, then on to the exhibition."

She glanced over her shoulder. Nicholas was sitting on the floor still, his leg cocked. As she looked, he pushed a hand through his hair. He didn't look at her.

"Exhibition?" she asked Damian.

"You are about to meet Lirgon...in his stone sleep."

* * * * *

New York seemed warmer than Pittsburgh, so Riley put on jeans and a lace-edged tank top, and flat sandals. She had forgotten to pack her hair straightener, so she did the best she could with the hair dryer that was in the bathroom, but it meant there was way too much curl in her hair to suit her when she stepped out of the bathroom.

Nicholas was working at the desk in the far corner and didn't turn around. She suspected he was ignoring her deliberately. That was fine by her.

Damian, though, shook his head. "You need a jacket or a coat."

"It's fifty degrees out there."

"Where are you going to stash this? It will not fit in your hip pocket." He held up a dark-colored knife with a long blade. "You have to remember, there are creatures out there who consider you a legitimate target now."

"Because I had a demon hunter mother? This sucks."

"And also because you travel with vampires. You are in a different world now, Riley. One where war rages, and races have battled for millennia."

She took the knife. "It's not steel."

"It is highly compressed carbon fiber, and won't show on scans if you have to go through security in some of the buildings in New York." He moved to the closet by the front door and pulled out his own coat. "An appropriate coat and shoes is going to have to be our first stop for you."

"What's wrong with my sandals?" she asked.

"You can't hold your footing in those," Nicholas said, without turning his head. "Or climb buildings."

Damian tucked the knife deep inside his own coat. "Or kick men in the groin." He winked and held open the door. "Food?" he coaxed and waved her on.

* * * * *

At the tiny bistro on the corner where Damian took her for lunch, he surprised her by ordering food for himself. "Protective coloring," he murmured. And when the food arrived, he picked at it, rearranging it on the plate. When the diners at the next table left, he dumped half his food on their plates, so it seemed he had eaten some of his.

Riley ate all her cheese sandwich and reached for Damian's remainders with an apologetic grimace. It wasn't until she was nearly finished her meal that an idea came to her, and she stopped eating, astonished.

Damian smiled. "What thought just occurred to you?"

She put down his egg roll, chewed the rest of her mouthful and swallowed. She could feel herself blushing. "I haven't had anyone hit on me," she said. "Not a single attempt. Not even a leer."

He picked up a piece of shredded lettuce. "But I am with you. They can see that."

She shook her head. "Damian, you have no idea—" She halted, realizing what she would have to explain, how it would sound.

He leaned over the tiny table. "Do not forget how old I am, Riley." He glanced around for observers, making it look casual. "I guarantee that nothing you say could possibly shock me." His black eyes and strong jaw remained steady. Reassuring.

Riley took a mouthful of water to give herself time. "Men try to...collect me."

He considered that. "Your mother once told me that up until she accepted her role as a demon hunter, she had a similar problem, but I suspect not quite as severe as yours. Forty years ago, there were more formal rules and stronger penalties for disobeying them."

"What happened after she became a demon hunter?"

Damian's lips pushed out into a sort of pout as he considered. As his lips were quite full to start with, the effect was interesting. Riley stopped chewing as she watched.

"I would say your father's presence was sufficient deterrent, but I believe that your mother herself became...intimidating."

"Is that why no one has bothered me since we left the apartment?"

Damian shook his head. "You have not yet acquired full confidence in your skills. You do not know in your gut you are a demon hunter. Not for true."

"Then why haven't I had at least one guy come up and try to get my number? I know that sounds horribly arrogant, Damian, but honestly, I usually don't eat out because I can't have a meal in peace without some jerk insisting it ain't right for a lady to eat alone, or that I shouldn't be eating with that dumb jock, come eat with him."

"You mean, they would try to pick you up even when you were with another man?"

"Yes."

Damian shook his head. "That won't happen while you are with me."

"Because you've got confidence?" she said, puzzled.

He picked up her arm and brushed this thumb over her inner wrist, where her pulse throbbed. "Because deep in their subconscious all prey senses the presence of a predator and the survival instinct says to avoid the predator." He smiled. "Men instinctively know I am stronger and do not attempt to challenge me. It is an old, genetic dance. So you can relax in my company and in Nicholas' too."

She jumped a little at the mention of his name, and looked Damian in the eye. "I can relax?"

Damian was still stroking her wrist and it was doing strange things to her pulse. He nodded, his gaze on her wrist.

"You knew what was happening after Nicholas took the sword from my throat. You sensed it. You deliberately broke it up, didn't you?"

His gaze shifted to her eyes, abruptly. He put her arm down and sat back. It was all the confirmation she needed.

"Why?" she asked softly. "Was it jealousy? Why did you and Nicholas break up after my mother died?"

He looked out the window. "Human men are not comfortable talking about emotions, Riley. We are even less inclined."

"And Nicholas is even more reluctant than you. He can't handle emotions at all. I pushed his pride earlier and that's why I ended up with the katana at my throat and you having to talk him down from — What? Bloodlust?"

"Rage," Damian corrected. "I'm glad it happened, though."

"What? Him nearly taking my head off?"

"All of it. He wants you now, Riley. He sees you. You're not just a human anymore."

And abruptly, heat sizzled through her. Wanting. Hot lust. Her clit swelled and bloomed with need. Her nerve endings seemed to prickle and sizzle and zap.

"And what about you, Damian? Am I still just a human to you?" Her voice was edged with the thick longing running through her.

"You never have been." He swiveled back to face her and she caught her breath at the pain and sadness in his expression. "I have struggled with this throughout my existence, and never truly succeeded as Nicholas has — to separate humans from myself and make them something less, something insignificant. Their passing still touches me. Their lives still affect me. I have never learned to stay above it all, not properly."

He pushed his uneaten food aside. "I...adored her. I didn't know how much, until she was dead. It shocked me that I had let myself grow so close to a human, but of course it was too late. When your mother died, Riley, the bottom of my world dropped out and I blamed Nicholas for not protecting her better." He grimaced. "And now I must watch Nicholas protect you."

He stood up abruptly. "Let's get you a coat and boots." And he headed for the cash register.

Her mind reeling, her body still zinging with leftover arousal, Riley pushed herself to her feet and followed.

By the time they made the pavement she had gathered her thoughts together. Damian led her into a small boutique and that prevented her from asking any questions. There, she tried on a few knee-length brushed cotton spring coats, finally settling for a cherry red one that went well with her black hair and green eyes. Damian nodded approval. "We'll also have one in black," he told the clerk, pulling out a

perfectly ordinary credit card. The clerk beamed, clearly thinking of her commission. She led them to the cash register, wiggling her ass in Damian's direction, perhaps hoping for a good tip into the bargain.

"Leave the red one on," Damian told Riley.

The next stop was for boots. While Riley preferred fur-lined, ripple-soled boots that would get her through the worst Pittsburgh could throw at her during winter as she ran from building to building on-campus, or from train station to job, Damian clearly had something else in mind. The boots she finally ended up with, along with a new pair of socks, were hand-crafted leather, stylish, with built-up heels. Not too high for running, but the heel was good for catching on ladder rungs. They had a decent tread for all weather. And hidden in the toe, steel lining. Damian had liked that touch.

When the clerk had gone to get the next smaller size to try on, Damian had leaned toward her and murmured, "We can add a small blade to each boot, to be triggered when you need it." Appalled, Riley had sat there and let the clerk slide her feet into the new boots, realizing she was acquiring new weapons, not new attire.

She walked out of the store in a mild daze. "*This* is the sort of stuff my mother used to worry about all the time? Steel-toed boots and if she could get blades into the toes? And if the lining of her new wool coat could take the weight of an Uzi?" She was trembling. "What sort of life is that?"

Damian, perhaps sensing the black cloud of her thoughts, wisely didn't protest or try to convince her otherwise. After a few moments of silence he said, almost like he was reminiscing, "She loved dancing. Especially the tango."

A few more steps.

"And she and your father were incredibly happy. They were...almost obsessively in love."

Riley took a deep breath, feeling the weight lift.

"Here." Something bumped her arm.

She transferred the shopping bags to her left hand and took Damian's wallet. He'd folded it so a section of photos in clear plastic were showing, and flipped the photos so that one was displayed. It was old. At least thirty years old and trimmed to fit into the sleeve. Black and white. A New Year's Eve party, with balloons, streamers, champagne. About sixteen people were crowded into the frame and Riley recognized Nicholas, who looked exactly the same. And herself.

She blinked. This was her mother, then. She was laughing at the camera, held in the arms of a big man with dark hair and a strong jaw. Her father, Carson Connors. Then she noticed her mother's swelling stomach. This, then, was just before her father died.

"They look so happy."

Damian's hand rested on the back of her neck. He took his wallet back and tucked it away. "That is one thing about all creatures that I have found consistent no matter what the race or the species. No matter how bleak the life, or dark the future, life goes on.

And humans are unique in being able to find happiness in the most dire of circumstances. Man is the most adaptable species I've ever come across." He gave her a little shake. "You must play the hand you have been dealt, Riley. You chose to sit at the table."

She nodded and tried to smile. But the tears were building anyway. It was a reaction to everything that had happen in the tightly compacted eighteen hours since she had left Pittsburgh. Her vision blurred and she blinked. That made them fall. Damn.

"Don't do that to me, Riley. For pity's sake," Damian said, his voice low. "I can resist almost everything but a woman's tears."

"I'm not doing it deliberately!" She tripped a little.

Damian's arm swept around her middle and she was being half marched, half carried across the pavement, out of the pushy New York pedestrian traffic, into a narrow alley between buildings. He hurried her down the alley, deep inside it, where they would have privacy and leaned her against a warm, sunny wall. Her bags were plucked from her hand. "Don't. Please." She sensed he was right in front of her.

She shook her head, trying to stop. But this had been a long time coming. Perhaps twenty-seven years in the making. In the last eighteen hours she had been scared, terrorized, worked to death, filled with hope, and painful memories prodded and turned.

"You think you d-don't like having emotions? You're not the only one!" She tried to wipe the tears away without completely ruining her makeup.

Her shoulders were lifted away from the wall again. Damian pressed her head against his shoulder. "Go on," he said. "Get it out." And his arms came around her, solid and hard and safe.

She turned her head away from the sun and let herself cry.

When her tears petered out and she was down to hiccupping and hitching, she realized that Damian was soothing her back with his hand and the other was in her hair. She liked it. She could stand here a lot longer accepting that sort of soothing. Like earlier that morning in the car, her lips were only a hairsbreadth from his neck. She could slide her tongue out and lick the flesh. Kiss it.

She could tell by the way his hands shifted against her that he was aware of her altered mood. Her heart began to race. She closed her eyes. There was nothing she could hide from these two. It was mortifying...but at the same time, it was almost relaxing. It saved a lot of conversations and misunderstandings if she could just get over being humiliated about it.

The hand on her back slid down to her hips. The fingers spread, questing. They pressed gently. Pressing her against him.

She sighed.

It was a signal. Damian brought her back up against the sunny wall again and this time, he held her there, his body against her. His thigh pressed between hers, putting pressure on her mons and she gasped.

"Ambrosia," he whispered. His arm curled over her head, resting against the wall, and he leaned down slowly, slowly to graze his cheek against hers.

Her body was screaming for more. She wanted to reach for him, to grab him and wrap her legs around him and beg him to plunder her. Abruptly, she recognized the thought.

She had battled this same impulse with Nicholas barely two hours ago.

Damian's tongue slid along her cheek. Collecting her tears.

Then he kissed her.

She had never been kissed like this. It was as if Damian's entire attention was centered on delighting her, making her happy and only that. There was no underlying agenda, no rush—he had eternity, after all—and he knew exactly how to kiss. His tongue stroked her lips and teeth and toyed with her own with such knowing, masterful touches that her knees began to tremble. Moisture pooled in her pussy.

But still he kissed her, until she felt the world starting to slip away.

"Who taught you to kiss like that?" he asked when he at last released her mouth.

"You did. At least, I've never kissed like that until just now."

His fangs were partially descended, but it didn't frighten her at all. She understood that this was a vampire response to strong stimulus. He closed his eyes for a moment and they retracted, then with a groan he pressed his mouth against her neck and slid his lips down her throat and held them over her wildly beating pulse. He licked it.

Riley closed her eyes. She had to stop this. She had to. But her hands were glued to the wall behind her. She wouldn't stop Damian, but she wouldn't participate in the seduction either, as much as she longed to tear the clothing from his long, lean body.

He slid the strap of her tank top and bra from her shoulder and she moaned, for she knew what he would do next and she wanted it with every corpuscle of her body. He lowered the cup of her bra and the tank top, exposing her breast...but he didn't immediately touch her breast with either his hand or his mouth. His eyes feasted upon it. But his hands yanked aside her belt buckle and ripped her jeans open even as he watched her.

She was ready to burst into flames. Her clit was engorged, thumping with blood and her pussy slick. Damian slid her jeans down her hips, bringing her panties with them, until her pussy peeped above the denim. He reached for her, but she managed to make herself grab his strong wrist.

He looked at her.

"Don't make me choose between the two of you, Damian." She could feel the pressure of more tears. "If you do this, you'll force me to and I don't want to have to choose."

"You want this." His hand slid between her legs.

"I want Nicholas."

His fingers slid inside her and she cried out and clutched at him, her balance uncertain. Her eyes closed all on their own. It felt so good, so right. As the same time Damian's mouth fastened onto her breast and his teeth tugged on her nipple. His thumb rubbed her clitoris as his fingers moved inside her.

She clutched at his hair, his shoulders. It took fifteen seconds and she climaxed, making a guttural screaming sound she had never in her life heard herself make before. The convulsion ripped through her in powerful wrenching waves.

She was left weak and trembling, panting and clinging to him.

Damian withdrew his fingers, straightened up and held her against him as the last of the orgasm passed through her. She could feel him trembling, too, and his congested cock against her stomach.

"Why did you force the issue, Damian?" she said against his shoulder. Her voice was pathetically small. "Why couldn't you have given me time?"

He began to rearrange her clothes, to re-dress her. And he adjusted his own pants to better stretch over the enormous bulge in them. At last, he curled his hand around her neck and simply looked at her. "We are not men, Riley. We cannot give you the luxury of time, not when you constantly want us the way you do. We are strong, but not that strong. And now that Nicholas wants you, I knew I must..." His mouth turned down. "Collect you."

She wanted to weep or stamp her foot in frustration. "Just to stop him? *Why?* You really hate him that much now?"

He shook his head. "It was important that I taste you first."

Her mouth opened. Nothing came out. She couldn't think beyond the buzzing there. And she couldn't seem to focus beyond that one critical word. *First*.

He leaned against her, his whole long body pressing against her. His mouth came down to her ear. "You've missed a vital point in all your agonizing, Riley."

She could barely breathe for the effect that his body was having, pressed up against hers. Responding to him was beyond her.

His tongue rimmed her ear, making her moan.

"Who said anything about you having to *choose* between me and Nicholas, anyway?" he breathed.

Then his weight was lifted and the sun was on her body, dazzling her eyes, making her lift a hand against it, even as her battered mind reeled at the suggestions and implications behind Damian's questions.

"Coming?" Damian asked.

She looked. He was carrying all the shopping bags and holding out his other hand toward her. Riley took it.

Chapter Four

"We're going to see Lirgon at an art exhibition?" Riley asked, looking up at the façade of the building Damian was leading her toward.

"Sculpture exhibition." He pulled notes off a bill clip and handed them through to a woman behind the glass at the ticket counter. Then he took her hand again.

The building was light and very white, full of square white blocks and steel, all except the floors, which were a very pale natural wood, sealed and varnished to a bright gleam.

Even the stairs were white blocks and steel.

Ahead, there was a security scan walk-through frame and a couple of bored-looking guards, also dressed in white. Riley wanted to giggle except that she was suddenly aware in a morbid way of the knife weighing down the inside of her coat.

Damian tugged her forward. "Come on," he said, thrusting a program into her hand. She glanced at it. *Fábio Natan – Gargoyle Exposé* was written in huge letters on the front of the booklet.

"They actually know about gargoyles?" she asked in a whisper.

"One at a time, sir!" the guard called out.

Damian dropped her hand. "I'll go first." He walked through the frame, turned and beckoned her. She tried not to hesitate or show any awkwardness. Instead, she looked down at the program as she stepped through, like that was taking all her attention, instead of the scan.

Nothing happened. She looked up at Damian and smiled. "Now, are you going to show me what's got you all excited?" she said, for benefit of the guards.

He took her hand again, and hurried her toward the stairs. "Gargoyles," he said, in a normal voice, "are carvings they used to add to old buildings to shed water off the sides of them. Castles and towers. That sort of stuff. Later on, gargoyle designs for public buildings got more and more elaborate and decorative. But Natan has designed his own gargoyles just for the hell of it, and put them on exhibition. They'll never sit on a public building anywhere."

The stairs split and turned one eighty degrees and headed up to the next floor. Damian took the right-hand side.

"You mean, he just *carved* Lirgon out of rock?" Riley asked in an undertone.

"Yes, pretty much exactly that, with some added complications." Damian pulled her forward. "Meet Lirgon."

Her first instinct was to scoot backward and she did step back, right into Damian. His hands came down onto her shoulders. "I'm here," he said. His voice reverberated against her back, warm and reassuring. "The creature is asleep for now. You are safe. All gargoyles sleep during the day. It is called stone sleep and it is when they are at their most vulnerable. Someone who knows of their true nature might take it into their heads to batter them to pebbles. But we cannot—not here and now, for the place is guarded and public."

Riley drew a deep breath and stared up at the twelve-foot mound of stone before her. It was the ugliest creature she had ever seen. The eyes bulged and wings curved around to protect a hunched and clawed body that included horned toes and hooked fingers, jagged teeth and a long snout that snarled even in sleep. The tongue protruded from the mouth, but it did not look pathetic.

"Is-is it aware of us?"

"No."

"It's wretched. People are paying to look at these things?"

"Don't let that fool you," Damian breathed. "This is the deadliest foe your parents faced. Now you must face it, or more people will die."

She bit her lip. "Why me? Why not Nicholas? He's a hunter."

"We think Lirgon came back just for you, Riley. The seed of the Connors. The only way we can protect you properly is to teach you how to defeat the monster yourself. We will help all we can, but you must do this."

She looked around the big display room and counted quickly. "There's twenty more. Are they all like Lirgon? All...real?" She flipped the program open. "How long has Natan been doing this for?"

"We don't know how many for sure. Nicholas came to the exhibition as soon as he heard of it and remembers five of them at least, beside Lirgon. The rest of the gargoyles we believe are just what they appear to be. Stone carvings. Dead lumps of rock. But the six, including Lirgon...they are from the original Stonebrood clan that Nicholas has been hunting, on and off, for over two hundred years. Up until August 1977, the night your grandfather died, demon hunters believed gargoyles were extinct."

"Then how...?"

A long finger stroked her cheek, making her nerve ends snap and sizzle. "That is a tale for closed doors and no witnesses." His voice breathed in her ear.

Riley couldn't take her eyes off the snarling, still creature crouched in front of her, and the lifeless stone eyes. "It really isn't aware of us?"

"No. The stone sleep is profound." Damian sighed. "Lirgon could not have chosen a more protected place to return than this. Simple, but brilliant. Security guards to watch all who approach him during daylight hours. All Lirgon must guard against is an untimely waking at night."

Riley flipped the program over. "It's short opening hours. Look." She held up the exhibition opening and closing times listed on the back of the program. "They coincide with daylight, more or less, at this time of year."

Damian tilted his head back to look up at the roof. Overhead, three large leaded skylights allowed sunlight to stream into the airy gallery, giving the displays the best possible light. "It's still only three p.m.," he said. "We have three hours to kill until he rises."

"You intend to watch him rise?"

"Yes."

"The guards won't let you stay here after the gallery closes," Riley pointed out.

"We can watch from another building." Damian bent to bring his lips closer to her ear. "The glory of Manhattan — there's always another building next door."

She shivered at the closeness of his lips, as images jumped into her mind. His hands, which were still on her shoulders, sliding farther down to cup her breasts, as he ground his pelvis into her from behind. She wanted to hear him make hard, breathless, helpless sounds as he handled her. She wanted to know he found her irresistible.

She was too used to the power she had over normal men. Damian had the power now. She needed him too much.

Him and Nicholas.

Just thinking of the other vampire made her heart beat a rapid tattoo and her pussy throb hard. Her clitoris beat in time with her heart and she could hear her breath in her ears.

"Damian," she whispered almost silently.

He drew in a breath and turned his head to look at her. His black eyes narrowed. "Tell me what you want," he murmured.

"You," she said honestly. She swallowed. "Now."

His lips brushed over hers. The light touch was electrifying. "How?" he asked softly.

"I don't care." She knew it beggared her, but didn't care about that either. She ached only to have him inside her. "Please," she whispered, knowing he would hear her when others wouldn't.

Damian stepped around her to stand before her and studied her face. His thumb stroked her cheek and sparks seemed to leap from his touch. She gasped unsteadily as she stared up at him. "Now," she whispered. "Hurry."

He glanced around them, making it look casual. There was a big, five-foot-square black leather upholstered flat bench nearby, strategically placed for visitors to sit and study the artwork. There were others scattered around the gallery.

"You want me to lower you upon that and have my way?" Damian murmured. "You should have worn a skirt, my lover."

Riley thought she might burst into flames. It wasn't just the idea behind his words. It was Damian's low voice rippling over the words themselves. *My lover*. They were true enough. She intended to let him seduce her as soon as discretion allowed. But they still touched a chord that sent startling shock waves through her.

Damian's eyes narrowed as he studied her face. He picked up the shopping bags next to her feet with one hand, and lifted her hand with the other. "Come," he said simply, and tugged her into following him. She went willingly, her new boots tapping on the pale wooden flooring with what sounded to her like incredibly loud raps that drew attention to what they were doing, like a trumpet call. But no one turned to look at them. No one paid any attention at all.

Damian threaded his way through the still and silent gargoyles towering over them, heading for the back of the large gallery, which took up the entire floor as far as Riley could tell. At the back of the room, she saw what Damian had spotted, being taller. There was an exit sign glowing over the top of a corridor that was lined with doors. At the far end was a metal-lined door with a fast-release bar. The fire escape.

The doors along the corridor seemed anonymous, but there were discreet tags. International signs for male and female restrooms, a janitor's closet and a manager's office. Damian pulled Riley up against the manager's door and knocked. When there was no answer, he knocked again, more firmly. Still no answer. Riley's heart was thundering now, for she guessed his intention and his body was pressing her hard up against the door. She could feel his long length against her from behind and it wasn't helping her pulse stay steady at all. Anticipation was making her tremble and her thoughts almost incoherent.

Damian glanced along both directions of the corridor, then reached out for the doorknob. He gave it a twist. It seemed like a gentle turn, but the door gave a low, agonized metallic groan and gave way. Damian pushed Riley inside, shut the door, grabbed a slim visitor's chair from in front of the big wooden desk and rammed the back of it under the handle of the door.

The desk took up most of the room. There was a silver plaque sitting on the front of it. *John Sandford*. An in-tray. Computer monitor with a blank face.

As Riley blinked in astonishment, Damian was suddenly there, in front of her, his hand sliding under her hair and curling around her neck. His lips were on hers, his other hand on her waist, sliding right around her, possessing her.

But then the kiss took hold and she lost track of what his hands were doing to her. She dropped the bags, or maybe he took them from her. But her hands were somehow free. Her coat came adrift and slipped from her shoulders as the kiss lengthened.

When Damian finally lifted his lips from hers she was panting, her thoughts a chaotic tumble of incoherent erotic needs. She reached for him, with a hazy, half-formed thought of undressing him, but he caught her wrists in his hands and turned her, bringing her hard against him. She could feel his cock throbbing against her ass and

moaned, pushing herself back against him. She moved her arms so his hands would rub against her breasts.

"Sweet Dion..." Damian muttered. His grip on her wrists tightened. "You're pushing me, Riley." There was a note of warning in his voice that both frightened and aroused her beyond belief.

She moaned. "Fuck me," she begged. "Fuck me hard."

"Ah, *Christos*." Damian's tone was that of a desperate man. His hand snagged in the top of her tank top and yanked. The tough cotton gave way with a tired sound. He grabbed her bra and ripped it the same way and she was abruptly bare from the waist up. He spun her around to face him and there was a light in his eyes she had not seen before. Raw lust, animal need, unshuttered. He licked at her throat with a hungry growl, his hand fisted in her hair. His mouth worked its way down her flesh to her breasts as his hand lifted them one at a time for his mouth to latch on to each tip and sip at it. Then he nipped with his teeth, drawing them out, making the nipples hard, erect and rosy with arousal.

Riley clutched at his shoulders, clawing at the coat he still wore, feeling an odd excitement at being half-naked while he was still fully clothed.

Damian's hand was at her belt buckle, unsnapping it, slipping the leather out of the slide, pushing the belt aside, tackling the fastening of her jeans. His fingers brushed against the flesh of her abdomen, making her abs quiver and tighten and her pussy to throb in anticipation. Her clit was swollen, beating with promise, a bare inch or two from his fingers. She trembled with the possibilities.

The zipper slipped undone and her jeans sagged around her hips.

"Take them off," he breathed and she barely recognized his voice. It was thick with desire and strong with the accent she knew was his, but was normally suppressed and controlled better. "Your panties, too. Everything. I want you naked."

Excitement shuddered through her. She bent to do as he bade, her hands shaking, and stripped herself of her garments. Her panties were soaked through. She put her new boots to one side. Barely had she dropped the last item to the carpet when Damian's hands curled around her arms, turned her and pushed her so her back was up against the door he had so recently closed and jammed shut. She could feel the cool steel frame of the visitor's chair against her thigh.

"Undo my pants," he commanded, his voice hoarse with lust. His thumbs moved against the sides of her breasts as he held her against the door. She remembered that even though the light was low in here, he would be able to see far more detail than she could. She reached for the strained buttons holding his trousers closed and struggled to push them undone. They popped open. Next, the zipper. She merely had to lift the tab and start the zipper sliding down and the pressure on the metal teeth did the rest. The zipper almost lowered by itself.

Riley caught her breath. No underwear. No belt. As Damian's trousers opened she saw his erect cock beating against his hip. It was thick and hard, with a flaring head. Just the sight of it made her moan and lick her lips. She looked up at his face.

He was watching her, his black eyes narrowed and sleepy. "You're a gourmand of a different sort, aren't you?" he murmured. "Perhaps the rumors were true after all. That would be...interesting, if it were so."

A question barely began to form in Riley's mind before Damian pressed himself against her, stealing her breath and her thoughts in one hard kiss. His cock pushed against her stomach and she could feel it beating with the tattoo of his pulse, as his hands gripped her thighs, lifting and separating them, opening her up to him.

The tip of his thick, blunt cock nuzzled her sopping pussy and the muscles around the entrance gripped him convulsively, trying to draw him in. Riley clawed at Damian's shoulders, her nails digging into the coat. "Harder. Deeper." Her voice was husky. She desperately wanted him to thrust into her with every bit of strength he possessed...except that in the back of her mind she knew he could possibly crack steel girders with one hand if he chose to. "Please," she begged hoarsely. "Fuck me."

He was studying her, watching her writhe against him, trying to take him deeper into her. Almost clinically, he gripped her legs and pushed into her with one long, smooth stroke, burying himself to the root. "Like that?" he asked softly.

Riley let her head fall back as he filled her. She curled her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck. "Mmmm... Good," she told him. She moved her hips. "More."

Damian's smile was wicked and lust-filled and she glimpsed, just for a moment, years of sexual mischief in his eyes. "Of course," he said simply. "But there is little more delightful than this moment right here," and he withdrew his cock a little and pushed it back into her.

Riley felt her pussy walls quiver and ripple around him and in response, his cock seemed to pulse. She sucked in a breath. "Oh!"

"Mmm..." he agreed and pushed into her again.

This time even her clitoris beat in response to his impalement. Riley felt her hips jerk of their own volition as a shocking wave of pleasure jolted through her, centered upon her clit and her pussy. She gasped, but Damian did not slow down his assault upon her, or spare her a moment to recover. The delightful assaults rolled over her one after another, building up inside her a tidal wave of intolerable pleasure. She clawed at Damian, feeling the monstrous great climax building in her and frightened by it.

"Come for me, Riley," he breathed.

She shook her head.

"Sink into it," he breathed next to her ear as his cock slammed into her. "Let yourself go."

She couldn't. Not something this large, this awesome. It would overwhelm her. Consume her. She would lose control. Riley panted, staying on top of it, beating the excitement back.

Right next to their heads, on the other side of the door, a sharp knock sounded.

Damian covered her mouth with his hand. He thrust into her. Once more. Twice. She felt his seed spill into her in hard spurts, his fingers digging into her thigh.

The knock came again. "Anyone there?" Security. From the tone of the question it sounded like they were doing rounds and checking every door as per standard procedure.

Damian's hand fell from her thigh, down to the doorknob and curled around it, over the top of the chair thrust under it. She saw the knuckles tense. Only the pressure of his hips against her was holding her up against the door now.

On the other side of the door, the doorknob was rattled. Testing to see that it was still locked. After a few seconds, there was a soft patter of steps heading away from the door. The guard had moved on, satisfied.

Riley dropped her head onto Damian's shoulder, weak with relief and trembling as adrenaline pumped through her body. He lowered her to the floor and kissed her, his hand tangling in her hair. "Get dressed," he murmured, fastening his trousers. "I'll check for the guard. We can slip out via the fire escape."

Of course, they couldn't go back out into the gallery where the guard might see them emerge from the corridor he had just checked and found empty.

He slipped off his coat and drew his wife-beater over his head. "Wear this. I'll have to replace your shirt for you." He put his coat on again and zipped it up so his bare chest was hidden.

Riley reached for her discarded clothing with a shaky hand as Damian lifted the chair away from the door, peered out carefully and slipped out.

When he returned, she was fully dressed. Damian's wife-beater was much too large for her, but by knotting the arms together at the back, she could make it sit high enough that her breasts were covered decently.

Damian picked up the bags once more, and led her silently from the room, turning right instead of left when they stepped out. They moved down the corridor to the fire escape door.

"Watch for observers," Damian told her, putting down the bags.

Riley turned to look over her shoulder, back toward the gallery. The small slice she could see of the white, light room was empty of people. She heard Damian moving, a small grunt of effort. Then, "Quickly."

She turned back to him. He had the fire escape door open and brilliant late afternoon sunlight was pouring in. She blinked. High up by the top of the door, bare, gleaming wires hung loose over the frame. That was what he had been doing while she

had been watching out—severing the alarm wired to the fire escape door so their opening the door didn't set off the alarm.

Riley picked up the bags and stepped out onto the metal landing. Damian followed and shut the door behind him. Quickly, they climbed down the ladder to the ground and hurried along the alleyway onto the street, where Damian relaxed once more and looked at his watch. "Time to find a perch to observe the skylights. Nicholas should be here for this, too." He scanned the skyline around them as he spoke.

Riley stared at him, as she realized the terse orders and his imperious air were not going away now they had reached safety. A chill touched her middle.

"Damian?"

He glanced at her. "You need food first?" he asked. "It *is* getting late."

"I'm fine for now," she assured him. "Is something wrong, Damian?"

His eyes pinned her to the pavement in a searing glance utterly without concession. "I think that is a question I should be asking you, but now is not the time for it." He hesitated. "I'm not even sure there *is* a time." And he looked away, as if he were still searching the skyline.

Riley could feel her breath drop out of the bottom of her lungs, exactly like someone had opened a trapdoor and let out all the air without warning her. Suddenly, she had no oxygen and her chest wouldn't work properly.

For sixty queasy seconds she fought to breathe, as her mind raced and her heart labored. She knew exactly what Damian was talking about. Even though he spoke in euphemisms, even though he was being deliberately obscure, she *knew*.

She hadn't been able to give up control. She didn't trust him enough to let go, even in his arms, even though he was possibly one of the most powerful creatures walking this planet.

Riley was flawed, weak, useless. Damian knew it now. He suspected it was a weakness she may never be able to overcome and already wondered if he wanted to try.

She watched him scout the terrain. More than ever, she wished Damian would try. She wanted him like no other man she had ever wanted in her life.

Except Nicholas Sherwood.

Tears pricked her eyes at the cruel dilemma.

Yes, she was indeed flawed.

Chapter Five

The roof of the building Damian finally chose was higher than the gallery building by two floors, which gave them an elevated viewpoint. The building had a supermarket and gym on the first floor, a dance studio on the second and apartments on the remainder. The apartments made it easy to gain access to the roof. Damian showed Riley how simple it was to dazzle one's way into gaining access into buildings and public areas of almost any building in New York with a bit of charm and a lot of very sincere lying.

Once they were on the roof, Damian selected the best vantage point, then called Nicholas on his cell phone. "And bring food," he said curtly, before dropping the phone back inside his jacket. He glanced at Riley. "By the time he gets here, it will have been four hours since you last ate. You've worked your body hard today. I won't have you pass out on me from low blood sugar." And he turned back to watching the roof of the gallery below.

Riley was sitting on an air-conditioning vent. Now she pulled her knees to her chest, and wrapped her arms around her legs. "You're pissed at me."

"No." He spoke with his back to her.

"You're angry about something."

"You're trying to give me human emotions. My reactions to day-to-day petty concerns are not the same as yours anymore. Do not make the mistake of trying to think of me as a man. I'm not." His face was in profile to her and he looked for all the world like he was disinterested.

"Bullshit, Damian. You think I don't know how fragile the male ego is? This happens to be something I *do* know about." She put her feet down and stood up, wanting the authority the height would give her. "It bothered the crap out of you I wouldn't let go back there, and now you're pouting."

Damian turned to face her, a startled expression on his face.

But Riley wasn't finished yet. "I don't give a shit how old you are, and you can shove that 'being above petty concerns' lie over the ledge you're leaning against because I don't believe it for a second—not for this instance, anyway. You're hiding behind it because you just don't want to talk about it. *Again.*"

"Jesus," he breathed. "You and Tally. Straight for the gut. No quarter given."

She flinched at the mention of her mother's name. "Did you ever fuck her?" she demanded.

He drew in a breath, a sharp one. "No," he said quickly. "I was with Nicholas then. And once she met Carson, there was room for no one else. She saw no one else. They

were obsessed about each other." He dropped his head, staring at his hands where they lay palm up on the concrete edging of the balcony. "They were only together for six years before Carson was killed by Lirgon, but those six years were lived so intensely..." He shook his head. "It was almost as if they knew they would not have long together and they squeezed as much as they could into the time they had. There was no room for anyone else, really. Just the small handful of friends they trusted with their lives and that was all."

"The opposite of what you do, in fact," Riley said dryly.

Damian grimaced. "I suppose...yes. Our race does become complacent about emotions. Time gives you that luxury."

"That's what you're doing now," Riley told him. "You're avoiding me."

He turned to face her, leaning back against the edge, spreading his arms along either side. He smiled. "Relentless, aren't you?"

"When it's important," she agreed.

"Is it important, Riley?" His tone was cool.

Her heart jumped. "Don't try to get around me that way. If this was simply just sex, just passing time, then you wouldn't be so put out about what happened back there." She came toward him. "I'm not centuries old like you, Damian. But I'm not an idiot, either. Don't treat me like one."

His gaze never wavered. "I apologize," he said evenly. "Such a simple tactic would work with a great many others. I've grown used to manipulating humans in such ways."

"And you still haven't answered my original question." She stopped barely a foot away from him and looked him directly in the eye.

"Do you know," he said softly, his gaze directly locked with hers, "that staring a vampire directly in the eye is the equivalent of challenging them? Most vampires find their feeding impulses kick in and have to subvert those impulses to other drives, if they wish to avoid killing the human who foolishly locks gazes with the vampire."

"Other drives?" Riley echoed, keeping her eyes square upon Damian's black pupils. His lashes were black, as were the thick brows.

"Sexual, often," Damian murmured, his voice thickening perceptively. "But if the need to feed can't be slaked via sex, then physical expenditure. Running. Fighting. Dismantling buildings." His hands were gripping the edges of the concrete, and the knuckles were white.

Her heart squeezed in her chest and she was mortally aware of the blood pumping through it.

Damian's eyes were unblinking. "Look away, Riley, if you do not want me to force you to yield to me *right now*."

"Answer my question first," she breathed, fighting to hide just how badly she was trembling.

He hissed out his breath. "Ask your question!"

"I hurt you by not fully trusting you enough to give up control and let go, didn't I?"

Damian's lips parted as his fangs partially lowered. His eyes closed. The sight terrified Riley but she remained totally silent, repressing every impulse to show any sign of fear, including the almost overwhelming need to reach for the knife hanging heavy and reassuring in her inside jacket pocket. She knew it would trigger Damian into action she couldn't defend herself against. She didn't have the skill yet and perhaps never would. He was too old, too experienced and far too strong—and she had pushed him, perhaps too far.

"That's it," he whispered. His chest lifted as he drew a very deep breath and let it out, like a man smelling the air.

Then, astonishingly, he smiled. "Yes," he said firmly. "You wounded me when you would not give up control." His smile grew wider. "My...what did you call it? My fragile male ego? It appears that even after all this time it is still remarkably delicate." And he laughed.

Riley found her mouth lifting in a smile, even though she was puzzled. Damian's laugh was infectious and his transformation from scary vampire to happy man was stunning and breath-robbing.

He curled his hand around the back of her neck. "I laugh, Riley, because it's so ironic to find this vestige of humanity still lingers in me, and it's such a pathetic one. Vanity, indeed. Pride. Ego. They're not admirable qualities. Why, if human qualities were to linger, could they not be the better ones like courage, loyalty and...and..."

"Love?" Riley suggested softly.

Damian's face shadowed. "I never lost that," he said softly. "Love never goes away. It changes. It can become perverted, if you let it and some do. Some allow it to become the most vile emotion imaginable, as it twists between the creatures they become and the partners they associate with. But love never goes away completely." His thumb stroked her jaw. "Is that one of your questions, Riley? What lies between us? Where this all leads?"

She jumped. She couldn't help it. The question lay in her heart and mind, but she never would have asked it. "How can you possibly answer such a question now? It would be unfair to demand an answer."

Damian's mouth lifted at the corners. "To you, it may seem that way." His hand at the back of her neck drew her closer as his other arm wrapped around her back. "I can see farther than you." He pressed her against his chest, where she had once slept. "Relax," he told her. "Nicholas will be here soon with food. Meantime, it's nearly sunset. We must watch the skylights."

Her face turned inward and she found her lips were a mere inch from his neck. This time, she gave into the same impulse she'd had when traveling to New York just that morning, she kissed his neck and slid her tongue over the flesh, tasting it.

Damian sighed. "Sweet."

"You have no idea how badly I wanted to do that this morning, in the car."

"I knew."

She thumped his shoulder with the heel of her hand. "It's just not fair, you being able to smell everything about me. It's like being able to read my mind. You get advanced information about me and I get left behind about what's going on with you two."

His long finger lifted her chin so she was forced to look him in the eyes. "You do very well with just your own senses, Riley Carson Connors. You just skewered me very neatly. I'm still bleeding, thank you very much." His lips touched hers in a soft kiss meant only to reassure. The kiss lingered, lengthened, but still didn't do more than share warmth and empathy. She knew Damian was carefully not arousing her—the gargoyles were about to rise. They could not afford to be distracted, even though she sensed that he longed to have her to submit to him, to make her let go completely and fully in the most comprehensive way possible, as soon as possible.

Very soon the confrontation between her control and his ego would come. But for now, he was content to let her keep control. His tongue brushed her upper lip and lifted away. "Don't feel inadequate with us two," he told her.

She smiled up at him. "I won't."

Damian jerked his head up, like he'd heard a loud noise, or been alerted by something. "Nicholas," he said, his hand falling away from Riley's face.

Riley turned in Damian's arms.

Nicholas was three or four paces beyond the roof entrance door, a grocery bag in one hand that glowed ghostly white in the gloaming. He was standing very still, where he had come to a halt on the rooftop. He had moved almost silently, so that only Damian had heard him.

Nicholas' face was painted with shock, the blue eyes wide. As soon as Riley turned and saw him, though, Nicholas shook himself and strode forward, swinging the grocery bag in her direction. "Food for the weak one," he said, dropping it at her feet.

Riley pulled away from Damian, even though his arm stayed around her. He was not hiding from Nicholas in any way. She stepped away from Damian, letting his arm drop.

"You two reek of sex," Nicholas said sharply. "Couldn't you have at least showered instead of assaulting me with the stench all night?"

Riley sucked in her breath, shocked.

Damian shook his head. "That's a cheap shot, Nick, and you know it. Feel better now you've hurt Riley and no one else?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I couldn't give a tinker's damn if the truth hurts," he told Damian, heading for the edge of the rooftop. He was completely indifferent. "Riley isn't here to be coddled. She can deal with it." He leaned over the edge to peer down at the

top of the gallery and the skylights below, where the lights from the gallery were radiating pure light in three big square white panels up into the night. "That's it?"

Riley, leaning over the wide concrete lip on Damian's other side, saw Nick glance at her.

He was not as indifferent as he wanted her to think.

Was it her he was aiming his barbs at? Or Damian?

She pushed back from the edge and straightened up, her heart thundering. Games within games. Was she going to get hurt here because she wasn't playing her own game? Because she didn't have an agenda? She was the only short-lived creature on the playing field, caught between two centuries-old vampires who'd learned the art of strategy from fighting actual war campaigns that she'd only read about in books. Damian had already confessed he could see farther ahead than her. What if she was the pawn in this? The piece that could be easily sacrificed in order to promote another, stronger player?

She had to be smarter than this, didn't she?

Or should she just trust that love would win out?

No, don't be stupid, Riley. Love is what romance heroines rely on. This is the real world.

In the real world, life wasn't fair, the underdog didn't always win, you got kicked when you were down, justice didn't always rule and in no way, shape or form was it impartial. Above all, if she didn't watch out for herself, no one else was going to.

Riley leaned over the ledge once more, copying the two vampires, to make it look like she was relaxed and hadn't just had her teeth mentally kicked in for her.

She had to figure out what she wanted from these two, then plan how to go and get it. And Damian was going to have to learn to live with disappointment, because she wasn't going to give up control for him in the near future. No way. Not if this was the way they were going to play the game with her.

"There," Damian murmured. "And there."

"I see it," Nicholas replied.

Both of them leaned motionless, watching the skylights.

Riley swallowed her fury and watched. Shadows were fluttering around the rim of the skylights. Large ones. Her heart began to pump hard.

Then large shadows stepped into the light below the panes, blocking it. She couldn't see detail, because the light pouring from the skylight was the only illumination source nearby and night had fallen suddenly as they had waited on the roof.

The skylights lifted back on hinges almost soundlessly and six large shapes eased out. From having studied him so long that afternoon, Riley was able to pick out Lirgon from the shape of his wings and head. Seeing him move was fascinating, but she recalled Damian's warning. These creatures had been the most deadly foe her parents

had faced. Lirgon had killed both her parents in the end. She could not underestimate the creature no matter what he looked like, or how he moved.

The six hunched shapes paused around the edges of the skylights and closed them again. The wings—ugly, hooked, leathery things—unfurled and stretched out to dozens of feet across and flapped experimentally. Hisses and snarls floated up in the air. The whisper of language, but not words that Riley understood. Then the wings began to beat in earnest.

Damian's hand caught her jacket and pulled her down into a crouch on the tarmac coating the rooftop, hugging the wall, just as he and Nicholas were doing.

The gargoyles rose in lazy flight into the air, wings lifting them in heavy, silent sweeps into the night air, almost vertically up over the rooftops as they searched the terrain with their excellent vision and even better sense of smell and hearing. Then, with a small circle in the air, they glided off toward midtown Manhattan and Central Park. Where the hunting would be more congenial, Riley presumed.

Nicholas spread his long legs out on the tarmac. "Saint Peter on a fucking pony," he said, resting his head back against the wall. "All six of them."

Damian sighed. "This really is starting to get a little old."

"If this is the same as last time. We'll confirm it, then deal with it. Once and for all."

"It's unlikely to be anything else, Nick, you know that." Damian sat up. "Why court a disaster just to be sure?"

Riley stood up and faced them both. "What the hell are you talking about. Either of you?"

Nicholas answered without hesitation. "The six gargoyles that just rose are the original six from the Stonebrood clan. The last six that I and twelve demon hunters spent two weeks hunting and exterminating in 1873. In the end it cost us eight lives, but we did it because we knew if we did not, the rogue clan would continue to go on slaughtering humans for the joy of it for decades to come, for gargoyles are virtually immortal if their stone sleep is secure enough. We accounted for every last gargoyle in the clan. That was the last clan, we thought. Gargoyles were wiped from existence and taken from the hunters' lists."

"Until 1977. Until my mother met my father," Riley prompted.

"The *only* reason they returned to life was through supernatural means," Damian told her. He lifted his arms to his knees and let his hands hang between them. "The demon Azazel that Nick had been hunting brought rock likenesses of the gargoyles to life—he channeled their life-force into the carvings using summoning charms. Azazel had more powers than Nick was aware of and we've always wondered if he really disintegrated the day Tally dealt with him, or merely departed and bided his time. Your mother hedged her bets. She made us swear to protect you if Azazel ever raised the clan again. She knew he would come after her offspring if he knew of you, for she was the one who transfigured him, the last time. He'll be looking for vengeance, this time."

Riley crossed her arms. "So despite seeing the six rise again, you still feel it is necessary to confirm that Azazel is behind this? Or is this some fancy form of procrastination?"

Nicholas' eyes widened slightly.

Damian just laughed. "She's Tally all over again, and then her father for good measure." He laughed again, silently this time.

"Glad you find it amusing," Riley told him.

"I'm not sure I could stand it, having Carson in the mix. I always found him irritating at the best of times," Nicholas said, looking up at her.

"Only because he was fucking Tally and you wanted her yourself," Damian said, his tone casual, as if he were discussing the latest football scores.

Riley jumped a little. Nicholas grew still, his gaze still on Riley.

Damian picked up the small plastic bag of food and held it up to Riley. "You should eat."

Riley took it. She realized that she was starving to the point of nausea and suddenly didn't care what was in the bag at all. She was going to eat every last morsel. She backed up to one of the air-conditioning hubs, sat on the lid and tore into the deli sandwich with huge bites.

"We should still visit the sculptor, anyway," Damian said, getting to his feet. "Riley isn't ready to face Lirgon yet. How long until she will be, Nick?"

Nicholas shook himself, clearly trying to dismiss Damian's shocking statement. He pushed himself to his feet. She felt his gaze on her, assessing. "Three days. Maybe two, but only if you were there, too." He seemed to be struggling with inner thoughts, though. His words came slowly. "And it would be a risk, at that. Tally had years of training and Lirgon still..." He stopped and pressed his fingertips to his temples. "I can't do this, Damian. I can't."

Riley put the sandwich down, shocked.

Damian, standing a little behind Nick, didn't look surprised at this sudden confession. "You have to," he said simply.

Nicholas dropped his hands and pointed at Riley. "Look at her! She had no idea who she is, her heritage, the traditions, any of it. We have to give it all to her and she'll never absorb enough to appreciate even a fraction of it. Tally at least grew up in our world."

Damian didn't move. "You're going to hate Riley because she isn't in awe of you, Nick? That's bigoted of you."

Nick whirled to face him. "She has no idea what she's dealing with!" he railed.

"I'm right here," Riley reminded him. The food she had eaten was sitting at the bottom of her stomach now, like a cold rock. She felt sick.

He strode over to her. He was angry. Lines were drawn beside his mouth and his eyes were very blue. "You fucked him," he said, pointing to Damian, "but you have no idea who he *really* is."

"And you do, of course," she said softly, suddenly grasping the shape of his anger.

"No, of course not! Damian is nearly three thousand years old. Even I have trouble trying to hold the concept of that amount of time in my mind, and I've lived for nine hundred years longer than you." He gripped his hands together, like he was trying to hold his temper in. "You literally fell into our world last night, Riley. How can you possibly appreciate..." He hesitated.

"You want to make sure I appreciate the right things and hate the things that should be hated," she finished. "You want me to soak up a lifetime of prejudices and learning in a day, so that I will genuflect at the right moment, will be scared when I should be, and will laugh at the same things as you two."

Nicholas straightened up. His anger faded.

Riley shrugged. "I'm sorry, Nick. That can't happen. Not in the real world. If you wanted me to be another Tally, then you shouldn't have abandoned me as a baby and left me for the foster system to take care of."

He sucked in a sharp breath.

"That's not how it happened, Riley," Damian added.

"No?" She brushed her clean hands of invisible crumbs to hide their trembling. "I wasn't exactly in a position to argue at the time."

"You were born in 1983, on the same day your father was killed. By 1983 record-keeping and social services were much more effective and regimented than they were when Nicholas and I helped raise your mother. Even so, we helped your mother for the next year or so hunt down Lirgon and look after you. But when Lirgon and your mother died, it was bloody, brutal and close to public. The authorities got involved. Your mother's body was found and when they realized who she was, they put you into the foster system as a foundling." Damian shrugged. "We were not next of kin, Riley. In 1984 we could barely produce identity papers saying we were alive." He grimaced. "We've not been so unprepared since."

"You left me in the system. Alone. You didn't try to find me." Riley wished the plaintive note wasn't there in her voice, but there it was.

"We couldn't find you," Nicholas said simply. "We tried."

Damian lifted a hand. "He's lying just a bit. Once you emerged from the foster system, he had your St. Louis location within twelve months."

She looked at Nick. His gaze cut away from her.

"But you still didn't contact me. Why?" she demanded.

Damian answered again. "We could see you were building your own life, Riley. We didn't want to dismantle it just because we selfishly wanted to bring you back into ours."

Her eyes pricked with hot, hard tears. "It didn't occur to you I might like to have the choice?"

Nicholas' blue-eyed gaze speared her. "There's no *choice* when we're in your life. The underworld is destructive and seductive, and it takes over your life until there's nothing left but this—the hunt, the chase, the constant thrill of your next target and the bizarre bohemian shadow world that normal humans have no idea exists right under their elbows and behind their ears."

She shuddered. His eyes seemed to grow larger, until all she could see was the summer blue of his gaze.

Staring directly at a vampire is a challenge. Damian's words echoed in her mind.

"Let me go," she whispered.

Nick blinked and turned away.

Riley drew in a breath. Then another. Her heart was thundering and her clitoris was swollen and pulsing. Her breasts were aching and heavy, the tips pushing at the soft material of the wife-beater. She licked her lips. She was powerfully aroused—Nicholas had been forcing her to it with his stare. She wiped her sweaty palm on her jeans, trying hard not to look at Damian, for she knew he would be able to sense her aroused state.

At least here on the rooftop the open air would sweep some of her telling pheromones away.

When she thought it was safe, she let her gaze lift up from her lap.

Right into Damian's eyes. He clearly had been waiting for her to look up. He had returned to his deceptively indolent lean against the edge of the roof, both arms spread against the ledge.

Now that she was looking at him, he spoke. "Riley has a psychological need to stay in control, no matter what. She probably acquired it from her turn in the foster system."

Riley bit back the moan of betrayal. How dare he speak of it aloud? And to Nicholas?

Nicholas turned to look at Damian, then her, quickly. Her expression must have given him all the confirmation he needed. He glanced at Damian again. Something passed between them, a silent communication.

Riley wrapped her arms around her middle and squeezed. "Shouldn't we go and see the sculptor or something?"

Nicholas considered her again. "It's the dinner hour. It would be uncivilized to interrupt a human during their mealtime." He spoke absently, his gaze on her face. "The foster system did more damage than I thought."

"Just shut the fuck up," she snapped.

Damian straightened up from his lean and strolled toward her. "She has such a need to control, in fact, that she will not let go, not even in my arms."

Riley jumped to her feet, her face burning hot. "God, you had to tell him even *that*?"

Damian lifted his shoulders. A shrug. "You're a liability. He has to know."

Her breath deserted her, just as it had earlier that evening. The impact seemed somehow worse this time. Damian stopped barely a foot away from her, his eyes drilling into her with chilled mercilessness.

She found her voice. It was nearly bodiless. "All that talk this afternoon. The things we did. And the whole time you were just...assessing me for Nick. Sizing me up. Seeing if I were fit for duty." The words tasted like ashes in her mouth.

"It's a tough world out there. We have no use for a gentle maiden and a delicate sensibility that would get slaughtered in the first pass."

"A test? This was a *test*?"

"You can call it that if you want." Again, the disinterested shrug.

Fury ripped through her. She had been moved around the chessboard like the pawn she had been determined not to become. And she had been utterly blind to the fact that she was being manipulated all along. How stupid was she? She had been completely unaware of when an agenda was being worked around her.

"Go back to your training room, little girl," Damian added, jerking his head toward Nick, who stood just to one side, watching this all go down with perfect stillness.

Afterward, she was never able to reconstruct the reasoning that made her act. There was none. There was simply hurt and fury and the need to strike back—and a subconscious knowledge that nothing she did could possibly hurt Damian, who was so much faster and stronger than she was. He would stop her long before she could do anything to him and probably damage her in retribution...and she would deserve it.

She whipped out the carbon knife from inside her coat and gripped it hard in her hand. An ugly cry burst from her lips as she grabbed the front of Damian's coat for purchase, took a perfect lunge forward with her lead foot and thrust with the knife, straight into his stomach.

The knife buried deep—it was incredibly sharp and she had thrust hard. She felt something give, deep inside him. There was a soft sighing sound and blood gushed over her hand as she stared down at it.

She pulled out the knife. "Oh god, oh god! No, no, Damian!" She looked up at him as he staggered sideways, his eyes closing. His hand came to his stomach.

The sideways stagger ripped the knife from her grip and it dropped to the rooftop.

Nicholas was suddenly there behind Damian, holding him, lowering him to the ground.

Damian coughed and blood trickled from the corners of his mouth.

Blood was everywhere, all over his coat, all over his hands as he pressed them against his stomach.

Riley dropped to her knees next to him, Nicholas beside her. "Damian, why didn't you stop me! Dammit to hell, why did you do this? What do I do now?"

He coughed again. "Too late, I think," he said weakly.

Fright tore at her with cold, icy fingers. *"What?"* she breathed.

His eyes closed and his head rolled limply to one side. His hands slipped down to the tarmac.

Riley wasn't aware that she was shaking him, or that she was crying his name, until Nicholas uncurled her fists from Damian's coat one finger at a time, picked her up, sat her in his lap and turned her face into his chest. His arms shut out the ambient light.

She wept in great racking sobs that hurt her chest and her head and Nicholas did not say a word.

It wasn't until she rested silently against him that he wiped her cheeks with his hand and then licked his fingers of her tears. *"Control is an illusion, Riley. No one ever has total control, however much they like to think they do."*

She watched the way he relished the taste of her tears. *"Do you know what I've just done?"* Her voice was hoarse and ragged.

"You just lost what you thought was control," Nicholas said calmly. *"We forced you to it deliberately."* He pushed her bangs out of her eyes and tucked them behind her ear.

She might have felt a cold chill in the region of her heart except that her capacity for surprise and hurt and shock had maxed out. She stared at him.

A hand curled around her neck and she caught her breath. She knew instantly it was Damian's, even without looking around. Nicholas was beginning to smile.

"You tricked me," she told him.

"We...suggested. The power of suggestion was enough."

Finally, she had the courage to turn and look at Damian. He sat right behind her, and although his coat was still stained in blood and ripped where her knife had sliced clear through it, his stomach was healed. He'd wiped his mouth of blood already.

"You son of a bitch," she breathed.

"Guilty," he agreed.

"Do you know what you put me through just then?"

"No. I really was...well, I guess unconscious is as good a term as any. I plan on asking Nick for details later though." He didn't even have the grace to look uncomfortable about such an intimate discussion. His expression sobered. *"But it needed to be done, Riley. You cannot go on believing you can operate alone and in control like you were."*

"But if there is no such thing as control, then what is there? Something must exist if there is no such thing as control, or the world would be in chaos."

Damian nodded. *"Trust."*

She stared at him. *"Trust."* She half laughed. *"You're kidding me."*

He shook his head.

"Three thousand years, we've split the atom, gone to Mars, there's no such thing as control and what's really running the world is *trust*?"

He smiled. "Yes."

Nick's arms tightened around her. "He really is not fooling around," he murmured.

Damian got to his feet. "Trust is something you give. Control is something you take. They're two sides of the same coin. It starts very simply by giving your trust to a few. Perhaps one, if that is all you can bring yourself to give up control to. You lay your life, your love, your trust in the hands of another and expect that they will not let you down. Ever."

"That's it?"

"It's no simple matter, Riley. You've already had a small taste of how complex handing over trust can be. And there's sorts of trust you can give. From all-consuming, complete-life trust," and he glanced at Nicholas, "to just trusting that someone will come through with tonight's meal for you. People hand over trust all the time, from their dentist to their coffee clerk, without realizing the implied contract between them. They think the world runs on control, but it's running on trust. Control isn't going to do you any good if the trust isn't there. You can't force people to behave. In three thousand years, we *have* learned that much."

He held out his hand to her. "I need a shower," he said simply. "And you need better food and sleep. The sculptor will have to wait for tomorrow, Nick."

Riley stifled the need to protest.

"Of course," Nicholas said, instantly letting her go. He picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. It was an old-fashioned move, but it didn't feel silly or quaint. His lips touched her skin and she shivered. He was staring into her eyes again—or at least, it felt like he was. Riley try to draw a breath, but breathing abruptly became almost impossible. She became aware in an instant of her ass and thighs resting against his legs, pressing against his hips, creating heat. Her shoulder was pushed against his chest, her hip against his abs. Although vampires seemed to run cooler than humans, where they touched there was heat and pulsing.

And she could feel his cock next to her hip.

As he turned to look at her properly, she could feel the muscles in his torso flex against her.

She finally was able to draw a breath into her lungs and sucked it in sharply. It shuddered down.

Nicholas' eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he watched her over the back of her hand. Then he lifted her hand up to Damian.

"We've all made choices, it seems," he said softly.

I didn't! she wanted to cry.

Damian lifted her to her feet.

Chapter Six

The studio apartment only had one bed, a prop used to maintain the illusion of Nick's human status. But when Damian emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a silk robe, his hair wet and tangled about his shoulders, he glanced at it. "I would not use it without his leave, nor would I have you in it beside me." He grimaced. "These things do not leave me as easily as other human customs did."

"Nick...won't be back?" Riley packed away the last of her meal.

"Not tonight."

She wiped her hands on a towel. "You made me choose anyway, Damian. Now Nick is kept out of his own home by us, and we hurt him tonight. I saw it. I don't know if it was because of you or me. But it hardly matters."

He crossed his arms. "It does not bother you that I was Nick's lover for many, many years before I became yours?"

Riley shook her head. "Should it?"

"You want him. Badly."

She could feel the need to yank the conversation back to where *she* had wanted it to go, where she needed it to be, but tamped down the desire. This was, she suspected, part of the idea of total trust that Damian had spoken of. Letting go of the need to control everything. Trusting the other.

Instead, she answered Damian's question as truthfully as she could. "Yes, I want Nicholas. Badly. But you know that. You can sense it every time he arouses me. And he did it deliberately tonight."

Damian's smile was warm and made his eyes glow. "Well done," he said, and she knew that he had recognized her struggle to give up trying to control the conversation. "In fact, he did it twice," he added. "Not the actions of someone who truly believes you have made your choice, hmmm?" He moved slowly toward her.

"Are you revealing your strategies to me, Damian? That's not a good idea, is it? I might blow the game for you."

"Perhaps I'm placing my trust in you." He picked up her hand and drew her back into the lounge area, where the big black leather sofas sat at right angles to each other, bracketing a beautiful Bokhara rug, about eight feet square, that featured reds, greens, and other beautiful jewel colors. From a closet, he pulled out some thick quilts, which he laid over the rug, and threw down pillows and cushions from the sofas.

Riley settled herself on the quilts, her heart pattering. She had showered earlier, before she ate, and now wore her robe, just like Damian. She had spent a little time doing her makeup and primping in the bathroom, feeling absurdly like she was

preparing for date, even though she slipped into her bathrobe to step out of the bathroom, and wore no shoes.

He settled cross-legged in front of her and picked up her hand. "Nicholas is conflicted about you," he said simply. "He wants you, but he wants me to be happy. He will not have an easy night tonight."

She tilted her head. "Why does he not simply seduce you himself? It's plain he still cares about you. There's all this history between the two of you. For that matter, why do you not seduce him?"

Damian reached for the tie on her robe and tugged. "Then I could not have you."

Her heart jumped. "Greedy."

"In this case, yes." The bow unraveled and he pulled the tie aside. "And I think that is what is stopping Nicholas, too. For the first time in centuries, he honestly cannot choose."

His fingers stroked her flesh where the robe rested against her upper breast, the edges resting not quite closed.

"The...breach between you two, over my mother. You stayed apart for nearly thirty years. That's a lifetime for some people, Damian."

"There have been times even when we were still together when we were a continent apart for much longer than that. Time is different for us, Riley." His hands separated the edges of her robe, but she caught at his wrists and looked him in the eyes.

"Have you ever been apart this long because of an argument?" she asked.

His chest lifted and rose. "No."

She cupped his cheek. "It damaged your relationship," she said softly. "Whether you want to admit that or not. You can't just walk back in without repairing that damage."

"I came back. I'm trusting Nicholas to protect you," Damian said, his voice harsh. "Is that not extending the olive branch?"

"Maybe," she said. "Now Nicholas must take the branch back."

His fingers curled into fists around the front of her robe, and she could feel the tendons and muscles in his wrists under her own hands stretch and flex. "You're making me feel very...young. How do you propose that Nick take back the branch, Riley?"

She shook her head. "I don't have all the answers," she admitted. "It's a pity you can't bamboozle him the way you did me, tonight. If you could make Nick feel the way I did, looking down at your body with my knife in your gut, he'd know exactly how he felt about you." Tears pricked in her eyes as she remembered. "I don't ever want to go through that again, Damian. Not for real."

He pulled her to him and kissed her. "You realize that most of what you were feeling was guilt and remorse, my lover?"

His lips stole her breath and her response. She wound her arms around his neck, her fingers tangling in his damp hair. Her body pressed up against his and she realized that he had separated the front of her robe after all, for she felt her flesh press against silk.

His hands, the long fingers, circled under her robe, across the skin over the back of her hip, making her hip jut forward and her back arch. Smoothly, his palm slid down to cup her bottom, and he found the lace of her thong.

Gently, he pushed her back so that he could see what the robe had hidden. He pulled the garment from her shoulders and tossed it aside. "Ah...women, I do love their ways." He let his fingers slide along the edge of her demi-bra, teasing the lace and her flesh at the same time. "That purple looks good on you. It makes your eyes look very green." His arm curled around her waist, drawing her back against his lean length. "I could inhale you in one breath." He nuzzled her throat. His tongue swiped her flesh, making her nerves sizzle.

He made her feel so small and delicate with his arm around her that way. She wasn't petite, but she may as well have been, pulled up against him like that. Damian was a big man. Tall, with shoulders and chest in proportion to his height. She was quite powerless with her breasts crushed against his chest, and the maelstrom of sensations his mouth was setting off made sure she wasn't about to try anything else. She melted against him. Her pussy was on fire, pressed against him as it was, and the pressure on her clit was making it ache with need.

His lips lifted to her ear. "Do you trust me, Riley? Will you try, tonight?"

She swallowed. "I'll try," she agreed, the best she could truthfully give him.

He turned her in his arm so that her back was pressed against him, and his fingers spread out over her abdomen, like they were tasting her flesh. She drew in a shaky breath. He had moved her like she was a doll and weighed nothing. "You could snap my neck any time you wanted, couldn't you?" she breathed.

"I would prefer you forget that," Damian murmured. "I don't want you afraid of me."

His fingers stroked, sending ripples across her abs as her nerves responded. Riley let her eyes close. "I don't fear you, Damian. I wouldn't be here if I did."

His hand stroked her cheekbone. "Then there's trust there, after all."

She opened her eyes again and turned her head to look at him. He was smiling.

Riley shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Nick was wrong tonight. One hundred and eighty degrees wrong about you." He put her back on the quilts. Back on her knees, and caught her face in his hands and kissed her. It was no simple smack on the lips. It was a deeply emotional, heartfelt wordless expression that still left her confused. He rested his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs stroking her jaw.

"Apart from hunters and humans who have lived and walked in the underworld for years, there are two sorts of humans, Riley. One type, when they learn of vampires, when they meet us, blank out the knowledge and treat us as just another type of human. So we stay human as much as we can around them and don't call attention to our vampiric qualities, because to do so tends to make that type of person jittery, or just plain afraid of us. The other type of person, the very rare person, can truly accept us for what we are. That sort of human actually sees us as different when they look at us. But not as freaks, or something to fear and they never forget that we are not really human, either."

His thumb touched her lips. "That's you, Riley. And Nicholas assumed you were the normal sort, the type that could not grasp my age, who would hate that Nick and I had lived so long and had known your mother as a child. But you understand. You accept it all, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Riley frowned. "I'm not even sure why you're surprised about it. Nick said 'deal with it', so I did. I didn't realize that..." she wrinkled her nose over the bad grammar, "not dealing with it was so common."

Damian laughed, a carefree sound, and spoke a sentence that was not English.

"What was that?"

"My birth language," he said. "The Greek that was spoken in Sparta. Historians would have me locked up inside a language laboratory for years if they heard it." He grinned. "I've forgotten more than I've retained, now, it has been that long—and there are none now who speak it, other than me." He touched his forehead to hers. "I said that you are the sort of treasure men, once they have seen you for what you are, go mad and die for need of you."

"Mortal men," she corrected. "But that's not you," she added as his lips came against hers.

His hand held the back of her head. "Thank the fates for that, or I would not be here now, doing this to you," he said against her mouth and thrust his tongue inside.

Riley moaned at the rush of hunger and need that pushed through her with the invasion of his tongue. Damian seemed suddenly eager and less controlled than before, as if the revelation that she really did understand his true nature was arousing to him. And perhaps it was. It would be exciting to find someone who accepted you for what you were. God knew she would be thrilled to discover someone wanted to fuck her because of what went on in her mind, rather than how she looked.

Riley gasped and pulled her mouth away from Damian, staring at him. She could feel her whole body trembling as she processed her own thoughts properly, once more.

Damian *did* want her for her mind. He wanted her *because* she accepted him for what he was, because she wanted him, because she was a hunter—or would be once Nick trained her, and even because Nick wanted her, too. He wanted her for a lot of complicated reasons, including simply because she was a part of his world. But

nowhere in there did he want her because she was a “beauty”, a sex object that he wanted to collect.

Damian stroked her jaw with his thumb. “Everything all right?”

“Everything’s just fine. Better than fine. Almost perfect,” she assured him. “Fuck me, Damian. Like there’s no tomorrow.”

“There’s always a tomorrow, my lover, and you will grow to appreciate that fact by and by.” He picked her up and put her on the quilts, farther away from him. “Don’t move.”

Her heart skittered. “Where are you going?” she asked as he stood up.

“Nowhere. Shhh.” He looked down at her, his black eyes smoldering with the pent-up arousal she had sensed a moment before. She had guessed right. Her total acceptance of his nature *had* unleashed a higher level of pleasure for him.

Damian untied the silk belt on his robe, shrugged the garment from his shoulders and tossed it onto the sofa next to hers. He was gloriously naked beneath the robe and his shoulders and chest gleamed in the low lights. For the first time, she saw all of his body at once. There were scars. Everywhere. Small ones, mostly, but they began on his upper thighs and stretched up to just below his heart. She counted a dozen before she gave up.

He had wanted her to see them and accept them. They were part of him, part of his heritage.

“Did you get those before you became vampire?” she asked.

“I was a warrior before I became a vampire. Now, if I am wounded, I heal cleanly.” He touched the place where her knife had slid into his stomach that evening. “There is no sign of the damage caused by your knife anymore.”

She moved forward and touched a puckered scar on his thigh. “I want the story of each and every one of them, eventually. Will you tell me?” Her fingers were mere inches from his cock, which was throbbing with rushing blood and arousal. She looked up at Damian’s face. His eyes had narrowed with a deceptively sleepy look as he watched what her fingers were doing.

“Yes,” he said after a perceptible pause and she heard him swallow.

Inspired by that purely human sound, she let her fingers drift over to his testicles and stroke and squeeze them. Damian sighed.

Encouraged, Riley drew one swollen orb into her mouth and stroked it with her tongue, while she toyed with the other with her hand.

Damian’s hips thrust in response and she felt his hand rest lightly against her head.

“*Dion*, Riley, my lover, no one should do that to a man and leave him waiting, I beg you!”

Riley mentally rolled up her sleeves. Immortal he may be, and three thousand years old, but at his core Damian *was* still a man and she knew how to touch that core. He had just given her the key.

She stood up. "I'm just going to be a minute, okay? Don't go anywhere." And she hurried over to the bathroom.

"I wish I had a video camera right now. You are the sexiest woman I've ever seen walking away from me in a long, long time, Riley Connors," Damian called after her.

"Just how many women have walked away from you wearing a purple lace thong and not much else, lately?" Riley called as she shut the bathroom door. She opened the drawer she had explored earlier that evening, when she had made her minor discovery, withdrew the objects inside, made a few preparations and wrapped them in a towel.

When she returned to the quilts, Damian was standing exactly where she had left him. He eyed the towel in her hands. "You're making mischief."

"I don't think there's enough people in your life making mischief. You're out of practice, big guy." She put the bundle down on the edge of the quilts, by the foot of the sofa. "Lie down for me, up here, with your head by the sofa. Here, I'll even put a pillow down for you."

She reached for his robe lying on the sofa as he slowly moved to do as she asked. His eyes were narrowed again, but there was little arousal there. Just curiosity and suspicion. That was fine. She pulled the sash from his robe and picked up his big wrist as he settled himself on the quilts and pulled his arm up above his head, stretching it out. She wrapped the sash around his wrist and anchored it on the leg of the sofa.

"So that's the wicked game you have in mind," Damian murmured. He tugged at the sash around his wrist. "You realize I could snap this very easily, of course?"

"But you won't," she said, picking up his other wrist and pulling the sash from her own robe out of its loops. She wound it quickly around his wrist and tied it to the other sofa leg, spreading his arms out. She leaned over and kissed him. "Just behave yourself for a change."

He laughed, but there was a glint of deep arousal in his eyes. He was already loving this in a way that he hadn't enjoyed himself in a long time, she could tell.

She trailed her lips over his chin and down his throat, taking her time to nibble and torture the stretched muscles over his shoulders and pecs, as she straddled his hips and rubbed herself over him. She made sure her breasts brushed against him. As she kissed and slid her tongue over his flesh, she slipped the clasp of the bra undone. When she sat up, she let the bra fall down her arms.

Damian watched every move, his gaze devouring her.

Riley pushed her soaking, hot mons into his abs, grinding herself into him, genuinely aroused and hungry to have him. She cupped her breasts for him, keeping her eyes locked on his, and tweaked the nipples with her forefingers and thumbs.

Damian made sounds that were purely human, purely male. Hungry sounds. Beneath her ass she could feel his cock like a rod of iron, beating with a pulse that was as human as any other man's.

Riley slid her hand down her stomach, heading for her pussy. As her fingertips slipped below the lace of her panties and closed around her own swollen, heated vulva, she couldn't stop the moan that escaped her lips. She was desperately excited by this teasing display, by torturing a man so much more powerful than her. She was shaking with it.

Damian groaned, mirroring her. "More," he demanded thickly, his accent strong.

Riley stood quickly to strip herself of the soaked panties and to spread Damian's thighs and kneel between them. He drew in a breath as she leaned over him, her breasts brushing his body, and his cock lurched. "You will receive yours for this," he muttered darkly.

"We've barely begun, lover," she told him softly.

His eyes snapped open wide and he looked at her sharply.

"Does the threat or the name scare you?" Riley asked.

"It isn't fear you see," he said. "Just surprise at your adaptability."

"You're a liar of the first order, Damian."

"Live only a thousand years and you'll be one, too," he told her, closing his eyes.

The closed eyes suited her. Riley reached for the towel-wrapped bundle and placed it by her knees, then unrolled it. Working quickly, she prepared the first item.

Then she returned to where she had left off before. She drew one of Damian's testicles into her mouth, and stroked it with her tongue. She did it without warning and Damian's eyes snapped open again and his head lifted from the pillow in a jerk. The tendons in his neck strained as he reacted.

"All things holy!" he breathed.

She cupped and rolled the other ball gently in her hand and Damian sighed.

Riley slid her tongue upward, along the shaft of his quivering, steel-hard cock, and this time Damian drew utterly still. Even his breath stopped, until her tongue swirled over the tip of the head.

He groaned.

Riley curled her fingers around the shaft. They covered less than half of it, and didn't reach around the width. She lifted it so that she could slide the head into her mouth, stretching her lips to take it all in. She caressed the head with her tongue, feeling the satiny ridge flare. With a moan, she sucked him in as deep as she could take him, feeling a wave of excitement build in the pit of her stomach. She wriggled her hips as she fed on him hungrily.

Damian bucked beneath her. The breathless and desperate sounds he was making were very human and music to her ears.

When she sat up, he clenched his fists, straining at the ties. "No!" he cried. "Riley, for pity's sake!"

She smiled. "I told you, I've only just started."

Damian clawed back his dignity, his control. "I will have you screaming my name for this, my lover," he said silkily, but it took two breaths for him to speak the words.

"So you say," Riley replied coolly. She picked up the dildo from the towel in front of her knees and stroked the flesh of his scrotum with it. She saw his breath catch again. "Know what this is?"

He licked his lips. "I can guess."

She held it up so that he could see it. "I found it in the bathroom, shiny new and still in the store wrapper. I'm sure Nicholas won't mind and I'll replace it tomorrow. Guess what I'm going to do with this, hmm?"

Damian's breath was coming faster. "How do you even...*Jesus*, Riley, you're a slip of a girl!"

"I know pleasure, Damian. I've had men chasing me for a decade and I've learned—sometimes the hard way." She ran the tip of the dildo over the length of his cock, which jerked hard, then back against his scrotum. His hips jerked again. "I know you know a version of this game. You and Nicholas were lovers for years, so you can take it. You *like* it."

He was breathing very hard indeed. "But do you, hmmm?" His tone was dark, thick with arousal, shadowed by all sorts of implications and overtones. And there was hope there. She heard that above all.

Riley lifted her gaze to meet his eyes. "I accept all of you, Damian. Not just bits of you."

"You like it." It was a statement this time.

She locked gazes with him and let herself smile, as in her mind she thought of Nicholas and Damian together. "Yes, I like it," she said, as her clitoris throbbed in response and her pussy clenched hard.

"Sweet Dion...such a wicked smile," Damian breathed.

Riley lubricated the dildo, letting Damian watch her do it. She knew it would add to his tension, to the suspense. Then she poured more of the lubricant she had found in the same bathroom drawer as the dildo into her hand and looked Damian in the eye once more. "I may look sweet, Damian, but looks are deceiving. Once you peel off the wrapper, well..." She teased his thighs and the flesh of his ass, separating the cheeks, sliding her fingers up against his anus and the highly sensitive ring of muscle surrounding it, spreading the lubricant.

Damian groaned, his eyes drifting half-closed in sensual delight.

Gradually, she worked the lubricant deeper, as Damian strained and panted on the quilts. With each sound and movement he made, her own pleasure rose. She clenched her thighs together, feeling the excess cream squeeze from her pussy and run between them. Her nipples were aching with the need for attention.

Instead, she picked up the dildo again and nudged it up against the tight ring of muscle around his anus. Damian drew in a shuddering, barely controlled breath and his

neglected cock jerked where it lay against his stomach. He closed his eyes. His knuckles were white.

Carefully, she eased the dildo inside him, letting the muscles stretch and ease before pushing nearly the full length of the dildo in.

Damian's body trembled. "Kiss me," he whispered.

Riley pressed her lips to his and his tongue thrust into her mouth. "I will deliver such pleasure to you, you will think you have died from it," he told her.

"Shhhh...I'm not done yet," she told him.

He groaned and closed his eyes.

Riley settled herself back between his thighs. "I happen to know that a climax for a man, when he has pressure on the prostate, is the most powerful experience in the world. I'm betting it isn't any different for you, despite being undead for nearly three thousand years." She caressed the base of the dildo, which made Damian catch his breath. "Pressure," she said with a smile. "And now, the climax."

She leaned over him, and ran her tongue from the base of his cock to the tip, and was rewarded by his gasp. Her whole body was throbbing with excitement. She was incredibly aroused by having such a powerful man as Damian under her control, even though that control was nominal at best. She curled her hand around his cock once more and her mouth over the tip, opening her lips to accommodate the girth.

Damian's hips shifted in response to her mouth on his cock, but then he felt the dildo in him and stilled himself with a breathless groan. The muscles of his abdomen rippled and quivered as she worked on his cock and he fought not to shift or thrust too hard. If he had been human he would have been sweating.

"Riley..." he said, his voice hoarse. "I will not be able to withstand much of this...torture."

She smiled to herself and fluttered the tip of her tongue on the underside of the head of his cock, where the seam ran, and heard his helpless choking breath wheeze out. It shortened to a pant and his hips began to shift in little thrusts.

She felt his cock bloom and swell and the balls beneath pulse.

Abruptly, Damian stilled in a tight, hard arch, his back bowed, as his cock erupted in her mouth, shooting streams of cum. He cried out, words she did not know. She heard the ties on his wrists tear.

His hands slid into her hair as she fed on the last of his cum. He lifted her head up from his cock.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She sat up and licked her lips.

Damian rid himself of the dildo then sat up and caught her face in his hand, forcing her to look him in the eye. His black eyes gazed deeply into hers.

For a moment, Riley wasn't certain what it was he wanted. Then she understood with a rush. *Looking a vampire in the eye is a challenge...subsumed sexually.* He was

arousing himself after one climax by staring her in the eye, so he would be instantly ready for the next.

Was a vampire aroused this way *more* aroused? More heated? She didn't know enough about vampires to know.

"Damian..."

"Shhh," he murmured, his hand coming around the back of her head. His gaze was still locked onto hers.

"I can wait."

"I can't." His teeth had descended. "You have provoked me too much, Riley Carson. I must take you now before the blood boils in me."

She pressed her hands against his chest, suddenly just a little bit frightened. This was the beast she had released by tormenting such a powerful creature. She had made the mistake of treating him like a man when he wasn't.

His hands came up faster than she could follow and grabbed her wrists. They were pulled behind her. "Don't fight me, Riley." His eyes seemed very dark and were all she could see in her range of vision.

She wriggled against him. She couldn't help it. The charge she was getting from being held against him like that, with her own aroused and naked body rubbing his, while Damian threatened erotic treats was too much. Riley moaned.

Damian's lips seared a path down her throat and hovered over her carotid pulse. "You're not afraid. You're...aroused."

She broke free of his loosened grip on her hands, shoved at him and ran.

With a growl, he came after her. She knew he would be able to catch her within three or four paces, he was that fast. He was a vampire and moving at vampire speed.

But she made it to the table before his arm snaked around her waist and she realized that he was trying to avoid hurting her, and that was the reason why he was so slow.

She was picked up and held against him and even though she struggled, she was so highly aroused, she knew she would climax with only a few quick slight touches to the right parts of her anatomy. Her breathing was fast and shallow.

Damian held her easily despite her struggles, turned her and laid her on the table. His hand held down one shoulder and his cock impaled her, making her cry out with the fierce satisfaction of having him inside her.

He lifted her legs to his shoulders, as he rammed his cock back into her again. "Fight me if you wish," he said. "I will take you any way."

"All ways," she whispered, feeling her climax building deep inside her.

"If you wish it." His cock was thick inside her, filling her and he laid his hand on her pelvis in a curiously possessive way. "Come for me, Riley," he coaxed. His thumb separated the lips of her vulva and pressed against her sensitive and ready clitoris. She gasped at the contact and her climax gathered and leapt forward. Her hips lifted.

"Yes, come for me," Damian urged. "Let go. Trust me and let go. Let yourself fall."

His thumb stroked in hard, knowing brushes against her clit and Riley could feel the orgasm beating at her, stealing her senses, building up like a gigantic wave.

Fright tore through her. She opened her eyes and looked at Damian. He was watching her.

"I've got you," he breathed. "Let go."

Her breath hitched in her chest as the orgasm beat at her.

"Damian." Nicholas' voice, harsh and low.

Damian's head snapped to the right and suddenly, Riley felt herself pushed backward and Damian was abruptly not there.

She was lying a lot farther along the table than she was two seconds ago. Her legs were supported. And her climax was ebbing and dying.

Sounds to her right. Murmurs.

Riley rolled slowly onto her side, feeling a chill settle onto her. She curled her leg over and her arm over her breasts, covering herself up, although Nick must already have seen enough, anyway.

Damian and Nicholas were standing in the little-used kitchen area, talking. Damian seemed completely unaware that he was naked, or that Nicholas had interrupted them in a most intimate moment.

Nicholas glanced at Riley where she lay on the table before turning his attention back to Damian. Damian was tugging at Nicholas' coat, pulling it from him despite Nick's protests and sluggish attempts to stop him. The coat dropped away from his shoulder and Riley sat up, alarmed.

His shirt was ripped from shoulder to elbow and two red gashes gored his arm. They dripped blood as she watched, the blood splattering the clean white kitchen tiles.

Nick looked at her. "I would have stayed away if I could," he said apologetically.

Chapter Seven

Riley got dressed again, for the tie to her bathrobe was torn in half and she didn't want to wander around the apartment in a robe that flapped open whenever she forgot to hold it closed.

While she was dressing, Damian thrust on jeans and moved around the apartment laying on all the window ledges and lintels of the doors black, rounded stones he took from a wood-and-studded-iron box that Nicholas told him to pull down from the top of the extended set of library shelves running along the east side of the apartment.

Riley found Nicholas in the kitchen using a towel to mop up the blood still oozing from the wounds on his arm. He'd taken off his shirt, or Damian had done it for him, for the bloody and tattered remains were sitting in the sink behind him. Now he leaned back against the black granite counter with the towel bunched in his fist, his torso twisted as he tried to look over his own shoulder. He did it awkwardly, for it was his right arm that was wounded.

"After nine hundred years, you're not ambidextrous yet?" she teased. She took the towel from him. "This isn't sterile," she pointed out.

"There isn't a bug on this planet that could infect me. I just don't want to stain the tiles any more than I have. They're Carrara marble. I brought them over from Italy myself." He sounded pissed, like whatever had done this to him had put him out and threatened the peace of his household, rather than his well-being.

"Then turn around and bleed into the sink," she said.

He looked affronted. "That's *granite*," he said.

Riley dabbed at the blood still pooling in the crook of Nick's arm. "If you weren't so goddamn...well, *male*, Nick, I'd accuse you of being gay." She said it to keep the mood in the kitchen light and superficial. Anything to keep her attention away from his bare chest, and the thick pectoral muscle right by her cheek. The rounded shoulder cap level with her eyes each time she lifted her gaze from the wounds.

"Ironic, under the circumstances," he said softly.

"Do you even think in those terms?" she asked. And she made the mistake of looking him in the eye, and was caught.

"Not the way the modern world does." His voice was low. Rich and strong.

God, she could drown in his eyes. Blue. So blue. She couldn't look away.

His arm where she was still technically swiping at the blood moved. The fingers of his right hand came to rest on her hip at the top of her jeans. The tee shirt she was wearing was too small from too many washings and tended to ride up and show off a band of flesh. His fingers caressed the flesh now, so softly she might have imagined it.

But she didn't imagine the effect. She trembled, unable to tear her gaze away from Nick's, her breath shortening down to uneven exhalations and choppy inhalations. Even his thumb left a searing little arc of burning flesh across her hipbone.

Her breasts grew heavy and she wished mightily she wore a bra. He must surely see her nipples extend and harden. The tee shirt was tight across her breasts. He would see everything, except that he was staring into her eyes.

But Nick was a vampire and could sense everything about her. Could pick up the slightest change in her pheromones.

And so could Damian. Her heart skittered. He must surely know by now what was happening in the kitchen.

"God help me, I can feel you," Nick murmured. "*See you on that table.*" His fingers clenched around her hip.

"Nick," she begged. "Look away. Let me go."

"You want me." His voice was rough. Hoarse with his own needs, and not all of them were sexual.

"Oh, Nick..." The unanswerable question. Why did he have to ask it now? So soon? So late? Too late?

When Damian's fingers curled around the back of her neck, Riley almost moaned in agony. How much had he heard? Witnessed.

"Answer him," Damian said softly. "Answer truthfully." His fingers caressed gently. Soothingly. While Nick's hand sent another message altogether.

Nick still hadn't looked away from her eyes. She was lost in his gaze. "I want you," she said honestly. "I want you as badly as I want Damian."

A shudder went through Nick. His fangs slowly emerged, as he lifted his gaze to Damian's face. "You're playing with real chess pieces again."

"The game is worth it."

"That is what you said last time."

"I was right then, too."

"People died, then."

Riley looked up at Damian, startled. "What is he talking about?"

Damian smiled. "London, 1593. A long story, full of intrigue and for another time." He looked at Nicholas. "I've placed the wards on every door and window. We're covered for now. Riley should be brought up to date."

"Up to date on what?" Riley asked.

Nicholas looked down at the gashes on his arm. "We're no longer the hunters. We're now the hunted. Azazel did this."

"The demon that raises the gargoyles?"

"What guise is he using now?" Damian asked, his hands on Riley's shoulders. His chest was against her back, strong and reassuring.

Nick's hand settled back on her hip with a casual movement and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world, although Riley's pulse skyrocketed. Damian's hands tightened just a bit, letting her know he'd felt her reaction.

"A small woman, barely bigger than Riley. Blonde. Green eyes. The green eyes were what caught me." Nick grimaced. "I don't know if Azazel has seen Riley or if it was just a coincidence, but he played me. It was enough for him to get close enough. His claws did the rest."

Damian reached over and squeezed Nick's shoulder. Comfort. Reassurance. Silent agreement that Nick had been duped and yeah, there was nothing that could be said that would make it any better. "He could have moved to another guise by now, too. Azazel has powers beyond anything we've ever seen in a demon. And he has an agenda we just don't understand. He operates independently. He's something you've never come across before."

Nick nodded. "And he wants Riley."

Riley jumped. "Why me?"

"You're your mother's daughter," Nick explained. "She interred Azazel in his last regeneration and it's taken him thirty years, almost, to pull himself together and come after you. He's angry, now. He wants vengeance. He dug up the gargoyles just to get even. It's payback time."

"You know this for sure?"

"I know Azazel of old, so I'm guessing, but I'd lay money on my guess, Riley. Everything fits. He's powerful but vain, selfish and arrogant. Childish and petulant. A typical demon, just one with superpowers."

"My mother had years of training. I've had four hours of it," Riley said. Fear bloomed in her chest, beat at her temples. She felt sick with it. She pushed her fingertips into her temples. "I'm starting to feel like you do, Nick. This is impossible. It's never going to work. I should just go hand myself over to Azazel now and put everyone out of their misery." Tears pricked at her eyes.

Her head was jerked up by a hand under her chin. Nick's eyes glared into hers, snapping fire.

Before she could even catch her breath his mouth came down on hers, hard and demanding.

Her thoughts scattered completely and utterly by the sheer unexpectedness of the kiss. Damian was still standing behind her. She could feel the warmth of him against her—the only coherent and panicky thought she could hold on to as Nick's tongue thrust into her mouth.

It was a kiss to die for.

She didn't want to respond. She fought not to. It felt like betrayal of the worst sort for even her heart rate to elevate or her breath to catch and at first she held it, trying not to show any sign of reaction to the surprising softness of Nick's lips against hers.

But she couldn't hold out for long. As the kiss extended she was drawn into it and lost inside it. She gave up and let herself thrust her fingers into Nick's hair and wrap herself around him as she had longed to do—as she had imagined doing since the idea of seducing Nick had first occurred to her. Her body seemed to catch on fire as she let go of all restraint and just let herself *feel* the kiss.

When he finally broke the kiss and pulled back, she was panting.

Nick glanced at Damian. "There are two classic ways to deal with a hysteric. You would rather I have slapped her instead?"

But he was breathing just as heavily as she was and his eyes were heavily dilated, the blue almost completely subsumed by the irises.

Damian didn't respond. She felt his hands on her shoulders once more.

Nick turned and walked out of the kitchen, heading for the lounge area. "Training, Riley!" he called over his shoulder. "Fifteen minutes! Let's add to that four hours right now."

"It's one in the morning," Riley pointed out. "He's aware that I need sleep at least somewhere in a twenty-four-hour cycle, right?" She kept her gaze averted from Damian, aware that her cheeks were burning with mortification.

Damian turned her to face him and lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. His expression was calm. "You need to trust me," he said. "In everything."

It was the last thing she had expected him to say. She blinked.

"You're not angry?"

"Not even close." His thumb stroked her jaw. "You have to learn to let go, Riley. Let go of control and of staying on top. You need to let yourself sink into things."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid that if I do that, if I lose control, I'll..."

"You'll what? What's the worst thing that could happen, if I'm here with you?" he asked reasonably. "No one could possibly harm you if I'm here, or Nick." He touched her lips with his. A cousinly, or a brotherly kiss. "You're not alone in the world anymore, Riley."

The truth of that statement slammed into her like an express train hitting a concrete wall.

She wasn't an orphan anymore. She had family. And she'd never, ever be alone again.

Ever.

* * * * *

Nicholas worked her harder than she'd ever thought it was possible for the human body to be driven. For three hours he trained her, using the bamboo poles, until her circadian rhythm overrode even Nick's harsh insistence.

She held herself up by the pole as Nick explained the principle of close-in fighting and tried to focus her eyes. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked.

"You need to focus on what I'm saying," he reminded her. "We don't have time for you to zone out."

"I did," she assured him. "I just didn't hear it."

"That's because she fell asleep for a few seconds," Damian said from his sprawl on the couch. "I was watching her. Her eyes shut."

Nick tilted his head to one side, studying her. He seemed somehow pleased. The corners of his mouth looked like they were almost lifting into a smile. He threw his pole to Damian, who caught it with catlike reflexes. Nick strode back to where his broadsword lay on the sideboard.

"Pick up your sword!" he called out over his shoulder.

"She's asleep on her feet!" Damian protested, sitting up.

Nicholas grabbed the hilt of his sword and strode back to where Riley stood grasping the pole. His face was grim. "If you don't want me to cut that pole to matchsticks and then start in on your hands, pick up your fucking sword *now*."

She was tired and her reactions were slowed as a result. Nicholas was also using vampire speed, she was sure of it. He reached her before she could react. The blade of the sword was a blur.

Riley had always known Nicholas was good. Intellectually, she understood he had been trained in the way of the sword from the age of ten, when one's sword and knife was the only form of defense a man knew and defending one's life was a common thing—as common as getting your email account hacked today.

But she didn't really *know* it. Not in her gut. Not the way she accepted in her bones Nick and Damian's vampire state.

She didn't have time to analyze that curious omission now, for he sliced off the top of her pole in two easy passes of his sword before she could get her sluggish body to move backward. Fright tore through her. The light in Nick's eyes and the unrelenting, hard look in his face...this was the implacable expression that his enemies had faced through the centuries, as he calculated how to defeat them and they realized the enormous skill and power of the foe they faced.

Riley dropped the pole, lunged for the katana sitting in the umbrella stand at the end of the sofa, curled her hands around the long handle, withdrew it and brought it around and up to block Nick's descending blade in two quick movements. There was a ringing sound as metal collided with metal.

Her breathing was fast and hard as she stared at Nick. His blade had been descending even though she had dropped the pole. Would he have buried the sword in her back or shoulder if she had not got the katana up to block him in time?

He smiled. "You're not sleepy anymore, are you?"

She licked her lips. "No."

"Don't ever let yourself believe your limits are what your mind determines them to be. The real limits of your body are far beyond what your mind thinks they are." He lowered the sword, stepped forward and pushed her blade out of the way. "You should get some sleep, Riley. You're very tired." He brushed her hair from her temple.

Abruptly, the adrenaline screaming through her body morphed into hot, aching arousal, between one heart beat and the next. She looked up into Nick's eyes, marveling at the summer-sky blue of them and realized she was staring at him again. She stayed very still.

"Use my bed," he murmured. "We'll keep your nightmares at bay for you."

Damian's hands slid around her waist. He was behind her. "I'll hold you," he whispered in her ear.

She was starting to shake. Adrenaline overload, she realized. That and tiredness. Damian's hands shifted and he picked her up. "Come, my lover," he murmured. The katana was plucked from her hand. "Relax," Damian murmured. "You're safe."

Things got confused after that as sleep and adrenaline aftermath claimed her.

Hands peeling her sweaty workout clothing from her. A damp cloth over her skin.

"She needs protein." Nick's voice.

Thick chocolate-flavored liquid in her mouth. "Swallow." Damian's voice. Swallowing.

Cool slippery sheets. Being turned onto her side. Warmth over her. A body behind her. Arms around her. A pillow under her head.

She was so exhausted sleep rushed at her without protest for one of the few times in her life, even though there was someone else in the bed with her. *It's not the same, though. This is Damian with me*, was the thought that followed her down into sleep.

She woke with instant orientation, aware that she had slept so deeply she had not moved from the position Damian had laid her in. She was still on her side. But Damian was no longer behind her.

Something had woken her. She didn't know what it was yet, but her senses had been alerted even in sleep. If she hadn't moved then not much time could have passed yet. She didn't feel any alarm, but she didn't sit up or show any outward sign that she was awake. Instead, she listened.

Low voices from the sofa. Damian and Nicholas were talking.

Riley didn't feel that Damian had deserted her in any way. Within the warded apartment, she was perfectly safe with the two vampires barely fifteen feet away. And they had some serious catching-up to do. This would be their first chance to do it, if they hadn't spoken on the way to New York. Somehow, Riley knew they hadn't—not with her asleep on Damian's chest and all that lay between them so freshly opened and hurting still.

Now, with Damian and her together, the old patterns had shifted and reformed and the two men could talk.

Riley shamelessly eavesdropped.

"You've seriously underestimated her, you realize?" Damian said, as if he were finishing a conversation.

Nick gave a low laugh. "And the dire prognostications roll on. *God*, how I've missed you." There was a note in his voice. One of longing that made Riley's heart clench.

"Nick..." Damian's voice also carried a tone of regret, of...*wanting*. Because she had heard that arousal in his voice when he was with her, she had no trouble recognizing it now in the single word he spoke.

Silence.

Riley could hear her own heart in her temples and her chest and her mind. She longed to move, to twist the tiny few degrees it would take to lift her chin and look at them, to see what they were doing. Were they kissing? Running their hands over each other's bodies? Thrusting a hand between each other's thighs? All of the above? Something else? Somehow cementing their old relationship and excluding her?

Riley struggled to remain utterly still, keep her breath even and maintain every outward appearance of sleep, while she fought a raging and swiftly building sense of fear.

After a few seconds of silence that felt like a year or so, Nicholas spoke again. His voice was thick with arousal. "You should be careful with this game you're playing. She's human. She doesn't have the stamina to deal with it the way I can. I like your games, Damian. Riley may not. Have you thought of that?"

"This one is different." Damian's voice was flat.

"The game or the girl?"

"You'll see," Damian responded.

Nicholas sighed, as if he was one of the most put-upon men in the universe. "Very well, then. Just be careful with her. I like this one."

Damian laughed. "That stiff-upper-lipped English thing of yours stopped fooling me about three centuries ago, Nick. You *like* her? It's far more than 'like' and we both know it. Have you forgotten how to speak plainly with me?"

Riley found she was holding her breath, waiting for Nick's answer. She made herself breathe in the slow, deep rhythm of a sleeper again, as Nick's silence stretched on. Finally, he spoke again.

"You haven't marked her yet."

Riley heard Damian's sigh. Disappointment? Frustration? She felt her own strong desire to grab Nick by the scruff and shake him.

"No, I haven't marked her," Damian replied evenly.

"Why not?" Nick pressed and Riley sensed he'd spotted Damian's own vulnerability and was jumping on it, because it took the focus of the conversation—and the pressure—away from him.

Damian didn't respond.

"Why haven't you?" Nick pushed again. "She's clearly chosen you." Riley heard a touch of bitterness in his voice. "If you mark her, it protects us all. It...settles the matter."

"You have to trust me, Nick," Damian said slowly. "You used to, once."

"Of course I do," Nick said, sounding surprised. "With my life."

"Then I ask you to continue to do so, just for a while."

The silence this time was much shorter. "Very well then," Nick said simply. He made a sound like someone stretching or standing. "It's good to have you back," he added.

Riley held in her amazement. Just like that, Nick had dropped the subject and asked no more questions, just as Damian had requested. He was going to trust that Damian would protect Nick's interests and emotions and wouldn't let him get hurt. Riley didn't know if she could do that. It took the sort of faith that Nick had built up over centuries.

But Nick was still speaking. "All these petty intrigues and plots are good for my brain. It's been a while since I had someone to outwit."

"Don't forget you have Azazel out there, still."

Nick swore. "Azazel isn't clever. He's just a demon with demigod-like powers that should have been killed the first go-round."

"You should thank him. He brought Riley back into your life."

"There's food for thought," Nick swore again. "Those damn green eyes of hers...I lied, Damian. The demon looked almost exactly like her."

"I know," Damian said softly.

Silence again.

"You'd better get back to her," Nick said, his voice rough.

"Going."

Riley tried to consciously relax all her muscles before Damian slipped into the bed next to her and she betrayed herself by her tension. The effect of loosening everything was therapeutic. She was still exhausted and slipped back into genuine sleep just as Damian's long body settled fully up against hers.

She woke to full daylight with cloudless blue sky peering in through the old factory windows and the sound of the television tuned to a morning breakfast show. Hot food smells came from the kitchen and the sound of cooking. She sniffed. Eggs and vegetables. Toast?

Her stomach rumbled emptily and cramped at the aromas. Riley threw back the covers and discovered simultaneously that she was naked and that her body was as stiff as a board. She gave a pathetic cry as every muscle she possessed seemed to instantly seize up and grind to a halt.

Nicholas magically appeared at her side and she was in so much pain she barely minded that she was stark naked. He wore dark trousers and a button-up shirt in a dark blue color. The fabric settled around his frame and clung to each curve and dip of his anatomy. The dull sheen told her the shirt was silk.

She looked up into his eyes, then remembered and dropped her gaze to his shoulders and the strong neck rising out of the open collar of the shirt.

He held out a glass of orange juice. "Drink this," he said. "It has glutamine in it and will help with the stiffness."

She looked up at him. "I would if I could lift my arm to take the glass."

He grinned. "Getting yourself moving is the next best way to combat the ache. Come on, move it, Riley." He made no attempt to lower the glass closer to her.

Gritting her teeth, she raised her arm and took the glass from him. "I hate you," she said between clenched teeth.

"As long as you do it while you're moving. Drink." He dropped a robe on the bed next to her. "Here, use this. Yours is useless. Come and eat as soon as you've drunk the juice." He went back to the kitchen where Damian was working over the stove.

Riley drained the orange juice, then forced herself to stand and put on the silk robe. It was ridiculously oversized on her and wrapped around her nearly twice. The hem trailed on the ground and as she tied the dark green sash she realized with a jolt that this was Nick's robe. She ran her hand over her hip, feeling strangely intimate and slightly aroused at the idea of wearing his robe and being naked beneath it.

She looked up and saw that Nick was watching her. He wasn't smiling.

Her heart thudded. Riley picked up the empty orange juice glass and walked with painful slowness to the kitchen area and rinsed the glass.

"You're just in time," Damian told her. "Your breakfast is ready." He tipped the scrambled eggs and vegetables onto a plate next to a toasted bagel, a pot of cream cheese and three strips of soy bacon, picked up the plate and carried it to the table where a single placemat and knife and fork waited. He was wearing jeans so ancient they were almost white with washing, sun and age. There were small rips and tears here and there, giving her glimpses of flesh beneath. But this was no designer pair of jeans with a horrendous price tag. She saw the common label on the back of his hip. He'd acquired the jeans years ago and they had earned their holes the honest way. The sweater above was equally as ancient, in some fragile yarn that looked like it would be soft and warm and barely there. It might once have been some sort of teal color, but now was so washed out and faded that it matched the jeans.

Against Damian's olive skin tones, it looked very good indeed.

"Where did you learn to cook?" she asked, heading over to the table.

"I used to cook for your mother a lot when she was a child."

"He likes it," Nicholas added from his post by the kitchen counter. "I think you've made his day, giving him an excuse to muck about in the kitchen with real food."

"Even though you don't get to eat it?" Riley asked, looking up at Damian.

"It's relaxing."

"So's swordplay," Nick said with a snort.

"Not the way I do it," Damian returned, settling on the chair next to Riley and pushing up the sleeves of the sweater. "You turn it into an art form. A sword was never meant to be art. It's a weapon. For defense only."

"How can you call a katana *just* a weapon? It's beautiful. Symmetrical, perfectly balanced..."

Their tones implied that this conversation was an old one, so Riley let their voices wash over her as she began to eat. She was ravenous.

The morning program on the television switched to news of the hour and the news anchor gravely reported the grisly findings of six more dead Manhattan residents overnight in the latest serial killings, their bodies mutilated in ways that seemed to indicate the presence of a large predator of a type unknown to police at this time...

Riley put down her fork, her appetite gone. She looked from Damian to Nicholas. Both of them were silent. They had heard.

"Six of them. One each," she said. She stood up, groaning at the effort. "Why didn't we go after them last night? Stop them last night? *Six more people*, Jesus, Damian, we lay around...we lay here...we did nothing!"

"What would you have had us do?" Damian asked.

"Stop them!" She pointed at the television. "We know what's doing it. They don't!"

"And how do we do that?" Nicholas asked, in a reasonable tone.

She spun toward him. "You must know the answer. You've stopped them before. Twice!"

Nicholas pushed himself away from the counter he was leaning against and prowled toward her. "And both times I was in the company of the best demon hunters the world had ever seen. Look at you, Riley. You can barely crawl out of that bed."

She bit her lip. "If you hadn't left me in the care of the foster system for seventeen years, I *would* have been ready. I would have been trained, just like you trained my mother from childhood."

"No, you would be dead," Nick said flatly. He stood over her. "You think Azazel wouldn't have made it his first point of business to make sure you were out of the way before raising the Stonebrood clan once more? We would have had no warning he had returned. No chance to assemble our defenses and protect you. This way, he had no idea where to find you."

"And now six more people are dead because we sat around on our hineys last night," she said bitterly. "We should have been out *doing* something. Anything. Surely there was a way to...to slow them down, even!"

Nick crossed his arms. "If you can best me, right now," he said softly, "you're ready to take on Lirgon."

"Nick," Damian said, sounding mildly vexed.

"With swords?" Riley asked.

"Whatever way you want," Nick replied.

"Riley, don't be stupid," Damian snapped.

But Riley didn't even wait for Damian to finish his protest. Her question about the swords had been meant as a distraction. She moved almost before she had finished speaking. She knew she had to move faster than she had ever moved before. Her first indignant movements away from the table had placed her in the clear space between the dining table and kitchen counter.

Now she grabbed Nick's belt for leverage, planted her foot at the top of his thigh and threw her other arm around his neck. She hoisted herself up and right over the top of him, using his neck as the pivot point. She brought her knees into the small of his back, landing hard. She heard the wind drive out of his lungs at the impact, and his knees buckle.

His hands were already digging into her forearm as it clung around his neck. She gripped her wrist and hung on, using surprise and her own weight to bring him toppling backward. She was going to hit the floor hard, but she was braced for it. She kept her head lifted up so that her shoulders would take the brunt of the fall. As soon as she had him on the floor, her legs would wrap around his chest and squeeze, cutting off his breathing even more. He would be at her mercy.

Then Nick staggered back...and back...and still farther back.

Alarm flared in her just as her shoulders slammed into the wall. Agony jarred through her left elbow, which had taken most of the impact, and her grip on her right wrist loosened. Nick ripped her arm away from his throat. She was lifted via her arm and tossed onto the table. More pain as she landed on the flat surface. His hand pinned her throat and squeezed just enough to ensure she kept still, or lose her ability to breathe. Blue eyes, cold and calculating, stared into hers.

"Never lose your temper," he said calmly.

"They're people!" she cried.

"They're just people," he agreed, and let her throat go. He stood up. Walked away. Toward the apartment door.

Riley sat up, rubbing her throat. She stared at his back, appalled. "If they're just animated things to you, then why are you doing this?"

"I gave my word." He pulled his coat from the hat rack by the door.

"I release you from it. I don't want your kind of protection." She almost spat the words.

"It's not your place to decide how I protect you and you cannot release me from my bond." He didn't look at her as he opened the door.

"One day you'll remember what it is to be human, what it is to have a heart, Nicholas. I hope I'm there to see it."

“An empty wish I’ve heard all too often. You’d be better off wishing for world peace, child.”

Chapter Eight

Nick didn't even slam the door behind him and that bothered Riley more than she wanted it to. She wanted him even a little bit angry. She wanted to know she had got under his skin in some small way.

Damian got to his feet, moved around the table to her side and pulled the robe closed over her legs. With another sick jolt, she remembered she was wearing Nick's robe. She groaned and put her head in her hands. "You're not even going to say 'I told you so', are you?" she said.

"As you just said it for me, it would be redundant." Damian pulled her into his arms and pressed her against him. "You've just met the ice core of Nicholas Sherwood, Riley. If it helps, I've bloodied my forehead and knuckles against it more than once and I don't consider myself a fool. He goaded you to make a point, which I think he just made in italics."

She dropped her hands and looked up at him. "I'm too weak to take on the gargoyles yet."

"Yes, but that wasn't the point." Damian smiled. "I wish you could have seen his face when you jumped him, Riley. You genuinely surprised him, something that hasn't happened to Nick in a very long time. I believe you're farther along than even Nick thought."

"Then what was the point?"

"You have to trust that Nick will know when you're ready to take them on."

She sighed. "More trust."

Damian's smile broadened. "It's infectious," he admitted.

"So...more people must die because I'm not ready," she said sadly.

"They would have died anyway, if you were still in Pittsburgh and ignorant of your heritage," Damian said harshly. "The harder you work now, the more quickly you will be ready to take the gargoyles on. Your noble but useless death today will not serve the people you might save in two or three days' time if you wait until you are strong enough."

She drew in a deep breath and nodded. "Tell me what I must do, then."

"For today, train, eat, sleep and learn."

She tugged at the robe. "And shower," she added.

Damian smiled. "I skipped a few miscellaneous items on the agenda."

Riley wrapped her legs around his hips. "I hope one of those items is you?"

"That can certainly be arranged." His hands came around her hips and drew her closer to the edge of the table. "Now...where were we?"

Riley pulled at the tie on the robe and it slithered undone. "I certainly wasn't wearing this." She gasped as Damian's lips seared their imprint on the nape of her neck as he helped her remove the garment.

His lips moved lower as his hands held her up like an offering for his own mouth as he feasted on her. She felt the soft scrape of his teeth, the slide of his tongue over her flesh and her legs fell helplessly apart. Her cunt was weeping cream, ready for him.

With fingers that trembled, she stripped Damian of the sweater. It was as soft as it looked. She dropped it to the table beside her. "Neither of you wear clothes that I thought would be natural for you to wear." She licked his chest, where the flat pectoral muscles lifted his flesh, then bit gently into his flesh. His hands captured her head as he drew in a quick breath.

"What would you have us wear, my lover? Black leather and lace ruffles?"

She smiled up him. "I guess it's clichéd, huh?"

He bent his head and she felt his lips against her throat, licking and kissing their way down to her chest. Her head fell back.

"It's also the best way I know of advertising who we really are," he murmured against her flesh. "Too many people live too closely around us and know our habits too well...it would raise a flag in their minds to dress the part, too."

"Pity. Black would look good on you," she murmured, then sucked in her breath as his mouth closed over her hard, sharply erect nipple. His teeth caught it and tugged as his tongue rasped over the very tip.

Riley lost track of what she had been thinking. She reached blindly for him, her eyes closing as she moaned. Her hands found his shoulders and she tugged and pressed at them, her hands moving restlessly against him as his tongue and lips and teeth built up a swell of pleasure. Her clit throbbed sharply, swollen and forlorn, as he played with her.

He swapped his attention to her other breast and she groaned again as the delicious feelings surged afresh. She scrabbled at his shoulders, unable to reach any more of him.

Damian's mouth was moving farther down her torso, leaving a damp trail where his tongue had tasted her. Her abdominal muscles quivered and clenched beneath his mouth and as he moved lower, her hips jerked as he slid his tongue over sensitive places on her flesh she had never been aware of before. His hair was tickling her stomach, but she was barely aware of the sensation. All she could focus on was the slow approach of Damian's mouth toward her mons. Her heart was thundering, her clit was pulsing at the prospect of his lips and tongue toying with it, and her breath had stilled, waiting...

His lips slid over the crease between her leg and hip and she gasped. Then she felt the soft touch of his mouth briefly against her vulva.

"Look at me," he commanded. His voice was thick, hoarse.

Riley opened her eyes as Damian lifted her knees and laid them over his shoulders. His eyes looked sleepy and coal black, glittering with an emotion she couldn't quite name, one a step beyond simple lust.

She licked her lips.

"I wanted to see your expression when I do this," he told her. His mouth closed over her pussy lips and his tongue drove between them to swipe against the sensitive bud of her clitoris in firm thrusts.

Riley cried out as the hot, swift erotic explosion burst through her at his touch. Her head fell back and her eyes closed. Her hands curled into fists and she clenched them against the tabletop.

Her climax swirled closer.

Damian's fingers slid into her pussy. Three thick, irregular invaders, stretching her, impaling her.

Riley bucked hard, her breath shuddering through her, as her excitement leapt higher in a fizzing and buzzing shriek along her nerves.

She could feel the touch of his hands at the edges of her cunt, along her cleft, caressing her, sliding through her moisture.

Then a slim probe pushed at her anus, rimming the tiny aperture, nudging the muscle.

Riley whimpered, as her hips thrust hard, encouraging him.

His finger slid inside her.

Her climax whooshed closer and closer. Frightened by the power of it, she clamped down on it, riding it out, hyperventilating so that she could stay in the moment, and the climax faded.

Damian straightened and his cock slammed into her, almost in one smooth movement, shocking the breath out of her.

For the space of five heartbeats they remained still, locked together. Damian's gaze drilled into hers. Her legs were still pressed against his shoulders, but his damp fingers curled around her thighs, high up by her hips.

Her climax was still threatening to rip through her. Riley's chest heaved helplessly, her breasts lifting with the effort to draw enough air into her driven body. Her pussy clenched around his cock, the muscles quivering and spasming, drawing on his shaft.

Damian gave a soft moan and withdrew almost all the way before driving back into her.

"Touch yourself," he told her, his voice thick with rising lust. "Quickly. Come with me." He picked up her hand and pushed it between her thighs, pressing her fingers against her clit. Just the slight touch sent sparks flitting through her. She massaged the little mound of flesh, her hips lifting in reaction, as Damian's cock rocked back and forth in her pussy.

Damian groaned. "Such a beautiful sight," he murmured. His pace quickened and his fingers tightened on her hips.

Riley could feel her ebbing climax re-gather. It was like a switch was thrown inside her. Her body seemed to light on fire. She caught her breath, her eyes widening as she looked up at Damian. "Oh!" she gasped. Then her breath hitched as the climax grabbed at her chest and her nerves, and squeezed.

"Damian!" she tried to warn him, but her voice was almost bodiless.

His cock was slamming into her.

She clenched around him as the climax hit her, and heard him groan and thrust in mini-spasms of his own, leaning over her on one hand. But her eyes were closing as the orgasm tried to shut down her thinking and her senses.

She fought it. Fought the loss of control, scared. She whipped her head from side to side, battling for breath, for reason. Instinct made her throw out her hand. Reaching.

A hand gripped hers. Tightened.

Riley relaxed. Her chest loosened. She found she could breathe. Slowly, the climax departed from her body and she could function. Think.

Damian's cock was still buried in her body, but he lowered her legs and withdrew from her as she recovered. He didn't let go of her hand.

Riley lifted herself up onto the elbow of the hand that Damian wasn't holding. He was just standing there patiently. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry," she said inadequately.

He shook his head. "Don't be." He held up her hand, curled in his. "This gives me hope, Riley."

A tear scalded a track down her cheek. "You're too human to be a vampire, you know. I'm the monster."

He smiled and wiped her cheek. "You haven't seen the monster in me yet, Riley. There's a dark side to everyone, human or otherwise. You just have to look beyond the shadows if you want a halfway content life." He let her hand go and began to dress.

She reached for her borrowed robe. "Is that what you do with Nicholas?"

Damian grinned. "Nick is...a special case."

"Is there any warmth in him? Anything human left at all?"

Damian kissed her cheekbone, high up by the corner of her eyes. "You know there is. You heard it last night."

Riley caught her breath. "You knew!"

Damian smiled. "I suspected. You just confirmed it."

Riley winced. "I am never, ever going to play chess with you. *Ever*." She tilted her head. "Do you mind that I listened?"

He shook his head. "But you heard Nick give me his trust, Riley. I ask you to do the same."

She drew in a breath. "Oh, Damian...you know how hard that is for me."

"I know." He picked up her hand and placed it on his chest, spreading her fingers. "Don't say anything now," he told her gently. "Sometimes just saying the words is the hardest part—like telling someone you love them. Loving them is easy, telling them you love them makes you break out in a cold sweat. For now, simply let me protect you and your interests and do what I have to do. Don't fight me, Riley. Do you think you can do that much?"

She bit her lip. "I suppose."

He nodded. "That's all I ask." His hand smoothed over the back of hers. He smiled at her. "You reached for me, Riley. You honored me. I will not forget that. I will always be here for you. Do you believe that?"

"Yes." She did. Absolutely.

"Good." His smile grew warmer. He let her hand go. "How does coffee sound?"

"Heavenly!" she confessed. "How did you guess?"

"Your mother was addicted to it." He glanced at the clock over the fireplace. "Why don't you shower and dress, and I'll take you to the bistro on the corner. Then we'll kick Nicholas out of his sulk. We need to speak to the sculptor."

"That was what I said we should do," Riley pointed out, sliding off the table.

"I know," Damian agreed. He patted her backside. "Hurry up. The longer you take, the longer it takes to get your coffee."

"And just how do you plan to kick Nicholas out of his sulk?" Riley asked, curious.

Damian pulled a cell phone out of his jeans pocket and hit a speed dial number, and waited for Nick to respond.

Riley heard Nick's gruff response from where she stood three feet away.

"Riley's had an idea that seems better than yours, Nick, so I'm following up on it. We're going to visit the sculptor, Fábio Natan. He's got a studio in that arts barn on Greenwich Street. If you've finished pouting, you can join us."

He disconnected the call and pushed the phone back into his pocket, without waiting for Nick's response.

Riley scrubbed at her mouth, trying not to smile. Then she gave up and just tried not to laugh.

"He'll kill you," she told him.

"He can't," Damian pointed out. "And he knows this is a good move, so he won't even be mad." He considered. "Not for long."

Chapter Nine

The arts barn was a huge building that impressed even Damian when he saw it. "Natan must have won grants and subsidies to afford a studio here. I can't believe carving gargoyles pays this well."

The corrugated-iron-sided building looked like an aircraft hangar, with tinted glass panels at the top of the twenty-foot-high walls that ran for a hundred yards. The iron was painted an ochre brown, and *Soho Arts Barn* in Art Deco lettering ran across the length of the building. In smaller letters, only three foot high, was written "enter here" and a big arrow curved toward a small man-sized door that would have been overlooked otherwise.

Riley adjusted her coat over her shoulders again. The katana hanging from the reinforced lining tended to pull down the left front. She suspected she would get used to this, but for now, it was awkward and made her feel like a criminal. The carbon knife was also tucked away in the lining.

She had emerged from the bathroom in time to see Damian pack a switchblade into his jeans and a short-handled knife into his boot. The knife in his boot was compressed carbon. He had weighed up a flat, short sword before reluctantly returning it to the umbrella stand and opening the apartment door to usher her out.

Now he stood looking at the arts barn across the road with a frown.

"Looks familiar, doesn't it?" came a low voice from behind them.

Riley turned, barely startled. She had recognized Nick's voice immediately, even at the low pitch he'd given it. He was standing at the mouth of the alley behind them, his arms crossed, leaning against the wall of the building.

Damian glanced at Nick, then back at the arts barn. "You're thinking of the night Peter Grey died. That was a warehouse. Not even close."

"But it's an interesting juxtaposition of circumstances, all the same." Nicholas straightened and stepped between him and Riley. "I didn't appreciate the summons, even if the idea is sound."

Damian kept his gaze on the barn. "You wouldn't have come here any other way."

"You brought her along, though. That was stupid."

"You can't keep her wrapped up in cotton wool."

"I'm standing right here, guys," Riley reminded them.

Nicholas glanced at her. "And you should be back inside the warded apartment where it's safe. I don't suppose you'll return there now, will you?"

"As this was my idea?" She laughed.

"You're not ready," Nick said flatly.

"Never will be if you don't let me out," she returned.

"And you will never get to protect a single soul if you're dead," he snapped.

She flinched, but managed to keep the reaction from showing on her face. "We're just going to talk to the guy, Nick. What's eating you? That this was my idea? Or that it wasn't yours? Or that I'm doing something that you didn't specifically tell me I could do?"

Nick grimaced. "Will you, just for once, listen to me and not argue every single point?"

"She wouldn't be Riley if she did," Damian said softly. "She's like Tally. You couldn't push Tally around, either, and *that's* what you don't like about this."

Nick thrust a hand through his hair and sighed.

Riley stared at him, her mind working hard. Her heart, too.

She was like her mother?

She had known from both their initial reactions to her appearance and from Damian's photo that she looked like her mother, but her appearance had always been such a negative thing that this had not struck her as being a particularly joyful piece of news.

But to know that she was like her mother in other ways, in the way she acted, in her doggedness—that was different. If she was even a little bit like the great Natalia Connors...well, it brought a small glow of comfort to her. And it brought home to her in a very real way the truth of her heritage. That Natalia Connors really had been her mother.

Riley let herself enjoy the warmth of the thought for a moment. She leaned into Nick, who was glowering over Damian's pronouncement, and pushed at him with her hip. "Ah, just accept it, Nick," she said, with a teasing note. "Who knows? You might get to like it, having a bossy bitch who doesn't just roll over at your every command."

She saw his eyes narrow a little. Then Nick moved more quickly than she could follow, for her back was suddenly bent over his arm, her torso stretched, his hand in her hair as he pulled her head back to extend her neck back, back, back, so that her face was lifted up to look directly into his. His blue eyes looked directly into hers, unblinking.

"There are certain commands of mine you will roll over and obey without pause or question, Riley Connors. Accept *that*." His voice played along her spine like fingers over piano keys.

She swallowed. "Let me up."

"Please." Nick's face hovered just above hers.

Riley could feel her attention narrowing down to just Nick's eyes. Locking in. Being caught. He was doing it deliberately. "Let me go," she whispered helplessly. "You know you have me cornered. That's unfair."

In a move that made her dizzy, she was abruptly put back on her feet. Nick held her steady until the dizziness passed, and she realized that the expression on his face was bitter. "You'll have to find a better card to play than that," he told her. "Life *is* unfair, and nothing will change that, not even you." He let her go, his hands dropping away like she was an unwelcome parcel.

Damian was watching beyond Nick's shoulder, and Riley focused on him, confused and hurt. What had she done to cause that flood of bitterness in Nick?

Damian shook his head, the slightest movement, and she understood that she should not probe the matter now. She turned to face the barn across the street once more, her insides churning with the swiftly changing current of emotions moving between them. She couldn't seem to keep up. There was too much she didn't understand.

"Natan lives here as well as working here?" she asked, striving for a normal tone.

"With this much square footage? I would," Damian replied.

"The man will be at home then, won't he?" Nick said and stepped onto the road, barely pausing to look for traffic.

Riley plunged into the traffic after him, Damian following her, and they weaved through the cars and jumped onto the narrow sidewalk running beside the barn together.

Nick didn't pause. He strode straight over to the small door and turned the handle. The door opened without resistance.

Damian went first, looking around carefully. Nick pushed Riley in after Damian, then closed the door behind him.

Inside was an empty foyer, with a bare, unpainted concrete floor. It was about eighteen feet square. The walls were painted soulless white and were unadorned. It was as if all the zany art effects had been used up by the exterior painting and there had been none left over for the foyer.

Three doors led off the foyer and each had their own intercom system next to it, and a nameplate over the intercom. The one on the immediate left was Natan's.

Damian pressed the buzzer on the intercom, his other hand in the pocket of his coat.

After three minutes there was no answer, so he pressed again, this time holding the buzzer down for a good ten seconds.

They waited another thirty seconds.

"Who is it?" came the annoyed demand.

"I'm from the gallery," Damian said, speaking loudly. "I have the new pro—" And he stopped speaking, dropping his finger from the intercom.

Nick pulled Riley away from the door, pushing her firmly to one side. He stepped up to the edge of the door himself, flattening himself against the wall to one side where Natan would not see him at first when he opened the door.

"What are you doing?" Riley demanded.

"Talking our way in," Damian shot back.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" she sighed. "You've forgotten basic human psychology then." She stepped back in front of the door, undid her coat, swiftly unfastened the top buttons of her cardigan, and ducked under Damian's arm. "Let me talk," she told him.

"What—" he began, but then the door opened.

Natan was a very short man in his mid-forties. He had a badly receding hairline. What hair he did have, though, grew as a wild and long fringe around the back of his head. He had a drop-away chin and very large, round brown eyes that looked permanently startled. Even so, they still widened when they saw Riley.

She smiled. "Hi there! We're from the gallery." She dropped her voice down a little, made it nice and throaty. "We came to pick up your bio for the new program." She blinked her eyes at him and tilted her head.

"What program?"

"The new one?" She put her hands on her hips and cocked one hip, jutting it forward. "They didn't tell you? That just figures, doesn't it? They didn't tell me until this morning!" She giggled, and recalled the name from the manager's office she and Damian had broken into yesterday. "Mr. Sandford thinks your profile hasn't been brought out enough, so he wants to redo the programs. Build you up more. We need your new biography. A longer one. You've got one, right?"

Natan's gaze ran over her, lingering on her cleavage. She could see him dismiss her as harmless. Coupled with the use of Sandford's name, and the appeal to his ego, it packed away his defenses completely.

Natan glanced at Damian.

"This is Damian, my driver," Riley explained, relegating Damian to a subservient role in Natan's mind.

Natan stepped aside. "Come in."

Riley felt Damian's hand stroke the back of her neck. A quick touch, then it was gone.

She stepped in, Damian following. Nicholas stepped around and through the doorway, and Natan frowned. "Who are you?"

"This is Nicholas, my bodyguard," Riley explained. "A girl can't be too careful these days." She beamed at Natan. "You understand, don't you?" She pushed her chest out at him.

Natan nodded, although he looked wary. "Sure," he said slowly. He stepped backward, rubbing his hands on his grimy tan trousers. "Well, the computer's over here. I can print off the long bio for you." He turned and headed for a computer desk against the wall.

The studio was an unfinished portion of what must have been an original aircraft hangar. The raw concrete floor was still unpainted and in places, the concrete was stained with old oil stains from aircraft and vehicles. The iron walls were unlined.

Brand-new steel heating pipes and outlets hung overhead, blasting heat into the space below, and looked oddly silver and shiny in the old space.

The big studio was dotted with massive hunks of stone that Natan was working on. Each was at various stages of development, and stepladders stood beside each, as well as portable working lights to shine upon the areas where Natan was working.

There was a bed and small fridge, computer desk and microwave to one side. The living quarters.

"While you're doing that, could I ask a couple of questions, too?" Riley tapped Nick on the shoulder and pointed to the book open on the table next to her hip. The ancient illustration showed a gargoyle in full flight, and the gargoyle was drawn in fine detail. She nodded toward the nearest carving. The gargoyle taking shape was a replica.

Natan was bent over the laptop on the desk. "Like what?" he asked absently.

"Like, how did you meet Azazel?" Nick asked.

"Who?" Natan asked, still working the computer.

"The man who gave you this book, who told you to carve gargoyles," Riley said.

"The demon who brought them to life," Damian added.

Natan's head jerked up. He looked at each of them, one after another. "You're not from the gallery," he said at last.

"Where's Azazel?" Nick said. "Where did you meet him?"

"Who is Azazel?" Natan said. "And what do you people want?" He stepped sideways, but Nicholas moved faster. He reached over and picked up the phone and shook his head as he disconnected it from the wall.

"It's the real name of the demon that brought your creations to life," Damian told the little sculptor. "What name did he give you?"

"Jeremiah." Natan swallowed. "He...is a demon?"

"What did he tell you he was?" Riley asked.

"He said he was a wizard. Like..." Natan sighed. "Like Gandalf."

"You have to stop carving the gargoyles, Natan," Riley told him. "You have to stop giving Azazel his raw material. You know what he is doing with them, don't you?"

Natan blinked. "He brings them to life. So what?"

"He gives an old foe of humans life," Nicholas corrected. "Have you not been following the news? These creatures feast on human flesh. The police have been searching for an animal that *you* created, Natan."

Natan flinched. "There's no evidence to connect them with the murders. Nothing."

"He knows," Damian said softly.

Natan looked away.

"You have to stop," Riley repeated.

"Why should I stop?" Natan flared, rounding on her. "*Why?* Six months ago I was living on the street! Now look at me! Now I'm somebody! Now I have cash in the bank. Now I have a bank account to put the cash *in*! People respect me! And I'm making money hand over fist all because I can copy a picture out of a book and create the same thing in stone. Why on god's green earth should I *stop*?"

"Because people are dying, Natan."

"People die every day," he said flatly. "My stopping won't change that."

Riley stared at him, horrified.

Laughter sounded from behind them and they all spun around to face the source.

A man stepped from behind the half-completed gargoyle nearest Natan. He was in his late thirties, and had longish hair that brushed his collar, and midnight-blue eyes. A strong jaw. He was a handsome man, with wide shoulders and a determined set to his chin. He seemed familiar to Riley.

"Isn't that shockingly practical for a creative?"

Both Damian and Nicholas stepped closer to her, bracketing her.

"Azazel, aping Carson Connors is just going to piss me off even more. You have to know that he and I never got along," Nick said. His hand rested inside his coat.

The man smiled, showing even, white teeth. "I thought I would show a pleasing disposition. The woman, here, has never had the honor, after all." He nodded to her.

A shiver ran down her back. *This is not my father*, she reminded herself. But now she knew where she recognized him from, Damian's photo and from the mirror she looked in every day. Her father's eyes were like her own except in color.

"You've raised the original six, Azazel. Your work here is done," Nick said. "Why are you still here?"

"I knew you would stop by to see Natan. How else would I pick up your trail?" Azazel shrugged. But his gaze flickered toward Riley, and it seemed his eyes glowed hot and red just for a moment.

She shivered. Nick had been right all along. Azazel wanted her dead. That was his primary goal this time around. He wanted vengeance.

Why had she even left the apartment? She had been safe there. She wasn't ready for this. Nick was right, she was wrong, dammit.

Damian's fingers curled around the back of her neck, under her hair. It was like a secret hug. Riley drew in a deep breath. And another.

She felt calm return. Lifting her eyes once more, she looked squarely at Azazel. She didn't know if demons found a direct gaze challenging, but she hoped so. He wasn't looking at her, but when her gaze fell upon his face, his glance swiveled to her as if he felt the weight of her look. He smiled. "I look forward to meeting you in the dark, little one."

"Why wait?" she asked, reaching inside her coat for the hilt of her katana.

His smile broadened. "Your watchdogs would not permit it."

"You mean, you're too gutless to attempt it in daylight. Don't bullshit me, Azazel." She pulled out the sword.

Natan, behind her, gave a breathy little moan.

Azazel's smile didn't waver, but his eyes took on a flat, opaque look. "You have no idea what you are inviting, girl." His voice was different. Thick.

"Yeah. I do," she said.

"Tell her," Azazel spat at Nick.

Nick shrugged. "If she wants a piece of you, I won't stop her. Not this afternoon."

"Nor I," Damian added.

Riley couldn't help smiling as she stepped out from between them. She flipped the katana up into the high ready position, and waited for him, her senses ready.

In the distance, she heard a police siren, but ignored it. Sirens sounded all day long in Manhattan.

Azazel looked from one to the other again. His fury built higher. "She is untested! You would let her go up against me?"

"Yep," Nick said, sounding astonishingly laid-back.

The sirens were drawing closer and Riley frowned. Were they coming here? There were a lot of them.

Azazel moved. He couldn't move as fast as Nick and Damian, but he could move pretty damn fast anyway. He reached inside his denim jacket and pulled out a thick gun-shaped weapon and fired. Riley threw herself out of the way but even as she jumped she realized she wasn't the target.

Damian was thrown backward by the impact. He lay clutching his stomach, gasping.

The sirens were right outside the building now and had halted there. Riley whirled to look at Natan, who held up a cell phone. "Text message," he said sheepishly.

She scrambled backward to where Damian lay, watching Azazel. Azazel waved the thick gun in the air. "Gargoyle toxin pellets," he pronounced. "There's more than one way to defeat you, and most of them I don't have to lay a finger on you to bring you to your knees. Try to cure your vampire lover of that, human." The triumph in his face was awful to look at it.

The demon jerked his head up as the door to the studio was rattled by the police, turned and strode away around behind the half-completed gargoyle, and was gone.

Nicholas was kneeling over Damian, trying to lift his hands away so he could look at the wound. "Let me see," he said, his voice low but even. "Damian, let go. Let me see."

Damian's hands fell away, revealing blood and an open wound that showed deep damage and horrible black track marks scoring his flesh, rippling under the surface of

the skin. He was writhing as the black moved in all directions along his torso from the wound.

Nick made a breathless sound as he looked at it.

Riley put her sword away as the studio door shuddered under the pummeling of the police again.

"Open up! New York Police Department!"

"Help! Help me!" Natan screamed. "They're armed!"

"Christos help us," Nick muttered. He looked at Riley. "Find the hangar doors. Now." His blue eyes were steady, relentless. He slid an arm under Damian's shoulders and lifted him to his feet.

Riley ran for the other end of the studio, where the old hangar doors would most naturally be, dodging the lumps of rock and stone that were Natan's natural carving materials. She found the doors where she thought they would be, but they had been welded shut.

"Here!" she called. "But they're welded."

Nicholas came up behind her, Damian draped over his shoulders. He looked at the welding. "It's spot-welded. Not a problem. Here, hold Damian up."

"I can't—"

But Nicholas had already handed Damian to her and she staggered under the weight of Damian's almost unconscious body. Damian tried to thrust a leg out to hold himself up, but she took most of his weight herself, her thighs shaking and her back screaming. She could feel his blood soaking into her shoulder and chest.

Behind them, she heard the shouts of the police.

"Hurry!" she begged Nicholas, as he studied the hangar doors. He braced one door with a hand, took a breath and kicked the other door. His face was implacable. It took three hard kicks before the spot welds gave way. The door shuddered aside and pale late afternoon sunlight fell in on them. Nicholas blinked and winced.

Then he took Damian from Riley, hoisted him back onto his shoulders once more and strode out into the daylight. He turned for the street, but Damian caught at his arm. "The roof," he said weakly.

"I'll get you home," Nicholas said firmly.

"The roof. No time. You have to get Riley away."

Nicholas closed his eyes. "No, damn it. We can get you home."

"The roof, Nick. Do as I say."

Nick looked like he was in pain. Riley didn't understand what was happening, but her heart was hurting just from looking at Nick's expression.

Without another word, Nick carried Damian over to the fire escape, pulled down the first-floor stair, and climbed it. Riley followed, pulling the stairs up behind her. The building was a four-floor apartment building and they reached the roof before the

police boiled out of the busted-open hangar doors and raced around into the alley. Nick had strength to spare and carried Damian like he was a pillow.

They watched the police race to the street looking for them.

Nick lay Damian down on the roof, and pulled his coat away to look at the wound. The black had spread and was a solid mass across his abdomen and chest now. Damian was fighting hard to breathe. It came in little gasps. And he barely moved.

Nick hung his head. "I can't...Damian...I can't."

"You have to," Damian whispered. "Riley needs you."

Cold washed over Riley as she realized the truth. Damian was dying. *Really* dying. Gargoyle toxin was the only truly fatal substance for vampires.

Riley picked up his hand. "Can't you fight it?" she asked, trying to hold back her tears. Tears wouldn't help now.

"Too far gone," Damian whispered. "Concentrated. Too fast." His hand squeezed a little, then loosened and she realized that was all the strength he had. It frightened her, that he had weakened so much, so quickly. She glanced at Nicholas. He knew what was happening to Damian's body better than she did, but he was too wrapped up in his own misery.

She bit her lip. "Is there pain?" she asked Damian softly.

"Not now. Not...physical." He swallowed. "Kiss me. Both of you." His voice was thready. A breathy whisper.

Riley realized she was crying, then. When had the tears started? Who cared? She pushed them away with her hand and leaned down to kiss Damian. His lips were cold and already the gargoyle toxin had begun to work, for the softness was being stolen. She wanted to stay kissing him until the end, but Nicholas deserved more.

She stroked Damian's cheek, then forced herself away from him. It felt like she was tearing herself from him. It actually hurt.

Nick stroked his brow. "I don't know that I can stand this," he murmured.

Riley hugged herself. The agony in Nick's voice was so hard to listen to. How could she have wondered if there was anything human left in him? Here it was, naked on his face, raw and painful to see.

"You will," Damian whispered. "I want you to."

Nick nodded. "All right. If I must." His face crumpled for a moment, then he got it under control again. "You want to go now?"

"I have to."

Nick nodded. He leaned down and kissed Damian deeply and longingly. When he straightened, Damian's eyes were closed.

Nick stood up. "Love you," he whispered, so quietly that Riley thought she might have imagined it.

He turned to her. His eyes were bleak in the failing afternoon light. "I'll get you back to the apartment. Come."

Chapter Ten

In three days, Nicholas barely moved from the sofa.

He wasn't just mourning. He wasn't moving at all. Stone statues showed more life. He needed neither food nor sleep, and was able to stay completely and utterly still. And he remained exactly where he sat for hours at a time, focused inward, not speaking.

Riley moved around the apartment, at times almost forgetting he was there, so motionless was he.

After three days of this, she became worried, though. She knew that Damian had forced Nick to agree not to do something stupid like end his own existence—did vampires even call it suicide? But this motionlessness was not living, either.

Was she even being fair, though? Was three days enough to recover from the loss of a relationship that had lasted for centuries? How could she know?

Finally, she went with her gut. She just knew that she had seen the raw human emotions on Nick's face when Damian lay dying, and now she did not. He was locking them away, and that was not a good thing. Not even for a centuries-old vampire who should know better.

But how could she possibly crack open his tough old shell, when he knew every strategy she could employ and would recognize it before she even began?

Finally, Riley stumbled over the answer when she sat at the table eating her lonely breakfast, as she watched Nicholas sitting motionless on the sofa, the blue eyes staring into nowhere.

The eyes.

Her heart jumped as she realized she had been staring at the solution all along.

Moving casually, as she had been for the last three days, she made her preparations. She showered, dressed in Nick's green silk robe and nothing else, put on her makeup and a light touch of scent.

Then she settled on the sofa next to him. Her heart, her entire body, was strumming with tension. With need.

She placed her hands on either side of his face and turned his head to look at her. He didn't resist her touch, but his eyes looked right through her. She shivered at the touch of his gaze.

"Look at me, Nick," she commanded.

The expression in his eyes didn't change. Did he even hear her?

"I miss Damian, too, you know. Look at me, goddamn you."

His eyes focused on her. She could almost feel the surprise and indignation there. But he remained silent. She kept her hands on his face in case he tried to look away and break the direct contact of her gaze, once he realized what she was doing. It was a futile gesture, really. He was so much stronger than her. But over the last three days he had proved that in some ways, she was the strong one.

But his eyes stayed locked on hers and she realized with a start that she didn't know when Nicholas had last fed, or when he needed to feed again. Did stress make him hungry? Was she baiting a thirsty vampire? Too late, far too late to reconsider the wisdom of what she was doing.

His eyes were so blue, she realized with a dazed mind. Midwinter cloudless day blue.

With a start, she realized it had begun. She was caught in his gaze. Drawn into him. Her heart was trying to climb through her chest.

"I can hear your blood pumping through your arteries," Nick said. His voice was thin, croaky from not being used for three days.

Riley moaned. His fangs were descending. The direct gaze was a primary challenge that a vampire would first tackle by feeding upon the victim. They only subsumed it sexually to avoid the complications of being caught with a dead, drained body. Nick wouldn't care about that in his current mood.

She licked her lips, trying to tamp down the beginning tentacles of fear. Nick wouldn't hurt her, she tried to tell herself.

"Nick, I need you," she whispered helplessly. Truthfully. It was an appeal to his better nature. His human nature. And it was a gamble. He could choose to be offended by her need and her essential weakness.

Or he could respond to it, his male ego reaching out to her as she desperately wanted him to.

She kept her gaze locked on his eyes. "Feed on me if you have to, Nick. I don't care anymore. You'll be doing me a favor."

His eyes shifted. Focused on her face. His gaze moved down, to the base of her throat and the pulse there. His hand caught in her hair and her head was slowly, inexorably, pulled backward to expose her throat. The strength in his grip told her he could have easily snapped her head back and broken her neck, instead of bending her head back. She blinked up at the ceiling and felt his lips touch her throat. They slid around to rest over her carotid artery and she felt the brush of fangs.

Her heart was roaring inside its cage, banging against her ribs. She thought it might explode if it beat any harder. She could feel its throb in her temples.

"You don't lie as well as I do," Nick murmured, his lips brushing against her throat. "Your body gives you away." He licked her throat. "You no more want to die than I do." He dropped her onto the sofa on her back and kneeled over her. His fangs were fully extended. Fury made his expression thunderous.

"You don't want to die?" she asked, astonished.

"What do you want, Riley? Why are you bothering me?"

"You haven't moved for three days."

"So?" He sat up on his heels, releasing her.

Relieved, Riley struggled up into a sitting position, too. "I was worried!"

"Why?" His fangs, she was glad to note, had retracted.

"Well...because..." She bit her lip. "For god's sake, Nick. Your lover, your best friend, just died. And you go into a funk for three days, and I'm not supposed to worry?"

"I don't want you to do anything for me," he said, his words precise. "You've done enough already."

She caught her breath as pure hurt ripped through her. It had never occurred to her that Nick might in any way hold her responsible for what had happened to Damian.

The hurt had to be vented. Five days ago she might have stamped her foot. Or slapped him. Five days ago, she had taken her knife out and jammed it into Damian's stomach. But that was five days and a lifetime of learning ago.

Now, she clenched her fist and sucker-punched Nick on the jaw with an upper cut that she didn't telegraph. Of course, it barely made him stagger, but he dipped a finger into his mouth and it came out bloody. She'd made him bite his own tongue.

Good.

She picked up her coat. The black one. The cherry-colored one was covered in Damian's blood. Silently, she headed for the door.

Nick's fingers dug into her shoulder, halting her. "You can't leave," he told her.

"Watch me."

"Azazel will be monitoring the apartment."

"I don't give a shit about Azazel. I'm not staying here with you anymore, Nick." She didn't turn to look at him despite the pressure of his hand on her shoulder.

"Riley..."

"No!" She shrugged off his hand. "If I'm so despicable to you, I'll remove myself."

"You're going to leave wearing just my robe?"

"I don't care!" she railed. "I just want to get out of here."

"You're being ridiculous."

"And you're being an asshole." She spun to face him. Nick was propped against the back of the sofa, his long legs crossed at the ankles, and his arms crossed, too. "Damian would hate you for this," she told him.

A shadow crossed his face. "You have no idea what you're talking about." His voice was low.

"You think just because you slept with him for a few centuries longer than I did, you're the expert?" Riley realized her cheeks were wet, and mentally shrugged. This was overdue, she knew. She put her back to the apartment door. "There were things about Damian you didn't know at all, Nick. Things you couldn't possibly know. And that bothers you, doesn't it?"

Again, the shadow seemed to ripple across his face.

"He left you," she said deliberately.

Nick licked his lips.

"You couldn't protect Tally. Damian loved her and you let him down."

Nick's arms dropped from their protective cross. "Stop this, Riley."

Riley dropped her coat and put her hands on her hips. "Damian chose me, Nick. Me."

He moved fast. Vampire speed. Suddenly she was pressed against the door, lifted up so that her eyes were level with Nick's and held there with his body pinning hers, his hips against hers, his hands around her waist. There was such power holding her there, she knew he could keep her like that all day if necessary. His gaze locked with hers.

"If he chose you," Nick murmured, his voice resonating through her head and her chest, down to her toes. It made her body quiver in response. "Then why are you wearing *my* robe, hmmm? And why did he not mark you in all the time he was with you?"

His tongue swiped over her cheeks, gathering her spent tears. It was strangely erotic. By the time his lips pressed against hers, her body was tense with anticipation and the touch of his lips made her gasp and shudder. It left her weak and almost totally defenseless.

"I hate you," she told him.

"No, you don't," Nick replied with complete certainty. "Kiss me."

She shook her head. That would leave her without any shield at all. It would ruin the last of her crumbling senses and she needed what she had left to deal with Nick. He was too canny. Too old.

He was watching her. Probably reading all her thoughts from the expressions on her face, the arousal of her body and her pheromones. It wasn't fair.

Life wasn't fair, she reminded herself. She had wanted to wake Nick from his three-day stupor. *Be careful what you wish for*, she thought ironically.

Riley kissed him, giving it everything she had. She wound her arms around his neck and thrust her fingers into his hair. She let herself go deliberately, sinking into the joy of kissing Nicholas Sherwood. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and gave her soul, her heart, her entire attention to the pleasure of the moment. She soaked up every tiny detail of the experience. Her breasts pressing against him, her nipples pushed against the perfect silk of his robe, sandwiched between her and him. The warmth

generated between their bodies. The slick moisture building between her legs, the pulse of her clit, which surely Nick must be able to feel with his hyper-senses, the quiver of the muscles in her abdomen as they clenched.

Riley brought her legs up and wrapped them around Nick's hips and pressed herself even tighter against him. The core of her was melting with the heat of her arousal. Pushed up against his pelvis as she was, even he could not fail to notice, especially as the silk robe had fallen away from her thighs and her naked pussy was pressing up against his stomach. The only thing between their flesh was his clothing.

When at last she lifted her lips away from Nick's, she was gasping.

So was Nick. He curled his arm around her back to support her, freeing a hand, which he used to cup her face. He pulled her away from the door, carried her across the apartment and laid her down on the bed with surprising gentleness.

"Your body speaks where your words do not, Riley," he told her, stripping himself of his clothing.

"Not every lustful whim has to be indulged." Her voice was heavy with arousal.

Nick smiled. "How little you know yourself."

It didn't help that he was undressing. Nick was taller than Damian, lean and while Damian had been broader across the shoulder, Nick had sinews and strength to wield a broadsword all day, if it was needed. His thighs were thick with muscle from controlling a horse, and his ass...

She swallowed. "What do you think you're doing?"

His smile broadened. "What you want me to do. I'm going to make love to you. I'm doing to leave you limp and mindless on that bed, Riley."

Her heart leapt and her body with it.

She focused on the key words. *Make love.*

"Why are you being so...nice?"

Nick leaned on the bed with one knee. His cock was already erect and Riley couldn't help but look at it. And she couldn't help compare it to Damian's. Nick's was longer, but not as thick, she thought. The head was wider, though. And it was flaring almost purple at the edges. It looked wickedly enticing.

She looked up. Nick was watching her and she felt her cheeks start to burn.

"You want me to be not nice?" he asked. "Because I can be whatever you want, Riley."

She shook her head. "I don't want you to be anything at all," she said quickly. "If I get to have you at all, Nick, I just want you to be you. Do you even know what that is, anymore?"

He hesitated and she saw that he was genuinely startled. "As in...when I was human?" He laughed. "You would not even understand the language." He spoke a few words as he moved onto the bed next to her.

She shook her head sadly. "No, I don't understand," she said softly, laying her hand on his chest. "But I wish I could."

He picked up her hand and kissed her fingers. "It's an ugly language, anyway. Old English isn't any better than modern English. Norman French was much prettier." And he spoke another sentence and kissed her forehead.

"Yes, that does sound much nicer," she agreed. "More musical."

"You'd be amazed at the barbaric deeds that were done in that musical language," he told her, tugging at the tie around her waist. It unraveled and the robe fell open and he sighed. His fingers began to stroke up and down the length of her body. "Is that the spell you cast over Damian? You let him be himself? His true self? You accepted him that way?"

"That he was a Spartan? Yes, I understood that. But I didn't think what I was doing was casting a spell." She caught her breath as Nick's hand closed around her breast and the fingers slid up to the peak to tug at the nipple. It was a casual tweak. His hand moved on, downward, to her hip, making her abdomen ripple and her hips jerk. Her cunt clamped and squeezed honey as he stroked between her thighs. Her breath grew faster.

"You know who I am, too," Nick said. It wasn't a question.

"I don't know the details, Nick. But I understand the differences between you and me. I know you're not human. I know you were alive when Richard the Lionhearted was on the throne. I know that in my bones. It's not something I will ever forget. I will never treat you as human when there is a need to differentiate."

"Yet knowing that, you can still lie here and let me touch you," he said softly.

She looked him in the eye. "Yes."

He smiled. "There's no need to challenge me. I already know the truth of it." He caught her face in his hands. "I'm beginning to understand why Damian could not leave you be." His face shadowed for a moment. Rippled with grief. Then it was gone. "Come here."

He tucked his arm under her waist and pulled her underneath him and looked her in the eye. His hand smoothed its way along the side of her hip, down her leg. "Just this once, Riley Carson Connors, I want to be very old-fashioned and traditional. Human, if you will. Do you mind?"

She shook her head. She was afraid to speak. She thought she might cry if she spoke. His request was profoundly moving.

Nick brushed her hair back from her face. "You really are very beautiful," he said. "I have lived a greater time than all men, so I have seen beauty in every form, and yours outshines them all. I confess, Riley, I have fought harder to deny it and struggled longer against its effects, but even I am not immune. I consider it my staggering good fortune that you choose to be in my bed today."

He kissed her temple, and Riley reflected that there was not a man on earth who had managed to make her feel like her beauty was a gift and that she had bestowed a favor upon them by sleeping with them. Only Nick, who wasn't human anymore. For the first time in her life, for one shining moment, her beauty wasn't a curse. It was actually a positive thing.

She blinked hard. "I thought Englishmen were supposed to be really bad poets?" Her voice was thick with the dammed-back tears.

Nick's mouth was trailing down her cheekbone to her ear. "And lovers," he added, and thrust his tongue into her ear. The tip of his tongue circled around the grooves and ridges of her ear as his breath blew softly against it. She began to writhe at the sensations both stimuli were building.

His thigh slipped between hers, pinning her down, and pressing against her mons. The pressure against her clit was both pleasurable and a torment. Her hips lifted in reaction.

"Mmm..." Nick murmured in response, his lips closing around the lobe of her ear.

"This is old-fashioned sex?" she said, with a gasp.

"So far," he agreed. "Lovemaking at its most basic."

She felt a *frisson* of surprise touch her again at his use of the word "lovemaking". Why was she so sensitive about it? He was being old-fashioned, for heaven's sake. *Go with the flow, Riley*, she told herself.

"Of course," he said, his tongue sliding down her neck to swirl over the most sensitive point of her nape, as his hand delicately caressed the underside of her breast, "If I really were human, then this would have to be your wedding night. You would not be in my bed, otherwise."

"No?" She gasped as his fingers slid over the peak of her breast, tripping over the nipple one finger at a time, tugging on it four times in a row, then back again. Sweet torture.

"A beauty like you would have been carefully marketed out to the highest lords in the land, no matter what the size of her dowry. And you would have been brought to my attention, for sure."

"You...were a lord." Of course. Of course. The broadsword. His language. She gasped as his teeth pulled at her other nipple. A sharp tug. Then he let it go so he could speak.

"Let us say that the marriage was agreed between us and this is the marriage bed," he said. "It would, of course, have been a four-poster bed and the curtains would have been drawn all around us."

"Why?" she asked, and drew in a sharp breath as his leg lifted from between her thighs and was replaced by his hand. His fingers began to stroke the flesh of her thighs, teasing. Her legs fell open, trembling.

"So that the witnesses could remain in the room and hear the taking of your maidenhead."

Riley lifted her gaze to Nicholas' eyes. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

He was smiling. "Unfortunately, no. The wedding would have been arranged for the night falling in the middle of your menses cycle, too. Even back then they knew that was when you would have the best chance of getting with child. A child conceived on your wedding night would have been considered a most fortuitous event."

Riley shivered. There was something in Nick's face. A shadow. More than grief. An older darkness. But it was gone before she could examine it and his hands were distracting her, teasing her, fluttering against the lips of her pussy.

Her clitoris was screaming for attention. So was her cunt. She needed Nick. Wanted him inside her. This slow, delicate seduction was killing her.

"So you would have to...make love to me in a roomful of people?" she breathed.

"It was the way of it then," he told her. "Just for your wedding night, and just for the first time. Once the bloody sheet had been produced, they would hang it out the window and go away happy."

She reached up to hold Nicholas' face, instinct driving her. "Make love to me, my lord. Everyone has gone. It's just us now."

Nicholas' breath caught. Then he kissed her with a passion that was almost blistering in its intensity. It took her breath away. His hand was under her hip, lifting her, holding her against him, and she could feel his cock against her belly, hard and throbbing.

His hand slid under her knee and lifted it. Her leg was draped over his hip. It spread her thighs as she lay on one hip beside him, and his fingers curled over her ass. Her pussy tightened, squeezing juice.

And still his kisses continued. Her nipples raked his chest as he plundered her mouth with his.

She felt his cock press against her pussy entrance. The engorged head stretched the entrance. Nudged inside.

She gasped into Nick's mouth as he pushed into her. He thrust his tongue deeper into her mouth, and his fingers gripped her ass as his cock worked its way into her. When he was fully seated inside her, she could feel him pressing against her womb.

He looked into her eyes, inches from his own. "Heavenly," he murmured.

Her pussy was rippling and clamping around his shaft, milking it. Nicholas' extended teasing had left her too close to an orgasm. She could feel it building already, gathering and growing.

"Oh, Nick!" she tried to warn him, her hands fluttering at his chest, her eyes widening.

"Shhh..." he said, and pulled his cock from her with inexorable slowness.

Riley writhed and panted, her climax building like a runaway steam train, unstoppable. "Quickly!" she cried.

Nick slid into her again, making her moan at the delicious sensation and the utter desperation she felt. She needed more. *More!*

He gave another incredibly slow withdrawal and thrust, impaling her with his long cock. Riley was falling to pieces around him, though. She plucked at his chest, clawed at his shoulders and arms, as her climax drew closer, unable to hold it off. Her breathing altered. Disintegrated.

Nick's fingers nestled up against her clit. Stroked it. "Come for me," he urged her.

Riley closed her eyes as her orgasm slammed through her. She tried to stay on top of it, to control it by breathing through it.

"Don't you *dare* control it," Nicholas growled in her ear. "Let go while you're with me."

She gasped, her eyes opening. Nicholas was watching her as she climaxed, his blue eyes missing nothing.

He kissed her roughly, and his cock slid back into her. "You will scream for me," he promised her. "You will let go."

His fingers closed around her clitoris once more as his cock thrust into her.

Riley wanted to tell him to give up, that she only ever came once, but his fingers were stroking, milking her clitoris in a way she had never experienced as he pounded into her, thrusting into and abruptly, she began to tingle with the building waves of a second climax. She gasped, disbelief circling through her.

"Yes, sink into it," Nick coaxed, his voice low. "Close your eyes. Focus on it."

Riley caught his gaze. "What are you doing to me?" she moaned.

"What I promised," he said, his voice rough. He kissed her, as his cock pushed deeper and deeper inside her. "Close your eyes," he told her.

She closed them, and immediately she could focus on nothing but what his fingers were doing to her clit, and the delicious sensation of his cock sliding in and out of her pussy. The pleasure they created seemed to double just by closing her eyes and she moaned. Her climax built.

Riley gripped the bedcovers, a little frightened by the power of the approaching orgasm. It was building and building, sweeping through her entire body, stealing her breath, locking up her joints, shunting thought aside.

"I'm here," Nicholas murmured. "Let go. Enjoy it."

The reassurance was enough. She sank into the approaching climax. Truly let herself go.

It was for a moment as if the world stopped. Her breathing halted and her body arched. Her pussy clamped hard around Nick's cock, milking it as he had done to her clitoris, and she heard him grunt softly and felt the spasms of his shaft as he came.

Then the climax peaked in waves of silvery pleasure that shuddered through her and she screamed in a low, hard voice that was utterly unlike her own. She couldn't draw in a full breath. The climax kept her hovering on peaks of delight as Nicholas toyed with her, until finally, there was simply no more pleasure to be had. She was spent. Replete.

And abruptly sleepy.

She realized she was curled up in Nick's arms, her head against his chest. His cock was still buried inside her.

His lips pressed against her temple. "Sleep for a while. I'll go and get some food for you."

"No, it's too dangerous," she protested sleepily as he withdrew from her body.

"For you, maybe. Azazel won't try for me. It's you he wants. I'll be careful."

A blanket was dropped over her and a pillow placed under her head.

She woke some time later. It was still daylight, so Riley knew that not much time had passed. When she checked the clock over the fireplace, she saw that barely ninety minutes had gone by. It was just after eleven in the morning.

The door to the apartment opened and she realized that the key fitting in the lock was what had woken her. She sat up, bringing the blanket up with her, as Nick stepped in and shut the door, locking it behind him. He was carrying shopping bags of food in one hand.

He was wearing his long black coat, black jeans and Damian's old teal sweater, which made his eyes look even more blue, if that was possible.

As he turned around from locking the door, he saw her sitting on the bed and paused.

"You're awake. I thought you'd be out for hours yet." And he smiled.

It struck her with the impact of an earthquake.

She loved him. She loved Nicholas Sherwood with soul-destroying intensity. It was that simple. She wanted to be with him. Always.

And she had loved Damian the same way.

She pulled her knees up under the blanket and hugged them. "You know, don't you?" Her voice shook. She could feel her eyes filling with tears.

Nick's smile faded. He put the bags on the sofa and crossed over to the bed. He didn't sit on it. He didn't try to touch her. "I know," he agreed. "A human's pheromones change when they fall in love. Yours have changed."

"That's what brought you out of your funk. Not sex at all."

He studied her. "You make it sound like a bad thing, Riley. Love is never a bad thing."

"Damian said love could be perverted." Her tears fell then.

"Only between perverted souls. You're not one of those."

"Are you?"

"Not if someone like you can love me, Riley." He took a deep breath, his chest lifting. "You are like a fresh breeze after centuries of despair. You're hope personified."

"I'm just a person, Nick. I have faults. Foibles. Don't make me out to be something I'm not."

"Oh, I know your human flaws all too well," he said, with a quick smile. "I love them all."

"Love?"

"Did you think you were the only one who toppled into this, Riley?" he asked softly.

Abruptly, the meanings behind the morning's lovemaking and talk shifted and became clearer. He had known all along that she loved him. And he had been hiding his love for her.

"Nick..."

He sank onto the bed beside her. "I was born in 1163 in Oxford, and I was milk brother to John Lackland, Richard's brother. You know of whom I speak?"

"King John?" Riley breathed. She could feel her eyes widening.

"He became king later, yes," Nick agreed. "By then, I was cut off from my family affairs."

With a jolt, she realized that Nick meant he had already been turned a vampire.

"*Family affairs?*" she repeated.

"A courtesy title. John and I were friends, as milk brothers usually are. Were." Nick grimaced. "And my real family was lost to me as well." He evened out the bedcover with his long fingers, then lifted his gaze to hers. "I was the eldest son of the Duke of Bradford. We were heading to Oxford for a tournament, at the command of King Henry, and were waylaid by what we thought was a highway thief. My father was elderly, nearly forty by then and unable to defend himself. Israfel was always a strategist. He killed my father first, then my younger brothers. That left me alone. He wanted me, you see. He isolated me, and by killing my family in front of me, made sure that shock partially disabled me, too. It worked. With his natural strength he barely had to work to take me."

Riley found her mouth was dry. She swallowed. "This...Israfel. He was the one who made you?"

"He was my maker and my first vampire partner, yes." Nicholas began to smooth out the bedcover again, almost compulsively swiping at the embroidered satin. He watched his fingers. "The tournament had been called to celebrate my betrothal to the king's cousin, Mary. The feast was to take place that night."

Riley said cautiously, "You loved her? Mary?"

"I was to meet her that night." Nick's eyes lifted to lock onto Riley's. "I welcomed the marriage, Riley. I wanted it. I wanted the children." His face spasmed in pain.

Abruptly, he got to his feet and moved to the window. He leaned his fist against it. After a moment, he rested his forehead against it, too, as if the cool glass was soothing.

Riley slipped from the bed and threw on his robe and belted it. She came up beside him and wrapped her arms around him. She didn't speak.

After a moment, Nick put his arm around her. "You wanted to see the human in me, Riley. That's all that's left of him—a pathetic scrap bundled up in pity."

"Damian knew this, didn't he?" she asked gently. "That's why you both became involved in the raising of my mother."

Nick sighed. "Except you've missed the one obvious connection, Riley."

She looked up at him.

"Damian did have children before he was turned," Nick said softly. "You and your family are descendants of his."

She could feel her eyes widening again. "You two are so closed-mouthed..." She sighed. "Were," she amended.

"It's a defense mechanism, honed from centuries of practice," Nick said. "We rarely let anyone in." He straightened up from the window, and pulled her in against his chest and wrapped his arms around her. "I may still slip from time to time. I'm out of practice, Riley. Damian knew everything there was to know. I didn't have to explain anymore." He shuddered. "God, I miss him."

Her eyes filled with hot tears. "Me, too."

Chapter Eleven

The katana skidded away from her numbed hand. Riley tucked herself into a ball and rolled after it. She reached out for the hilt, but before she could curl her fingers around it, Nick's hand snapped down over her wrist and yanked it away from the katana. She was rolled away.

Riley pulled her knees up to her chest and when she was flipped onto her back as she expected to be, she found Nick looming over her, his broadsword lifted up high, exposing his chest in order to give him the room he needed to stab.

She planted her feet on his chest and shoved. Hard.

He staggered backward, his sword arm flinging out sideways to give him balance. It was the opening she sought. She surged to her feet, and grabbed the katana with her left hand as she came up. Nick wouldn't be expecting the sword in her left hand. He would be watching her right hand.

She pushed his flailing left hand aside with her empty right hand, stepped inside his guard, and brought the katana blade up under his chin. His head jerked up as he felt the touch of the blade. She warded off his sword arm with her left elbow. It was too late, anyway. Her blade was already against his throat.

He grew still, his eyes locked with hers. "You swapped hands."

"I knew you would be watching my right." She smiled. "Not going to pull my hair today, Nick?" she asked sweetly.

They were training in the same cleared-out area as before, with the sofas pulled back, and the training mat laid down on the floorboards, making a twenty-foot informal dojo.

Riley wore a Lycra camisole and yoga pants, both black, and Nick wore thin black sweatpants that sat low on his hips...and nothing else. The sight of his chest and shoulder muscles working as he wielded the heavy broadsword had at first been a distraction to her. She had learned the hard way not to let her gaze get caught by his rounding and flexing muscles and sinews. A smack on the ass or legs with the flat of his sword hurt. Nick meant business when he stepped onto the mat.

Now he considered her question about pulling her hair with the same sort of seriousness. It was almost impossible to tease him when he was in his teacher role. "You beat me fairly...and Damian didn't see it this time." He looked around the mat, as if visualizing her last sequence. "You're ready."

She nodded. "We tackle Lirgon tonight, then?"

He took a deep breath. "Tonight," he repeated. "As long as you agree not to get yourself killed. Damian would never forgive me, wherever he is."

"I'll try to avoid it."

"Then could you drop the blade from my throat, hmmm?"

She smiled. "I kinda like having you at my mercy." She nudged the blade a little higher, forcing his head back. "It's not often I get to have you dancing to my tune."

"You just *think* you have me at your mercy," he growled. His right arm moved, and she knew he was going to try to pull her down like he did once before, but she blocked the move by throwing out her elbow and pushing the blade in deeper. A fine line of blood showed on his throat and he hissed.

"I *do* have you under my control," she told him.

"Yes," he admitted. His fangs had descended, and his voice was hoarse.

He liked her having control.

For a man like Nick, who must keep control at all times, handing over that control in certain circumstances would be a thrilling thing. She realized with a start that she had caught a glimpse of the power structure of Nick's relationship with Damian.

And how it might work with her.

Her own body was pulsing with this unusual excitement. She kept the sword in place, reached up to grab a handful of Nick's hair and kissed him, hard and rough. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, flicking it over his fangs.

He groaned. She felt his body shudder.

Riley hooked her foot behind his heel and yanked with all her strength. Nick went down hard, landing on his back on the matting. The impact pushed the air out of him with a gusty grunt and the floorboards shook.

She followed him down, dropping the sword and straddling his hips and squeezing with her thighs to keep him still. She pushed the broadsword out of his reach and pinned his wrists above his head, using her body weight to hold them down.

"You just lost your advantage," he told her.

"That's what you think. Try to throw me off."

He looked amused. "You and I both know I can lift a car with one hand. If I were a man, you *might* have the advantage of me, but even then, I'd outweigh you —"

She kissed him. In the two days since they had first made love, they had done nothing but fuck and train, and when Riley could not stay awake any longer, she slept while Nick held her. She would wake from erotic dreams, already aroused, to find him easing his cock into her, his hands running over her body and his voice in her ear as he told her the things he had planned to do to her while she slept.

Eating had become a sensual exercise, with Nick feeding her morsels between caresses and even in the shower they clung together. The only reason they wore clothing now was because for Riley it soaked up sweat, and it gave them both minor protection against scrapes and nicks from the swords if they grew careless. But Nick would not allow her to wear protective shielding. He did not want her to grow psychologically dependent upon it.

So she had kissed Nick a lot in the last two days, in all sorts of ways, and she loved all of them. She knew that running her tongue over his fangs drove him crazy with need, and it had a side benefit, it provoked drops of the aphrodisiac that vampires produced when they bit humans. Nick had been almost embarrassed by this discovery, but Riley's response to the aphrodisiac had left them both drained and replete, with the knowledge in each other's eyes that they would do this again, and soon.

Riley had learned how to kiss Nick for maximum effect and she kissed him now with complete attention on giving pleasure. She ran the tip of her tongue over his lips and flirted with his own tongue, thrusting gently.

As she kissed him, she rubbed her breasts against his chest. Her nipples caught fire and pebbled into hard nubs.

Slowly, she spread her thighs and sank down onto his hips, until her pussy was making hard contact with his pelvis. She rocked gently, the soft tissues between her legs already hot and moist and throbbing. As she rocked, the thin, tight yoga pants she wore let her feel almost every sensation.

Nick's cock was hardening, thickening beneath her.

"Now throw me off," she told him, her lips brushing his. Her voice was heavy with arousal.

"You really want me at your mercy, hmmm?" His eyes were half-closed, the blue mere slits as he watched her.

"You like it," she accused him.

"Only when it's true." He lifted himself up, bringing her with him, despite her weight on his wrists. He sat up, and Riley found herself in his lap, her hands behind her back, locked in his grip. He tapped her nose. "You're far more dangerous with a katana in your hand. Remember that."

"Bastard."

"Not even close," he assured her, and kissed her. His free hand roamed over her body. He gripped the top of her camisole and ripped it apart, leaving her naked from the waist up. "Better," he muttered. He fondled her breasts, tugging at her nipples. She gave a gasping cry, arching back, and he smiled. "I love making you squirm."

"I do...not...squirm," she gasped, as she wriggled on his lap.

He laughed. "You squirm like hooked bait, my lover. Let me demonstrate."

Riley froze. "What did you call me?"

Nicholas shifted, releasing her hands, and she felt his bent knees press up behind her, giving her support. He studied her face, looking for clues. She could feel his wariness. Riley put her hand over his heart, trying to reassure him. "You called me 'my lover'. Damian used to call me that."

Nicholas took a breath. She could see both relief and the shadow of grief touch him that always did when Damian's name was mentioned. He gave a crooked smile. "That's where I got it from," he confessed. "I can hear his voice in the words."

Tears pricked her eyes. "So can I." She cupped his face. "He called you that, too, didn't he?"

Nick caught at her hand with his and kissed her palm. "Yes," he breathed into her hand.

She slid her hand under his chin, and tried to lift it, to make him look at her. Nick lifted his gaze up to meet her eyes. She attempted a smile. "Why did he make you take him to the roof, Nick? Why somewhere so exposed? Why not leave him somewhere more protected?"

Nick's hand bent around hers, almost crushing it, as he stared at her. "The wind. He wanted the wind to scatter...him... Fuck." He hung his head.

"Nick?" she asked softly.

"Do you know what I would give to be able to shed a tear, right now?" His voice was muffled. "I can't even do that for him." He lifted his head again. His eyes seemed very blue. "Humans get the benefit of funerals. Ceremony." He grimaced. "I envy them, right now."

"But the funeral is for everyone except the person who died," Riley said. "You can do something for Damian that no human can do for the dead."

"What?" Nick seemed genuine puzzled.

"You can remember him forever."

He cupped her face in his hands. "I can remember you, too, Riley." He seemed to be about to say more, but hesitated and shook his head. "You are a rare one, indeed." He brushed her hair from her temple. "My lover."

She smiled. "You'd better prove it when you use that name."

His big hands settled on her waist, and his thumbs circled restlessly, just below her naked breasts. Her nipples hardened and her belly muscles quivered at his touch. Riley found herself trying to arch, but her back was blocked by Nick's legs.

"I have you now," Nick murmured, his eyes hooded and his voice thick with a sudden excitement. His hands tightened around her waist. "Wriggle all you want."

"I told you, I don't squirm." She pushed at his hands and realized the movement was making her breasts jiggle right in front of his eyes. He was so strong, his hands might as well have been iron bands around her waist. She wasn't going to move them as long as he wanted them there. She was a bug in pincers.

Nick smiled. "Caught, aren't you?"

She pushed at his chest. "Not for a minute," she denied hotly.

But her movements were making her pussy rub against his lap, and she could feel his cock lying against his hip, thick and erect. He was fully aroused, turned-on by her helpless struggles in his hands.

A hot blanket of arousal washed over her. Liquid languor. Her pussy pulsed, squeezing out honeyed moisture. She lifted her hands to her breasts, cupped them, and stared into Nick's eyes. "Fuck me, Nicholas. Take me now."

His fangs descended, just a little. "You know I can't resist a direct plea."

She smiled. "I know."

He lifted her, showing a hint of his incredible strength, and got to his knees. But instead of putting her on her feet as she expected, he flipped her and put her on her hands and knees. He stripped the yoga pants from her in one long sweeping motion, which left her naked on the floor.

His feet pushed her knees apart. He was standing over her. Riley began to tremble.

"You are so fragile," he murmured. His fingers trailed along her spine, making her arch. "But so strong in ways that always surprise me." His hand pushed between her ass cheeks, sliding the length of her cleft. "Hot," he whispered as she gasped at the small invasion.

He moved away. She traced the sound of his feet on the mat. Small sounds. Nicholas could move silently when he wanted to, so she knew he was deliberately letting her hear him. Baiting her with small noises. He wanted her to try to look to see what he was doing.

She kept still. But her trembling increased. Anticipation worsened it.

She heard him return. "You're a contrary woman, aren't you?" There was laughter in his voice. He knew she had deliberately not looked.

"Surprise me," she told him. Her voice was husky.

His fingers traced her mouth. "Open," he said.

She opened her lips and they slipped inside. Unlike human fingers she could taste no salt. Nick didn't sweat. He stroked her tongue and moistened his fingers. They withdrew, and closed around her right nipple, wetting it, elongating it with their pulling and stretching.

She drew in her breath, her clitoris throbbing in reaction to the teasing. In the airy apartment, the play of the air across her wet nipple made it harden and become even more sensitive. Nick pushed his fingers into her mouth again, sliding them across her tongue, dampening them down. He toyed with her left nipple, rolling it around with his wet fingertips, soaking it.

She hissed, her breath ragged. Nick had barely touched her and already she could feel the beat and pull of a climax, low in her belly, starting to build.

The touch of the cold metal of the clamp made her moan and her hips thrust forward.

"Mmm, yes, squirm for me," Nick coaxed as he tightened the clamp around her nipple. The chain swung as her hips jerked, sending a little jolt of pleasure-pain from her nipple to her clit and her cunt. She moaned again.

She didn't care if she was squirming.

Nick fitted the other clamp to her hard, erect nipple. Now the chain between them was swinging in a free pendulum, creating constant little tugs on her nipples.

Riley groaned, her eyes closing. Her world narrowed down to the sensations caused by the nipple clamps and the swinging chain hanging from them. The silvery spears of delight that were transmitted back to her pussy and her swollen nub.

When the dildo touched her cleft, she almost screamed. She swallowed back her surprise. The thick tool brushed between her lips, gathering moisture and she pushed back against it. A moan escaped her. Nick was going to impale her with it and the idea made her giddy. Which one was it? The big, thick one? The slender one that would sit right inside her and drive her crazy?

Where was he going to slide it in?

She could feel her pussy weeping with anticipation, even as her heart began a staccato rattle against her chest.

"Such a beautiful sight," Nick said, pushing the dildo an inch or so into her pussy. His voice was distorted with lust.

Riley sucked in her breath, her fingers clawing at the mat. "More," she croaked. It was the big dildo. She could feel her pussy lips clench around it, working to draw it in. She pressed backward, encouraging him to push it into her. She wanted it inside.

Nick pushed it an inch farther in, making her cry out in both elation and frustration. "More!" she demanded, working her hips, trying to drive it deeper.

He nudged it a little farther in.

She moaned in frustration, her head rolling backward. "I beg you, Nicholas..." She was panting, and it took two breaths to say the words.

"Music," he said. The dildo slid smoothly into her, deep and hard and she arched, crying again as it came to rest against her womb, filling her completely. Nick's hand tangled in her hair, pulling her head back even farther, and his lips captured hers. "Your expression...I could come just watching your face, my lover, as I play with you."

"Play more," she pleaded hoarsely.

His eyes sparkled with delight. "Very well."

He ran his hand down her back again, making her twitch, making the nipple chain dance. Her clit throbbed in reaction and her pussy clamped around the fat invader.

Cool liquid touched her nether lips. Lubricant.

Fiery excitement washed over Riley. She knew what Nicholas intended. Her pussy gushed around the dildo and almost squeezed the tool out, so great was her delight.

"Hush," Nick murmured, perhaps sensing her leap in pleasure. His fingers spread the gel, bumping into the base of the dildo, then up to her anus. They worked the lubricant into her ass, pushing it inside, spearing her.

Riley clawed at the mat with her fingernails, riding at the outer limits of her control. She was jittering apart with anticipation and excitement. Her breath was ragged and barely serving her.

Nicholas had taught her to love anal sex, but this was the first time he had taken her while she had a dildo in her cunt as well. She didn't think she could stand the wait.

His cock pressed against the tiny aperture and she pushed back. "Slowly, my lover. Slowly," he warned.

She was shaking. Nick's hands curled around her hips, controlling his entry with slow mastery. And she needed the time to accustom herself to having both Nick and the dildo inside her. As he pushed inside, the feeling of being full was at first odd and a little uncomfortable. But then she swiftly grew to like it. Very much.

Before Nick was even fully lodged inside her, she knew she loved it. She rolled her head back as her pussy, her clit, her entire cleft throbbed and clamped around the two shafts inside her. "Oh, lord," she sighed.

Nick kissed the back of her shoulder. "Wanton."

"Yes," she agreed, and flexed her hips. She heard Nick catch his breath.

She closed her eyes. "I don't think I can last too much longer, Nick," she warned.

"Nor I, this time," he agreed. "You are so tight around me, I could come just from resting in you."

Her body seemed to flush hot at the idea. Her clit pulsed. "Oh," she breathed. Her hips thrust. "Oh, Nick!" she said quickly, as her orgasm swelled and grew.

His cock thrust gently into her. But even a gentle thrust was far too erotic a sensation for her. She cried out, a guttural sound from deep inside her, as her climax bloomed. She sank into it, her body shaking.

Nick thrust harder. Faster. It pushed her over into the depths of her orgasm.

Nick groaned as he came, his cock spasming in her back passage. It set off another peak of her climax, shuddering through her like a silvery wave of electricity.

She felt herself being lifted even as she was still shaking, still impaled on Nick's cock. No fear touched her. Nick's hands around her waist were strong, unfailing. She felt him sit back so that she was astride his lap, still mounted upon him. He pushed aside her hair and turned her face so that he could kiss her cheek. "You didn't scream," he said, his voice the breathless, quiet, post-orgasmic one she loved.

"I didn't?" She hadn't noticed. She smiled at him. "You always take it personally. You shouldn't, you know."

"Really?" His smile was sleepy. "In my day, it didn't even occur to men that women could deliberately be made to climax. If it happened, it was something that sluts did accidentally, because they were oversexed. Ladies never did, of course. Prostitutes saw it another way altogether. Information was very confused back then."

"And you were a model of propriety, of course."

"In public," Nicholas agreed, with a grin. He wrapped his arms around her. "For all its drawbacks, progress and enlightenment is worth it. The worshippers of history and a quieter age have no idea that what they long for is an illusion, filled with misery and disease."

"You're glad to be here, aren't you?" she said softly.

"Immortality has a price, Riley. You get to watch friends and lovers die. I've fought tooth and nail for five centuries to never love another human, because I just couldn't stand to lose another one. The pain is just too great. Over and over again, decade after decade, watching humans grow old and die and helplessly standing by and letting them wither away. I couldn't do it anymore. So I just...stopped. It never occurred to me in my arrogance that I might lose Damian." He sighed and his lips pressed against her neck. "But what I had forgotten about human love is that it keeps me human, too."

"Damian didn't forget that. He told me as much."

"No, he managed to keep his humanness intact somehow. That's why you were drawn to him." Nick rested his head on her shoulder. "And so was I." Then he lifted her up off him, very carefully, and put her on her feet. "We have preparations to make for tonight." He swatted her ass. "And you have a sword to clean."

Chapter Twelve

They arrived at the gallery ten minutes before the guards changed shift, and Riley, already seriously scared, just about jumped out of her boots. Fábio Natan was sitting on a bench at the top of the first landing, watching everyone who entered the gallery, a sketchbook in his hands.

"Relax," Nick murmured. "He'll never recognize you like that." He picked up her hand and squeezed it.

She glanced at him and did another small double-take, as she had been doing ever since they had left the apartment. Nick was not Nick at all. He was wearing a knitted cap pulled down low over his ears, wraparound sunglasses and what looked like three days' growth on his cheeks and chin. A long-sleeved Ed Hardy tee shirt, and very baggy black jeans that looked like they were only barely hanging onto his hips completed the outfit, along with a very heavy, large crucifix swinging from a silver chain around his neck. He'd thrown a sleeveless black denim vest over the top of it.

But the most startling difference was his eyes. He wore brown contact lenses and every time he took off the glasses, she was astonished all over again at the stranger looking back at her. It wasn't just the eyes. It was the attitude, the demeanor. The swagger.

Nick had disappeared, and a lanky, lazy, street punk was shuffling along next to her, his hips swinging in time to unheard music.

But her own appearance had shocked her when she'd caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as they'd left the apartment. She wore the boots Damian had bought her, but everything else was pure gang whore—purple pantyhose and a short, tight denim skirt that she didn't dare bend over while she was wearing it, and a black leather bra top with a mesh tee shirt over the top. Nick had bundled her real hair up under a wig of spiked hair that was blonde at the ends and black as midnight at the roots and helped her slide black contact lenses over her eyes. She'd applied masses of mascara and eyeliner to her eyes, and black eye shadow and dark lipstick, and blinked at herself in the mirror. It was a stranger blinking back.

Nick added big, chunky silver earrings that hung to her shoulders and a cheap green faux fur coat that came down to her knees and itched despite the thin lining.

"I look..." She grimaced at herself.

"Different," Nick said flatly. "Even if Natan took our photos with that cell phone, they won't even twitch when they see you."

She shuddered. "I look ugly," she breathed. "That's what it is."

Nick rested his hand on her shoulder. "I can still see you behind it all."

Riley turned to look at him without the mirror. "Really? Because I can barely see the real you."

He slid on the glasses. "You ain't seen nothin' yet, babe. Pick up y' shit and let's get out of here."

Startled—again—she followed behind as he slouched his way to the apartment door. Their walk to the gallery was an education. People actually stepped around Nick. Some even crossed the road when they saw him coming toward them. Women slid their hands under the arms of their male companions.

No one looked at Riley. No one even noticed her. She was almost invisible because everyone was watching the dangerous man beside her.

By the time they turned into Vandam Street, where the gallery was located, Riley had relaxed and was beginning to play along. She was the gang tart, with her man, and no one would mess with her while she was with him. She straightened her spine, stuck out her chest and began to strut a little. And she worked hard to hide her smile, because she felt totally ridiculous. But people were taking Nick very seriously indeed.

When she saw the gallery, she remembered why they were there, and her amusement died.

They were there to kill a gargoyle. A creature that was eating humans.

And Nick was going to kill the demon that had murdered Damian.

This wasn't play at all.

Now, as she stood in the foyer of the gallery, her hand in Nick's, she took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm fine," she told him.

"I'll get tickets," he told her.

She cocked her hip, crossed her arms and looked bored while Nick murmured to the ticket clerk and bought a pair of tickets for the exhibition. The clerk looked nervous, her eyes darting over to the security guards manning the walk-through screen, as she pushed the tickets and program under the glass partition.

The security guards were also watching Nick, even as they were processing visitors through the walking-through frame. He was naturally drawing their attention, like filings to a magnet.

Riley looked around, making it look casual. Indifferent.

Natan was also watching Nick as he swaggered toward the guards.

Nick wasn't going to bring the tickets to Riley. She was expected to run over to him. As she looked at him, he jerked his head, a silent command that she get her butt over and join him.

She flounced over, and he silently shoved a ticket at her, and pushed at her shoulder, indicating she should go first through the scanner.

Riley handed her ticket to the guard on the near side of the frame and he silently tore the ticket in half and gave her back the stub. It was odd not to get even a smile from a man, and she worked hard not to show her surprise or discomfort. She stalked

through the frame, head up, knowing there was nothing on her body that could possibly set off any alarms.

She turned to see Nick dropping his sunglasses into the plastic tub in front of the guard. Then the crucifix, followed by the heavy silver rings on his fingers, and the belt holding up his jeans. He grinned at the guard and held out his ticket.

The guard took it, ripped it in half and handed it back, all without smiling or taking his eyes off Nick's face.

Nick shoved the ticket stub into his back pocket and walked through the frame. It stayed silent, but the guard with the manual scanning wand waved him over. "Step over here, please, sir."

Three guards were picking suspiciously through the jewelry Nick had dropped into the tub to have passed around the frame. They were frowning, turning the pieces over, giving them more than the usual scrutiny.

The guard in front of Nick passed the wand up and down his body and in between his legs. He was also frowning, not happy that there was nothing to set off the metal alerts.

They'll be focused on the suggestion of gang trouble and won't look anywhere else, Nick had explained when he had first outlined the reason why they would be dressing to draw this sort of attention. It seems like we're drawing attention to ourselves, but what we're making them focus on is the illusion we're painting, and that is all.

Finally the guard stepped back and nodded. He didn't apologize or thank Nick, but that would have involved loss of face.

Nick winked at the guard.

Red flushed up the guard's neck, into his face, but he stayed silent.

Nick waited for the other three to finish with his jewelry, then put it all back on again, including the sunglasses. He cracked his knuckles, clicked all four fingers in a waterfall staccato and pointed at the guards with both forefingers. "Later," he said.

Riley drew in a deep breath and let it out. She didn't know if she wanted to howl with laughter or throw up. The expressions on the face of the guards were priceless.

She hurried after Nick as he headed for the stairs. He was already five steps up when she reached them, and climbing two at a time with his long legs, the saggy jeans flapping around his limbs. She clambered after him, glad that the cheap fur coat came down to the back of her knees, giving her at least a little dignity as she climbed the stairs in such a short skirt.

Natan was watching them both as they moved up to the landing. Nick angled to the right, heading for the turn and the staircase that led up to the gallery on the next floor. Riley followed him, which allowed her to naturally turn her head away from Natan. She kept her gaze on the steps, watching her footing, or on Nick's back.

Then they were past Natan, and moving up the second half of the flight, heading for the second floor. She could see the feet of the gargoyles already, and people wandering among them, looking small and insignificant between the dark stone giants.

They reached the gallery level and Riley looked at the clock. "Eight minutes to go," she murmured.

"Kay," he replied and wandered off without looking at her.

For the next few minutes, Riley toured the exhibition, gazing up at the gargoyles in frank wonder. She stayed away from Lirgon. She didn't think her nerves were up to facing the leader of the clan just yet. The time was soon approaching when she would be challenging him directly.

When she rounded the hulking stone mass of one of the gargoyles that Damian had told her was not one of the Stonebrood clan, she found herself face-to-face with Natan, his notebook under his arm.

"Scuse me," she said, and went to step around him.

He stepped sideways to block her way. "I know who you are," he said softly. "The disguise has fooled everyone else, but I carve shapes for a living, and your face, you see... You should have changed the shape of your face if you wanted to hide from me. It's so very nearly perfect in symmetry."

She put her hands on her hips. Bluff. It was all she had left. "Who the fuck are you, mister?" She could hear Sabrina's indignant Louisiana accent in her head, and injected it into her voice. "You'd better get out of my way if you don't want me to scream down this building right now."

"Trouble, babe?" Nick had come up behind her.

Natan shifted his gaze up to take in Nick, then looked back at her. "Your face, and his height and build. Together that is conclusive. You'll notice I haven't called the guards this time?"

Riley didn't know how to respond. Nick also stayed silent.

"What happened to your friend, the one Jeremiah shot?" Natan pressed.

"He's dead," Nick said flatly.

Natan closed his big eyes. "That...was not what I intended," he said softly.

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you bargained with the devil," Nick said in his own voice.

Natan swallowed. "You said he was a...a demon, not the devil."

"Who do you think he works for?" Nick replied dryly.

Natan was squeezing his notebook convulsively. The pages tore at the edges and crumpled with each contraction. "The police...I told them nothing. I lied and said you were kids looking for cash."

"Why?" Riley asked.

Natan looked at her. "Jeremiah," he said flatly. "He shot your friend just to hurt you. It was...it was..."

"Evil," Nick finished.

"Yes," Natan agreed.

"Help us," Nick said quickly.

"Help you do what? Why are you even here?" Natan asked. "Jeremiah said you would come, but I didn't believe you would be that stupid."

"I'm here for Lirgon," Riley told him. "But Nicholas is here for the creature you call Jeremiah. His real name is Azazel, Natan. He must be stopped tonight, or more people will die."

"And who is Lirgon?"

She pointed to the carving behind Natan. "That is. He is the leader of the clan. You carved him, and Azazel brought him back to life. For the past ten days he has been feeding on human flesh and tonight I have to send him back to the earth where he should have been all along."

Sweat glistened on Natan's forehead. "You're going to destroy my sculpture?"

"I'm going to destroy a killer, Natan, just as he rises from his sleep. A killer that you had a hand in creating."

Natan seemed to be on the verge of protesting.

"Do you want me to show you what Azazel's gun did to Damian, Natan?" Nick said, his voice harsh. "Do you want to see what concentrated gargoyle toxin does to the victim? It's not pretty, you know. Normal toxin takes about twelve hours to petrify the target. Azazel has beefed it up. Damian was dead inside ten minutes and he didn't die peacefully. His skin turned black and the edges of the wound were rigid, like solid lava. You could see the toxin burrowing under his skin —"

"Stop! For god's sake, stop!" Natan breathed, his eyes very wide and glassy. His face was white. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. For several minutes he just breathed hard. "I thought it was inspiring, to know about...demons. About this other world. I thought it would help my work. I actually felt superior because I knew and no one else did." He looked woebegone. "But it doesn't work that way at all, does it? It's a responsibility."

"Yes," Nick said flatly.

Natan nodded. He wiped his forehead. Then he took another breath. "What can I do?" he asked Nick. "I can't fight," he warned. "I am a natural coward, and I am very good at it."

"You can be two warm bodies, though," Nick told him. "You have security privileges, don't you? You can bypass the scanning frame at the front door?"

Natan nodded.

Riley looked up at the clock. "Four minutes," she told Nick.

"Leave the gallery right now," Nick told Natan. "Go out the way the general public does, through the security frame. Then wait about five minutes and come back in using your security privileges. Have a coffee, draw a picture, anything you like. And then, sometime before gallery closing time, leave the gallery again, using the public exit, through the security frame. Then go home, Natan. Stay there, and don't come back here tonight. Not if you're the natural coward you say you are."

Natan frowned, thinking it through. "You want the security counts for bodies in to match bodies out."

"Yes," Nick said.

"You're staying here, to wait for the gargoyles to...what? Wake?"

"Rise," Riley told him.

Natan squared his shoulders. "All right. I will do what you ask." He turned and hurried away.

"Three minutes," Riley warned.

Nick turned and walked in the opposite direction.

Riley went back to studying the gargoyles, but it was a pretense this time. She was steadily counting down the minutes. After what she thought were about three minutes, she drifted out to the edge of the gallery floor and looked around, as if she were looking for Nick. The security guard who had been standing over by the edge of the stairs was heading downstairs. His duty shift was over.

She turned and weaved her way to the back of the gallery and the service corridor and hurried down the corridor to the ladies' washroom and pushed inside. It was a single facility and built wide enough for wheelchair access. She shot the lock.

Quickly, she shed the prickly coat, the net tee shirt, her boots and the purple pantyhose. She was wearing socks over the top of the pantyhose, which she also stripped off, and she put those back on once the pantyhose were removed. From the oversize pocket in the coat, she pulled out a far more modest and traditional tee shirt, which she put on over the leather bra. She pulled the skirt farther down her hips so it covered more of her legs.

The wig went into the pocket the tee shirt had emerged from. From the other pocket she removed a packet of pre-moistened towelettes and used them to remove most of the makeup she wore. With a deep breath, and careful probing, she removed the contacts from her eyes. The contacts and the awful earrings went into the pocket with the towelettes. She rolled the coat up into a tight bundle.

Then she climbed onto the basin, reached up and pushed aside one of the ceiling tiles. She threw the coat up into the ceiling cavity, and replaced the ceiling tile.

She put her boots back on, feeling much more like herself, and shook her hair out.

When she came out of the washroom, she knew she looked totally different. Only someone who may have noticed her boots would have made the connection between the brassy chick who had strolled in on the arms of the troublemaker ten minutes ago

and the brunette who wandered the gallery by herself, and everyone who may have noticed her boots was now off-duty.

As she paused at the flat, glass-topped display case with biography materials on Fábio Natan and the history of gargoyles, Nick passed by on the other side. Like her, he was utterly changed in appearance. The cap, jewelry and stubble were gone and his hair was back to normal. The denim vest, tee shirt, and baggy jeans were now lying on top of the ceiling tiles in the men's washroom, just as her clothes were. The tailored trousers, leather belt and slim collarless shirt he'd worn beneath looked slightly rumpled, but not enough to even come close to calling him scruffy. He'd straightened up, and squared his shoulders and now he'd removed his contacts, he was back to being Nick again.

He didn't even glance at her.

Riley glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes before closing time. These security guards just checking in for the closing round were the night staff. They specialized in after hours security. They would clock on just to shut down the gallery, go home for dinner, then come back a few hours later to do their security rounds, and that would go on all night. Nick's appearance at the display table meant he had prepared her hiding place for her. She moved away from the display table, taking a wandering path back to the service corridor, glancing around at the exhibition. No one was taking any notice of her. She was normal. Ordinary. Nothing like the potential trouble that had sashayed in the door half an hour ago.

She moved into the corridor once more and hurried down toward the fire escape end. The janitor's closet was one of the last doors on the right before the metal door. She noticed that the wires Damian had severed over the top of the fire escape door had been repaired.

Riley glanced once more over her shoulder as she reached the closet. No one was passing the corridor opening. No one was looking at her. It was just her mental state. She breathed deeply and opened the closet. The doorknob rotated slackly in her hand. Nick had wrenched the locked door open earlier for her.

She slipped into the tiny closet and shut the door behind her. The ruined lock would not lock again. She would have to take care of that when the guards came by to check after closing.

By running her hand along the wall very gently, she found the light switch and flipped it. A low-wattage light showed her the four-foot by three-foot space she stood in. There were a couple of folding yellow plastic warning signs for propping over the top of puddles and spills when members of the public were careless with their drinks and beverages, and a mop and squeeze bucket tucked back into the corner, underneath two unfinished wooden shelves holding cleaning supplies. The faint scent of pine lingered.

She picked up a yellow warning sign. It was surprisingly tall when it was folded flat. She jammed it under the handle of the door.

Then she pulled the mop bucket out from under the shelves and turned it around so that the roller section was facing her. It would make a good temporary seat. She tested it carefully. It took her weight.

So she reached up and switched off the light, plunging herself into thick blackness, and carefully felt her way back to her stool. With some careful fumbling, she perched on the rollers.

Her breath sounded extraordinarily loud in the dark.

She also became aware of the world beyond the door. People wandering the exhibition at the end of the corridor. The squeak of running shoes on the wooden floor. The hush of people conversing in a public place. The rush of warm air through the central air ducts.

Nicholas would be squeezed into the cupboard they had chosen for him to hide in by now.

Riley recalled Nicholas' eyes, his body against hers, a montage of moments from the last two days. Instructing her in the finer points of swordsmanship, a small furrow between his brows. Standing naked at the warded windows of the apartment, his arms crossed, watching the street below with a brooding air, hatching plans. Listening to her with total concentration and being caught by surprise by a laugh, then letting himself go and *really* laughing, his head thrown back. Waking up to find him crouched next to the bed, watching her, his eyes so blue she could drown in them.

Riley had not suspected the icy Nicholas Sherwood had been protecting a passionate, intense, loving, *human* man, but in hindsight, she might have guessed. He let the shield down for no one but Damian.

And now her.

Total trust, her mind whispered. This was what Damian had asked of her. And now Nicholas had given it to her, unasked. She realized with jolt that she could — *would* — do the same. She would do anything that Nicholas asked of her, even if he asked her to give up her life for him. For Nicholas, she would pay that price. If Damian were alive, she would gladly include him in that life-debt, too. But no one else. She understood, now, what Damian had meant about degrees of trust. And now she knew how Nicholas had given Damian his complete and unquestioning trust that night.

Just thinking about Nick aroused her, brought her nerve endings alive. This was the first time they had been apart for longer than a few minutes and she missed him. It was like an ache in the chest.

And she wanted him. Her pussy crawled with fevered need, clamping in on itself. Her breath shortened.

She clutched at the mountings of the rollers, staring into the dark. She wasn't afraid of the dark at all, even now when she knew there really were monsters that moved out there. But she wanted Nicholas.

She wanted to feel him against her.

How long until closing time? How long until full dark? Nicholas had the better time sense. He would know with utter certainty when the sun had set, and would be the one to emerge first. He would come to find her.

Riley knew, though, that she wasn't going to last in this tiny space. Not alone. Not without Nick.

When the doorknob shifted slightly, the broken metal pieces of the lock rolling inside it, she nearly gasped out loud in shock, and slapped her hand over her mouth to hold it in. It couldn't be the guards doing their closing-down rounds. Not yet.

She stared at the place where the sound had come from.

"Riley, let me in."

It was Nicholas, his voice almost soundless.

She nearly sobbed her relief. She stood and turned the light back on, and pushed the bucket out of the way, back under the shelves, then unhooked the caution sign from under the door. As soon as she moved the sign, Nick pulled the door open, pushed inside with her and shut the door. He kept his ear to the door, listening for a moment. Then he relaxed and turned to face her properly.

"Good idea," he said, and jammed the caution sign back under the door. He twisted hard to do it, for with both of them in the closet, there wasn't enough room to turn around. He was already pressed up against the door.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"You called to me," he told her. His fingers traced her jaw. "So I came."

Riley was far too close to him to be able to put her hands on her hips and challenge him that way. She glared at him. "What do you mean, *called*?" she demanded suspiciously.

His fingertip followed the line of her mouth, his eyes following the trail. "You want me. I could smell it. Sense it."

Riley caught his wrist and squeezed, making his hand come to a stop. She pulled his hand away from her mouth, bringing it to her shoulder and out of harm's way, and waited for his gaze to focus on her eyes. Only when she had his complete attention did she speak.

"You're good, Nick. I know you can pick up my pheromones from dozens of paces away. But you're not that good. You're lying."

His eyes narrowed.

"Tell me why you're really here. What brought you here?"

Nicholas drew in a breath. Let it out. "You," he said flatly.

"But..." Riley began.

"No pheromones. Nothing, Riley. I..." He hesitated. "I just couldn't stay away."

She slid her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him. In the confines of the tiny closet, that was all the movement the space allowed. She pressed her mouth

against his neck, and licked and felt him shudder. "For days you have been telling me that business is business, Nick. We're two hunters who happen to be working side by side. Nothing personal."

His hands were on her back. Then one slid into her hair. The other down to her hips to hold her against him. "I know," he said simply.

"We watch each other's backs, but as soon as we start worrying about each other beyond that, we become a liability and we might as well draw targets on our own backs." She kissed the underside of his jaw.

His hand slipped underneath the hem of her skirt and stroked the delicate flesh between the backs of her thighs. Instantly, heat flashed to her pussy and made it ripple. She gripped the front of his shirt in her fists. "Not fair," she whispered.

"All's fair..." He kissed her as his fingers pushed higher, up against the fabric of her panties, making her groan against his mouth.

His fangs had descended and were protruding just a little beyond his normal teeth. Deliberately, Riley slid her tongue over the ends of them. They were razor sharp, but if she did it softly enough, it didn't hurt. She stroked the points again and Nick gave a breathless moan. His hand clenched hard in her hair. His cock was iron-hard against her hip and she felt it jerk and throb.

Hot-cold drops of liquid oozed onto her tongue.

Riley swallowed before she considered the wisdom of doing that.

The effect was instantaneous. Her body was engulfed in hot flames, torrid need gushing from every pore.

"No, Riley. Hush...silence, my lover," Nick murmured, his lips covering hers, as she scrabbled at his shirt, moaning with desperate desire.

She understood the need for silence, but her hands trembled as she pulled at his shirt. She wanted him naked. Now. Her head throbbed with the simple idea, but her fingers would not cooperate.

Nick took over, swiftly removing the offending items. As he worked Riley shed her own clothes. Her fingers were clumsy, but she managed to remove everything but her boots. There simply wasn't the room to take them off. And before she could think of how she might, Nick picked her up, his hands around her waist. He simply lifted her straight up into the air, giving a hint of his incredible strength.

Then he brought her sliding slowly down the length of his body, until his cock pushed against her cleft. Riley dug her fingernails into his shoulder as he slid into her. She was so wet with juices there was no resistance at all, but the feel of his wide head burrowing into her as he lowered her onto him was so exquisite she began to buck and squirm in delight.

Nick held her as her first orgasm ripped through her, and her cunt clamped around him in viselike contractions. His own breathing was labored.

When her pussy walls relaxed their grip on his shaft, he wrapped her legs around his hips, and thrust into her with heavy, hard strokes.

There was enough of the effects of the aphrodisiac left that Riley could feel every touch exaggerated, playing upon her sensory inputs like an amplifier. She held on to Nick, fighting to stay silent, to not scream out her pleasure at the top of her lungs. She was melting. Falling to pieces around his pounding cock.

Her second climax hit after only a few thrusts, but this time Nick didn't stop. He couldn't. He was feeding off her excitement, and driving toward his own nuclear-level explosion.

Riley could barely draw breath. Even as the climax ebbed, she could feel Nick's cock swelling inside her. The head flaring and pulsing as he came close to his climax. Every nerve ending she had was hypersensitive and alert, receiving all signals only as pleasure.

"Ah, Riley!" Nick breathed. "Only you!"

Her senses reeled. Her third climax began as his cock pumped and jerked in her pussy. It throbbed behind her eyes, and made her throat and neck hurt as she clamped down hard with her jaw to stop from screaming her heart out.

Nick's heavy groan was rich reward for keeping her silence. She might have missed it otherwise.

When she thought it was safe to open her eyes and try to focus them, she looked at him. "You're still a liar."

"Yes," he agreed, his chest lifting and falling quickly as he recovered his breath. His shoulder wore fine scratch marks from her fingernails and he glanced at them and smiled. "Don't look so horrified. They're honorable war wounds." He lowered her to the ground.

"Do they...hurt?" she asked as she dressed.

He laughed softly. "Not even for a moment." He paused from buttoning his shirt to kiss her. Very gently. The blue of his eyes looked rich in the low light of the cupboard and she knew even from just a few days it meant he was mellow and at his most human and vulnerable. "Stay with me, Riley."

She couldn't look away from his eyes. She knew what he was asking. There was enough honesty between them that she couldn't even prevaricate with a stupid question like "stay here in the closet?" or pretend to misunderstand.

"Forever, Nick? Or just for my life?" Her heart was racing.

He swallowed. "I think I would prefer forever, because I hate goodbyes. But I would not force that on you. It's a curse...and a blessing. I was not asked when I was turned." He brushed her hair away from her temple. "I won't ask you, because I would be asking for selfish reasons. If you want to be turned, you must ask me for it." He picked up her hand. "But, I do not want you to ask now. Not for a while. I just want you to be you. To be human and to stay with me." He kissed her hand. "Can you do that?"

Tears pricked her eyes. "If I stay, we can't hunt together anymore, Nick."

He drew a breath. "No. Your father understood that better than I. He had the right of it when he refused to hunt with your mother. I'll finish your training. I'll give you every skill I know. But we must find different partners." His hand tightened around hers. "You're staying, aren't you?"

"Did you doubt it?"

His expression was solemn. "There was always the possibility. I find the humans I'm closest to are often unpredictable, even after all this time. My own feelings get in the way of seeing them clearly, I think." He lifted her hand to his cheek and rubbed the back of her fingers against it. His eyes closed. "I resented your mother's bond, Riley. I hated her for it. You should know that. If I could have found an honorable way to break my word to her, I would have. It terrifies me to know how much happiness I would have lost if I had found a way to punish her for dying and leaving us alone, Damian and I." He opened his eyes. "But by dying, she gave me something I would not have had otherwise."

"Me," Riley concluded.

He grinned. "I think Tally would have enjoyed that irony. She knew precisely what she was demanding of us when she made us swear to protect you if Lirgon rose again, and I think she might even have predicted to herself what the end result might be if Lirgon's rising was far enough in the future. I don't break my word once it's given. Nor did Damian." He pulled her against him and tucked her head under his chin. "Ah, Riley, I can see by your expression that you're wondering what you've bitten off. I can go back to being surly if you'd prefer."

"No, thank you," she said swiftly. "I like you this way. I just keep waiting...to wake up."

"You are awake, Snow White," he murmured. "This is as real as it gets." His hand caressed her cheek. After a minute, he said. "Was it so very bad a childhood, Riley?"

She sighed. "Physically, no. I wasn't beaten or abused, and I've heard stories far worse than mine. I was lucky, in that respect. My friend Sabrina—you met her in Pittsburgh. She's a foster kid, too, and she had it way worse than me. But even she shook that off. We both agree that it's the loneliness that's the worst. Not being loved or wanted by anyone. Knowing that the families who take you in are only doing it for the money and that they don't really care about you at all, that there isn't *anyone* who gives a shit... It weighs you down. And it just gets worse, year after year, until you want to explode with it, especially if you get moved from home to home to home."

Nick's arms tightened around her. "Christ..." he said thickly.

"Don't," she said quickly. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. This is just how it was supposed to happen, Nick. If it didn't, then I would have grown up with you and Damian around me all the time, and you would never have seen me as someone you could love. Not *really* love. Not like this. I'd live all those years in foster

care all over again, just to stand here in your arms and know I get to do this for the rest of my life."

He touched her lips with his finger swiftly, then reached over her shoulder to turn off the light. As the closet plunged into darkness, she felt his arm move under her shoulder, and knew he was holding the doorknob with an iron grip so it would feel locked when the guards tested it.

The guards were doing their closing rounds.

It was a long time before she heard sounds of anyone approaching the closet, but Nick's hearing was much better than hers. There was a brief rattle of the doorknob, then nothing.

Nick relaxed. "He's already left the corridor. It's Friday night, and the Knicks are facing the Mavericks at seven. He'll be rushing home for the game." His voice was very soft, almost subliminal.

"How do you even know he likes basketball?" Riley demanded.

"I'm guessing. But he's heavy on his feet, so he's overweight. Probably from too many sedentary pastimes. And that was a very superficial security check. He's in a hurry, and it's not hockey season." He chuckled soundlessly. "It makes it easier for us. Let's hope he's taking his workmates home with him for beer and pizza."

"How soon until sunset?"

He breathed in, almost like he was sampling the air. Perhaps he was. "The sun is already touching the horizon. Lirgon will need to guard against too early a rising. Gargoyles rise at full dark, not at sunset. Ten minutes, Riley, and you will get to meet the monster that killed your parents."

Chapter Thirteen

The corridor was quiet and dark except for the red glow of emergency lights. The guards had switched off normal illumination already. Ahead, the gallery was lit by small spotlights that shone on the displays, but the main gallery lights that bathed the big room in merciless white glare had all been doused. Nick moved ahead, Riley behind him. He had the vision that could see infrared beams and signals, not her, and had to take point.

Nevertheless, they moved fast, almost at a run. The timing was hurried by the sunset, which crowded too close on the heels of the closing of the gallery and the departure of the guards after their security shutdown round.

"Nothing," Nick said softly as they emerged into the gallery proper. "For a display of rocks that no mortal can lift on their own, perhaps they feel nothing more sophisticated is warranted." He moved over to the flat black square lounge pad, picked it up in one hand and shifted it over to sit underneath the skylight. Then he stood on it and threaded his hands together.

Riley stepped onto the lounge, then onto his threaded hands, then onto his shoulders as Nicholas boosted her up to that level. He gripped her boots, holding her steady, as she examined the alarm wires the way Nick had taught her.

"The circuit *is* broken," she told him. "Although you really have to look hard to see it."

"Hurry," he warned her.

She lifted the skylight. It was heavy and she strained to move the large pane, but she managed to hoist it high enough to reach over the lip and grab the duffel bag sitting next to the frame. She and Nicholas had placed it there earlier in the day.

As soon as she lowered the pane, Nicholas lowered her down to the pad. She dropped the duffel bag next to her and he opened the long zipper, shoving the United Airlines tags out of the way with an impatient sound. Riley realized that this was Damian's bag, the one he had brought with him from Greece. Her heart did a funny misstep, but she hurried. Nicholas had turned into the hard taskmaster. She could almost feel time ticking away in her own head.

He pulled out her sword first and handed it to her. The message was clear. Lirgon was the priority. He was about to wake.

She pulled the sword from the scabbard and hurried over to Lirgon. The gargoyle was still just a lump of rock to her eyes, crouched on a flat, low stone pedestal, his clawed feet curled over the edges, his wings bent around him protectively while he snarled permanently as some unseen foe. The sculpture looked completely unchanged

from the day she and Damian had studied it, and if she had not seen the creatures climbing from the skylight herself that night, she would have said this was just a lump of stone.

But something was beating in the air around her. Invisible, rushing past her skin like cool water or an electric charge, but neither of those things. It almost prickled.

Magic.

She bent into the primary ready posture, bringing her sword over her head, both hands on the hilt. She kept her eyes on Lirgon. There were five other gargoyles, but they were for Nicholas to keep at bay, and the threat to their leader would halt them at first.

"I'm here," Nicholas said softly, from behind and just to her left, which was her unprotected side. "Keep watch. It's about to begin."

"I know," she agreed. "I can feel it."

"As soon as his eyes glow, he's vulnerable," Nicholas added.

She didn't point out that he had told her this many times already. This was Nick's way of worrying. She brought the sword farther overhead so that the point was in her range of vision, and directly lined up on Lirgon's muzzle.

Her heart was hurting. She was shaking, but knew it would pass when she began to move. She was terrified, but knew that the terror would pass, too.

Then she saw it. Lirgon was changing right in front of her. If she tried to watch it happening she couldn't see it. If she focused on any one part of him, nothing appeared to be moving, but if she looked overall, then she saw it. It was like watching a really big mound of snow during the spring thaw. You could watch it all day long and it didn't seem to change at all, but in two days the mound would completely disappear under the heat of the spring sunshine. The stone-like quality of Lirgon's hide was changing. Becoming more like leather.

When the creature's wing moved, Riley snapped her gaze back to the gargoyle's eyes. They were no longer stone. But they weren't glowing yet.

Yet the wings were moving. The toes were stretching. The claws extending.

She gripped her sword with her sweaty hands as the eyes rolled in their sockets and the creature began to straighten up from his daytime hunch. *Not until the eyes glow.* It was Nick's voice, from all the training sessions, calm in her mind. *If you bury your sword in his brain before the tissues are converted properly from stone sleep, he won't be vulnerable, and you won't kill him. You'll just piss him off, and you'll break your blade, both very bad things.*

"Nick!" she breathed softly, trying to contain her panic.

"Wait." He was so calm.

Lirgon at full height had to stand at fifteen feet. How in hell was she even going to reach up to his head? Nick had overlooked that tiny detail. Full panic gripped her chest, locked her breathing. The creature was moving. Slowly, it was true. And so were the other five.

"You. A bloodsucking abomination and your meat-sack woman. You are not welcome here!" The cry came from her left.

Do not let anything distract you, Nick had warned her.

But she knew that voice, and knew who spoke with such venom. It could only be Azazel, come to protect his beasts. And he had a weapon that could kill Nick.

"Don't turn around," Nick told her flatly. Quickly. "Deal with Lirgon. He's the greater threat."

"Azazel will kill you just to get at me," Riley cried.

"I will," Azazel confirmed. "I will kill your other bloodsucking lover, you perverted *bitch*. He will die in agony at your feet."

"Don't look at him," Nick said quickly. "He's trying to provoke you."

"No! You must not do this!" The thin voice came from behind them. From the stairs. Fábio Natan. She knew the voice even without turning. The beseeching quality was distinct.

She caught a glimpse of movement to her left, and turned her head just enough to spot it. Azazel, still looking like her father, was moving slowly into her range of vision. Closer to Lirgon. And Nick was tracking him. The tip of his broadsword came into her view, as well. Azazel wore a full-length raw brown leather coat that was scuffed and torn in places. Anything could be under it. Including the gun that fired the concentrated gargoyle toxin pellets.

Natan rushed toward Azazel and actually stepped in front of Nick. "You can't do this," he told Azazel. "You can't."

Riley switched her attention back to Lirgon. The beast was stretching, the wings lifting out to their full span. Perhaps thirty feet across from tip to tip. Azazel stood inside that radius.

A sour stable smell washed over Riley as the wings beat back a little, fanning air in her direction. Beast smell.

She studied the eyes. They were not glowing. There was no intelligence there yet. Lirgon was still waking. This was just rolling over and scratching himself as he got out of bed.

Natan wrung his hands as he stared at Azazel. "For god's sake," he said. "Where's your sense of decency?"

Azazel threw his head back and laughed. "Little man, you have no idea what you're dealing with." He reached into his coat and pulled out the thick, ugly gun, the one that had killed Damian.

Gargoyle toxin.

Only he didn't bring the gun to bear on Nicholas. Natan was in the way. Riley realized the barrel was swinging around to point at her, the *real* target of Azazel's plans.

Time jumped out of its rails and slowed down to a crawl.

There was nowhere she could run that Azazel could not track her with the gun and shoot anyway. And Lirgon was right there and waking. He would kill her if Azazel did not manage to hit her first.

Lirgon. The gargoyle's eyes were beginning to gleam as he reared back, stretching his wings, looking down at the dramatic tableau beneath him.

How much did Azazel want to protect his pets? How instinctive was it?

Riley recalled from the very first day she had trained with Nick the moment she had caught him off guard by jumping inside his defenses instead of farther away. The unexpected move from the smaller opponent using the stabbing sword.

She surged hard to her right, *toward* Lirgon, moving as fast as she could. She slapped her foot onto the creature's bent thigh, using it as a stepping stone, then pushed herself upward with a hard thrust of her leg. She threw her left arm around Lirgon's massive neck, hooking herself there.

Lirgon reared back even harder. His wings flapped forward and around in front of him protectively. It was instinctive, as he tried to grab at the woman clinging to his neck.

Azazel's gargoyle toxin pellet struck Lirgon's leathery wings and whined away harmlessly.

Riley had the katana in her right hand, down low, in a stabbing grip. She looked into Lirgon's eye from about six inches away. There was intelligence there. And fear.

"Remember me?" she asked. She thrust the sword up under the muzzle, and kept pushing deeper, higher, until the hilt rammed home. Then she twisted.

Lirgon screamed. He staggered backward, flailing at her and the thing in his head, trying to reach her. But she pulled the sword out and dropped to the ground and let herself roll safely out of reach of the staggering monster.

She looked around for Nick.

Azazel stood with his gun to Nick's chest. His face was writhing with fury. "I will have your flesh for my walls for this!" he screamed at her.

"Kiss my ass," she told him.

Nick smiled.

Natan tugged at her arm. "The others! The others!" he wailed.

There was a crash and the musical notes of breaking glass as the other skylight was thrown aside. The five leaderless gargoyles were clambering out and taking off into the night air. "I cannot tackle more than one a night, Natan," she told him. "I was lucky with Lirgon, as it was."

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Nick said.

Lirgon lay still and silent on the gallery floor. Black, oily stuff oozed from his body. Gargoyle blood? Riley presumed so. She stared down at the creature, her heart pounding, listening to the sudden silence.

Her parents' killer lay dead at her feet. She had achieved what her mother and father had been unable to do.

Her body began to shake. Riley looked at Nick. "It shouldn't have been so easy." Even her voice wobbled.

"It wasn't," he said flatly. "You don't see it, do you?"

"See what?" She hugged herself, as cold seemed to seep into her bones. Ice shards were pricking her skin.

Nick's eyes were that of the master swordsman. The hunter who had seen it all. "Your speed. Your agility." He spoke with the flat tone of sincerity she had come to rely upon as the rock bottom truth. "You have inherited the greatest talents your parents could have given you, and tonight you used them all. I gave you the one advantage I could never give your mother, Riley. For the first time in the history of their species, I was able to give you the gargoyles' nesting location. But you used it in a way she could never have." He waved towards Lirgon. "Natalia would not have thought to move closer to her enemy. And if she had, fear would have stopped her from executing the move."

He dropped his hand and the corner of his mouth lifted. "Your courage is probably your greatest asset and I had nothing to do with that at all."

Azazel made a noise in the back of his throat, a disgusted sound. "If you're done with the hearts and flowers?"

Natan moved to Azazel. "Let them go. You have nothing left to punish them for."

"Natan, shut up," Riley said sharply.

"Yes, and exactly *who* helped them bypass security so this disaster happened, I wonder?" Azazel asked, studying Natan.

Natan swallowed and took a step back.

"I see you've had a change of heart, Natan," Azazel said. "Fame and fortune no longer your cup of tea?"

"Not at the price you ask for it," Natan told him, lifting his chin.

"Okay." Azazel turned the gun on Natan and fired, and the little man went down clutching his gut.

At the same time, a dark shape dropped through the skylight above them, landing right behind Azazel. Azazel's arm, the one holding the gun, was wrenched back. Azazel cried out, his whole body arching as the black tip of an oddly shaped sword punched out through his chest from behind. The sword ripped upward in a series of jerks that tore the chest apart and lifted him completely off his feet.

Azazel didn't burst apart in blood and guts as Riley thought he would.

He began to scream like a man on fire, clutching at the sword point.

"Iron through the heart," Nicholas said softly.

Then the demon disintegrated like a paper-stuffed effigy on a bonfire, soaked in gas. He went up in silent flames that burnt blue and green, until there was nothing left but bright images dancing on Riley's retina, blurring her vision.

She blinked, trying to clear her eyes.

Damian stood holding the ancient-looking sword, watching them both warily. He was in black. Black jeans, black sweater, black sneakers. And very, very alive. "Yes, it's me. I know it's a shock. I can explain."

Nicholas dropped his broadsword, took three steps forward and drove his hand in a short, sharp upper cut to Damian's chin. It was a sucker punch. The exact same one Riley had given Nick not so very long ago. It rocked Damian back on his feet and made him stagger.

Nick rubbed his knuckles and looked at her. "You've got something there. It does help," he told her.

Damian was flexing his jaw with his free hand. "I suppose I deserve that."

Nicholas rounded on him. "You can *explain*?" Fury was etching lines beside his mouth.

Riley wanted to keep listening, but couldn't. She sank onto the lounge pad as her knees seemed to suddenly give out. Noise was beating at her. The world seemed to be rushing around her with too much noise and speed. She held up her hand to try to make it stop.

"You need food. And quickly. Why didn't you say something? Damn it, Riley, you have to give me a chance to get used to these things again." It was Nick. His arm around her. Trying to lift her to her feet. Trying to cope. Sounding worried.

But Damian was there, too. She could feel him. His hand on the back of her neck. She nearly wept at the touch. "I did this," he said softly. "Let's get her home."

"Someone take care of Natan," she whispered.

* * * * *

In the end they all took care of Natan's body. Riley's momentary shock passed. So did Nick's fury, when he saw her back on her feet. Damian stowed his new iron sword in the duffel with Nick's and Riley's and they put the gallery back the way it was supposed to be. What was left of Lirgon's body they disposed of. Security would assume the carving had been stolen. There was nothing they could do about the broken glass in the second skylight, so they left it as it had fallen, to make it look as much like an accident as possible. They worked in almost wordless concert, holding off any discussion of Damian's reappearance until they were back at the apartment and safe once more.

They weighted Natan's body and lowered it into the East River. With the gargoyle toxin spread throughout his system, his remains could not be left for human authorities to autopsy.

On the taxi ride home, Nick drew Riley into his arms. She went willingly and resting her head against his shoulder. He kissed her. "You did it," he said. "Do you know how proud I am of you?"

"Are you playing games, Nick?" she asked softly. "Because Damian is here?"

He smiled. "I don't have to, do I?"

She threw her arm around his neck. "No."

But she caught him glancing at Damian.

Troubled, she found she couldn't look at Damian directly herself.

It was a long, silent trip home after that.

* * * * *

Nicholas barely waited for the door to shut before he rounded on Damian a second time. He grabbed two handfuls of Damian's sweater and pulled him closer. "How *dare* you let us think you were dead! *For five fucking days!*"

Damian didn't resist the manhandling. "For two of them, I pretty much was, Nick. When Azazel shot me, I thought it was the end, too."

Nick stared at him, clearly trying to make sense of it. "*Fuck!*" he said finally, disgusted. He let Damian go and walked away, frustration pouring off him in waves.

Riley curled up on the couch, hugging her knees. Abruptly, with both of them in the room once more, she felt like the mortal in the middle again. The only one without an agenda. The Nick she had fallen in love with had gone. There was just the old Nick, squaring off with Damian.

Damian was the key.

She looked up at him. He was watching her. "I told you to trust me, remember?"

"You *planned* this?" She sat up.

"Not this exactly, no. But it helped." He came and sat on the sofa next to her. Not close enough to touch. But close enough that she felt small. She could remember being in his arms. Remember his cock sliding into her. His kisses.

"Damian, you don't just get to just shrug off leaving us thinking you were dead for five days," Nicholas said, his voice dangerously soft and calm.

Damian reached into his pocket and pulled out a small glass vial with a black plastic lid, about two inches high. It held a brown-colored liquid. He tossed it to Nicholas. "Remember that? I found it in the casket with the house wards, when I was placing them on the windows and doors after Azazel made his appearance. When we went to see Natan that day, I took some."

"What is it?" Riley asked.

"Gargoyle antitoxin," Damian told her.

Nicholas held up the bottle. "This has to be thirty, forty years old."

"At least," Damian agreed. "I didn't know if it would work. It was sheer happenstance that I took it. We were heading into gargoyle territory and the last time we did that I got my guts ripped out, so I thought I'd try it. As it was, the antitoxin is so old, it took two days to counter the poison." He grimaced. "I had forgotten what it was like to be genuinely sick."

"But you would have recovered at least three days ago," Nick said, putting the bottle on the dining table. He still looked grim.

"And Azazel was watching this apartment and every move you two made. Why would I ruin the one genuine advantage you had by letting you, and Azazel, know I was really alive?" Damian lifted his shoulders, a tiny shrug. "I was still weak and recovering, but even then I knew I would rather put you through a few more days of misery than show my hand to Azazel. It was a tactical advantage that won the game, Nick. We could not have killed Azazel otherwise."

Nick shoved his hands into his pockets. Riley knew that look. He was upset. Damian was making sense, but Nick was hurting about this.

"You don't understand, Damian," she said softly. "It wasn't just five days of misery he felt —"

"No, Riley," Nick said shortly. "Don't."

Damian leaned forward. "The demon has been dogging your steps for nearly forty years, Nick. He's had a hand in the killing of the people you loved the most." He lifted a hand, a helpless little gesture. "I *know* the hurt I caused you. I, more than anyone..." He glanced at Riley. "Except maybe Riley, now. We know what you went through the last few days. But I thought it was worth it to rid the world — to rid *you* — of Azazel for once and for all. Christ, Nick, for all the people he's killed — Peter, Carson, Tally and the others —"

"You," Nick said hoarsely. "It wasn't worth it if you were part of that price." He moved toward Damian slowly, as if he were dragged there against his will. When he stood in front of Damian, he reached out with equal slowness to push his hand into Damian's thick black hair.

His hand clenched, gripping tight, and he bent and kissed him.

Damian groaned and his hand clawed the sofa.

Riley flinched. She had guessed her position correctly. She was the disposable mortal. Now Damian was back, Nick had forgotten her.

She began to rise from the couch, but Damian's hand shot out and locked about her wrist. He broke the kiss and turned to look at her. "Where do you think you're going?"

Riley fought hard to keep her voice even. "You don't need me," she said politely.

Nicholas straightened. His eyes were sleepy. Aroused.

Damian's thumb smoothed over her wrist. She hated that it made her nerves sizzle. "You and Nicholas are lovers now." It wasn't a question.

She looked Nicholas in the eye. "Were."

Nicholas swallowed. "Riley..."

"I don't want pretty speeches, Nick," she said tiredly, pulling her wrist from Damian's grip. "I've had my fill the last few days. I don't think I could stand another one."

He pushed a hand through his hair. "No!" he said desperately. "That's not what this is. Damian, for god's sake, what game are you playing here? You're pushing the pieces around and I don't want to play anymore. Not if it means losing Riley."

Damian's face lit up. He surged to his feet and caught Nick's face in his. "Say that again."

Nick pushed him away. "You heard well enough." He dropped to his knees on the floor in front of Riley. "I meant every word I've said, Riley," he said gently. "I always do."

Tears were burning her eyes. "But you love Damian," she told him. "I saw the look on your face just then. Having him back now that you've lost him has taught you exactly what he means to you. You want him back, Nick."

He sat back, silent.

The tears slid down her face. "You need to be with him," she told him. "You always have."

Nick groaned. "No."

Damian put his hand on Nick's shoulder. "Wait, my lover. Just wait a moment," he said softly.

Nick hung his head.

Damian turned to her. His black eyes were warm. She could drown in them. "You would give Nick up for me, wouldn't you?"

She nodded. "I'd only get to be with him for such a short time, anyway. Even if I lived an extraordinarily long time for a human, it would be over in a blink in your terms."

Damian picked up her wrist again. "Do you remember that day when I said that I had to collect you first?" He kissed the inside of her wrist. His tongue slid along the inside of it.

Nick's head jerked up. He was staring at Damian, his eyes narrowed as if his mind was racing. "You son of a bitch," he breathed.

Riley looked at Nick. "Why? I remember the day, but I don't...Nick?"

He was smiling. "'Trust me,' you said," he told Damian. He got to his feet. "Oh, but this was a dangerous game to play, Spartan." He grabbed Damian's hair and kissed him. Hard. His knee came down between Damian's thighs and pushed against his crotch and Damian spread his hand over Nick's thigh.

Riley had no clue what "the game" was, but the sight of the two men kissing was doing interesting things to her innards. Her clitoris swelled and her pussy clenched. She pressed her thighs together, which put further pressure on her vulva.

Nick let Damian go and laughed. "I could kill you."

"Thanks, but I've been dead once this decade already." Damian's hand hadn't moved off Nick's thigh. His fingers were stroking gently. Sensuously. Riley couldn't tear her gaze off Damian's hand.

Nicholas looked at her.

So did Damian. "She likes it," he said softly. As before, it wasn't a question.

Nicholas held out his hand to her. Riley took it, her heart thundering, and he drew her closer to them both, and kissed her. "Have you figured out Damian's game yet, Riley?"

"I could guess, but why don't you paint me the picture?" she asked. "You're both as devious as original sin and I'm just a mere mortal."

Damian chuckled. "There's no 'mere' about you." His hand smoothed its way up the back of her thigh, the hand that wasn't caressing Nick's. "I knew as soon as I saw you that I wanted you, and not just a casual affair, Riley. Nick and I don't indulge in them, especially not with humans. My reactions to you from the start told me I was in trouble, and everything that happened from then on confirmed it."

His hand fluttered between her thighs, high up by the hem of her skirt. This was no casual touch. He was seducing her. Riley looked at Nick, but he was watching what Damian was doing. Not protesting.

With a rush, she understood the game. All of it.

She bit back a moan, and let Damian continue to speak.

"I could see that Nicholas was reacting to you, too, and that his reaction was as powerful as mine. But I also knew that Nick would stifle his response. You are human, and you are Tally's daughter. For both those reasons, he would kill off any feelings he had for you before they began to bloom." Damian smiled. "When we realized that morning in the car that you wanted us both, my plan was born."

"To ensure I got you both," Riley concluded.

Damian stood up, dislodging Nick's knee. Now both of them faced her.

"He had to make sure I learned to love you without destroying your love for him, or mine," Nick said.

"The gargoyle bullet did it for me, although that's not the way I would have chosen to do it," Damian confessed. "My preferred way may have taken longer, but it would have been gentler and lots more fun."

Nick brushed Riley's hair from her temple. "I don't know...we managed to have fun, didn't we?" He winked.

Riley smiled, but it was a weak thing. She looked at Damian. "You manipulated us."

Damian shook his head. "Just Nicholas, because he's so stubborn he can't always see happiness when it's staring him in the face, or reach out and take it."

"So you...claimed me first to make him jealous?"

"To make him see you as a desirable woman, not an animated object."

Nicholas swore. "I could already see that in Pittsburgh. I'm not blind."

"You saw her as a sex object, Nick. Not as someone you could love." Damian spoke the words calmly. "You had to witness my love for her first before you could see the possibilities for yourself."

Riley's eyes widened in surprise.

"You didn't tell her, did you?" Nick looked at Damian with something like disgust in his face. He wheeled away, and blew his breath out, looking at the ceiling. "The great strategist! He can't even woo the woman properly!"

Damian sank to his knees in front of her. It put his head lower than hers. "Do you remember when I spoke of trust, Riley? When I said that saying the words were often harder than just giving the trust, unspoken?"

She nodded. "You said love was the same."

Nick came up behind him. "He quite desperately loves you, Riley. He would lie on the bed next to you while you slept and bemoan his fate that he was not a man and could not marry you and give you children." Nick grimaced. "It seems we've both been kissed by that muse."

Damian's gaze dropped from hers when she looked at him. "I couldn't speak of it," he said. "It was too new. Too strong."

"It scared him," Nicholas said softly. "Finally, after all this time, I got to see something that made the great Spartan afraid. And it was you." He rested his hand on Damian's shoulder. "Of course my eyes were opened, Riley. Of course I looked at you differently. Who would not? After two thousand years, Damian chooses you, of all humans, to love." He looked down at Damian and back at her. "I see what Damian sees, now. Or perhaps not. Perhaps we love different things about you. I know I love you just as deeply as he does. And apparently that was his plan all along. Simple sex would have been too easy. Damian always plays at the high-stakes table."

Riley let out her breath. They were both looking at her.

"Does this mean, then, I get to keep you both?" she asked cautiously. "I really don't have to choose?"

Damian grinned.

Nicholas' smile made his eyes light up. He sat beside her on the sofa and brushed her hair back over her shoulder as she sank back down onto her heels. "The time I put the dildo in your pussy and I took you in the ass. You liked it, didn't you?"

She glanced at Damian, her cheeks flaming. But Damian sat forward, his expression hungry. Intense.

Riley turned back to Nick and nodded.

"More than liked it, in fact," he pressed.

She licked her lips. She had loved it.

Nick picked up her hand and kissed the knuckles. "Think about what it would be like if that were me and Damian in you, instead."

White hot-ice cold excitement dropped over her like a blanket, whooshing through her from her toes to her hair, leaving prickling, sensitive nerve endings in its wake. She gasped, her genitals sizzling at the idea. Her pussy and ass both clenched involuntarily.

A mental image flashed through her mind of Damian and Nick on either side of her, their cocks in her. *Both of them.*

She moaned.

Nick licked her palm. "Kiss Damian as you kiss me," he murmured.

Damian lifted her down from the sofa. His black eyes looked into hers and now she knew what lay in his heart, it was hard to mistake the emotion in them. How could she have missed it before? Because these two were so good at protecting themselves, that's why. But they had let her in, now.

She settled a knee on either side of Damian's hips, and her arms around his neck. "I love you," she told him. "Even though you deserve to get kicked in the groin for letting me think you were dead for five days."

"And she'd do it, too," Nick added.

"My lover," Damian told her, his hand curling around the back of her neck. He kissed her, and she pressed herself up against him. Even just knowing that Nicholas was watching was intoxicating, and she moaned into Damian's mouth. She pushed her tongue inside and felt his answering thrust. She ran her tongue along his teeth and felt the narrow, sharp points of his fangs, almost fully retracted. She stroked them and they extended a little.

Damian groaned, his hand at her neck sliding into her hair and clenching hard. He pushed her hips against him and the pressure of his hand spread her thighs, and forced the denim skirt to ride up to the level of her hips. Her mons was crushed against his lower abs. The hard contact with his stomach made her clit pulse, and she thrust her hips, rubbing herself against him. There was only her panties and the black sweater between them.

She brushed her tongue over his fangs again, and this time, Damian pulled her lips away from his. He was panting, his eyes glazed over with heavy sexual arousal. "*Christos,*" he whispered. He looked at Nick. "Take her."

Nick's hands came in around her waist and she was lifted and turned. Nick brought her against him. "Put your legs around me, instead," he murmured.

"And I thought you'd take the moment to strip, Nick. How un-enterprising of you," she chided him.

"When I can have the pleasure of you taking my clothes off me?" He smiled. "I want you half-crazed from kissing me, and *tearing* my clothes off, like you nearly were earlier tonight."

"Will you hush me like earlier tonight?"

"Please don't," Damian said.

Nicholas kissed her. His fangs were already extending and Riley stroked her tongue over the piercing ends. Like his cock, Nick's fangs were longer while Damian's were wider, but both were as sharp as razors. Nick moaned as she licked them, his hands squeezing her waist.

She felt the touch of the hot-cold aphrodisiac on her tongue. Even before she swallowed, the tingling effects hit her system. She clutched Nick, as swirling hot need ripped through her. His eyes locked with hers and he read her dire arousal.

"Damian," he said softly.

She was lifted from Nick's arms. The slightest touch vibrated to her pleasure center, so Damian's arms around her back and under her knees registered as glorious stroking pressure. He was carrying her.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked. Her voice was throaty. Used.

"To our bed," Damian replied.

Her whole body rippled. "Nick..."

"I'm here." And he was there beside her.

Damian laid her on the bed, but she left her arms around his neck. "Kiss me," she begged.

His eyes were very black as he leaned over her. "My lover," he murmured. He kissed her, his hand resting on her hip, moving in the same restless little stroking movements as it had on Nick's thigh.

The reminder and the mental image, along with the sensations created by his fingers on her overly sensitive nerve endings spread sparkling flurries of pleasure through her. She gasped against Damian's lips, her hips thrusting, her back arching.

Hands were at her ankles. Her boots slid off her feet. And her socks.

"Relax," Damian murmured against her lips.

Riley smiled. "As long as you do." She tugged at his sweater, pulling it over his head, and saw his eyes widen just a little in surprise. She tossed the sweater to Nick, who threw it to the big easy chair with a smile.

Riley tucked her feet under her and got to her knees so that she was more or less at the same height as Damian, who stood at the end of the bed. She laid her hands on his chest, spreading her fingers, and felt him catch his breath. "I learned something while you were away, Damian."

Nick began to undress, moving fast and silently. He had either anticipated Riley, or guessed her thoughts. Then he moved to stand behind Damian. He was perfectly placed for what she intended to do.

She looked Damian in the eye. "Sometimes, you don't get to control everything, Damian. Especially not Nick and me. Especially not here."

She caught Nick's eye. He moved fast. Blindingly fast. She didn't see it at all. Just the end result, Damian's arms caught in Nick's viselike grip, pulled back and held. Only Nick had the strength to hold Damian still and keep him captive.

Damian tried to pull his arms free and grew still. He was breathing faster. "And now?" His voice was thicker. Heavier.

"Now, I have the control," Riley told him. She caressed his strained chest with her hands, running her fingers over his flesh. She saw the muscles flex in response. "You do what *I* say. Respond to *my* commands."

"And mine," Nick added. He slid his tongue up the side of Damian's neck, then bit his shoulder. Gently. But there was a capped, feral excitement in Nick's eyes that made Riley's heart jump anyway.

And Damian groaned.

He was watching her through his lowered, heavily aroused lids and she could see the front of his jeans was swollen with his erect cock.

Riley moved back on the bed so both Nick and Damian could watch her. She reached for the bottom of the tee shirt and languidly raised it to her breasts. She stroked her stomach, and slipped the button and short zipper of the denim skirt undone, swinging her hips from side to side provocatively. Teasing. She had been to a strip club once or twice with groups of friends and now she deliberately mirrored the strip artists' motions.

"Jesu..." Damian breathed.

She pulled the tee shirt up and off, revealing the leather bra beneath. Then she gathered the denim skirt up so it bunched up about her hips, and ran her hands over her thighs.

Even her own touch was powerfully arousing to her, more so than usual. The aphrodisiac in Nick's fangs was still at work. Still driving her. She licked her dry lips, feeling the pressure to hurry, to be possessed, to be fucked. She would not hurry this, not tonight, no matter how driven she became.

Damian and Nicholas were both watching her with intense, predatory stares. She smiled at them. "You want this?" she asked, pushed the denim skirt farther down her hips. She already knew the answer. Damian's cock was clearly outlined as a hard shaft rearing up inside his jeans. Nick's fangs were extended, his eyes hooded with desire, and the sharp glittering blue she knew meant he was powerfully aroused. But still he kept Damian's arms locked and held.

She slipped the skirt off and threw it away. Now she wore tiny panties and the bra. She spread her thighs and ran her hands over them, up her torso to her breasts, and played with the straps of the bra. One of the straps fell off her shoulder and she left it lying across her arm.

Damian drew in a shuddering breath.

Slowly, she crawled on all fours across the bed toward him. When her face was almost touching his stomach, she blew on it. His muscles quivered in response. So she licked his flesh, then unbuttoned Damian's jeans, and lowered the zipper.

Damian groaned again, his head rolling back onto Nick's shoulder. "If it is mastery you want, I concede," he muttered. His accent was thick. "Let me go. I must move, or die."

Riley shook her head as she tugged his jeans down around his hips. "Not yet."

Damian closed his eyes. "Gods!" he cried.

His cock was throbbing, purple around the flared head and surprisingly hot, for Damian. She ran her hand along the shaft, and realized she was humming in appreciation, her mouth filling with saliva. Her pussy was also slick with cream, as she imagined the cock she was fondling sliding into her.

Riley pressed her free hand against her belly. Slid it lower, to curl over her mons and press against the stretch lace of her panties.

"If it's torture you intend, Riley, you've achieved it. For both of us," Nick said. His voice was thick with need.

She met his eyes, and realized that by having him contain Damian, he was as helpless as Damian. "And I'm not even holding my katana, Nick," she said softly.

"If I let Damian go, this all changes in a heartbeat," Nick warned her.

"You think?" She smiled. "Watch this." She slid down on the bed until she was lying on her belly, propped up one elbow, and took Damian's cock into her mouth. She had to stretch her lips to accommodate his girth, but the choking, moaning noise he made was reward enough. So was Nick's harsh sigh.

Then she forgot about that and focused on the pleasure of fucking Damian with her mouth. She gripped the base of his cock with her hand and stroked the seamed underside of the head with the tip of her tongue. Her body was zapping and clenching with pleasure as she worked and she realized she was wriggling and moaning as she worked on Damian's cock. Her eyes closed in ecstasy.

With her free hand, she reached for Damian's testicles, expecting to have to burrow inside his half-lowered jeans, but she met no resistance.

She opened her eyes. His jeans were gone. Damian was naked. And his arms were free. Nicholas had let him go. Damian's hands touched Riley's hair, his fingers slid into the locks. "More," he urged.

She felt hands on her back. Stroking. Nicholas.

Riley ran her tongue around the head of Damian's cock and drew him back into her mouth as Nicholas caressed her back, making her skin quiver and her muscles vibrate. He unclipped her bra and unhooked the straps and drew the bra from her. Her breasts swelled and the nipples hardened instantly, rubbing against the satin bedcover like pebbles as she squirmed.

He spent long minutes stroking his fingers over the damp patch of lace between her legs before he drew her panties down her thighs. Riley was ready to scream by the time she was fully naked.

She felt Nicholas settle on the bed behind her. His hands on her hips lifted her up onto her knees and pulled her away from Damian's cock. She was panting already as she looked at Damian. But his breath was no steadier.

"Kiss her again, Damian," Nicholas suggested. "Make her moan and writhe."

Damian climbed onto the bed and caught her face in his hands. His fangs were out, his eyes very black. "You have strong tastes, Riley, my love. I'd hoped it was so." He kissed her and she thrust her fingers into his hair, and ran her tongue eagerly over his fangs.

He growled low in his throat and she felt the touch of the aphrodisiac on her tongue, rolling down into the back of her throat. Hot fire exploded from the center of her body, radiating out to the tips of her limbs, setting her nerves aflame. She gasped. She was floating, almost climaxing.

Damian held her steady. "The power of age, Riley," he murmured, and she could hear the laughter in his voice.

"Oh..." Her voice was weak. Helpless.

Nicholas stroked her hips. "What I would give to be vulnerable to that power, just for a night." His fingers slipped between her cheeks, and stroked the delicate tissues of her cleft, sending more hard, spasming shocks through her system. She moaned. From deep inside her, a wave was building. Large. Heavy. Powerful.

Damian was cupping and toying with her breasts, as Nicholas gathered the honey from her pussy and spread it higher. Around her anus.

Riley's breath shortened and her arms shook as she kneeled on the bed. She pushed herself back toward him. She couldn't help it. She looked up at Damian. "Hurry," she whispered. She could barely speak the word. Her clit and the folds of flesh around it were swollen and pulsing with a life of their own. Just the brush of air over them was stimulating them beyond belief.

Damian sank down onto the cover, so that his eyes were level with hers. His hand cupped her chin. "Wait for me, Riley."

She felt the touch of cool gel on her ass and moaned. Nick's long fingers worked it quickly inside her. She gripped the cover, her gaze caught by Damian's eyes staring into hers. Her breath was ragged, completely untamed. Anticipation was driving her wild.

At the touch of Nick's cock against her ass, she stifled a choked, breathless cry.

Damian let out a harsh breath, watching her face.

Riley couldn't focus after that. Her gaze shifted inward, to the overwhelming sensation of Nick's cock working its way into her. She tried to keep still, but only Nick's steady force on her hips stopped her from rolling and writhing and dislodging him from her as he pushed in.

The heavy wave of pleasure was increasing its power. Threatening to drown her. Riley opened her eyes as Nick came to a stop, fully lodged inside her. She was panting, aware of the size of the coming climax, the might of it.

Damian had his hand around his own cock. He was stroking slowly, his fangs fully descended, as he watched Nick take her.

Riley was shuddering. "Fuck me, Damian," she begged.

He curled his hand around the back of her neck. "At once, my love." He glanced at Nick over her shoulder.

Nick's hands curled around her waist and upper chest. "Relax. Let me lift you." And he lifted her back against his chest, her ass cheeks hard against his hips. His cock remained buried inside her. His lips nuzzled her neck. "Put your hands around my neck," he told her. His hands were stroking her legs, opening them. Draping them over his knees, which he spread even wider.

She was being opened up in the most profound and delicious way. Riley shuddered, her breasts quivering, as Damian settled between her thighs.

His hands pressed against her hips and he kissed her throat. She could feel his excitement in the rush of his breath against her skin, in the brush of his teeth—lightly—against her throat.

"Hurry," Nicholas urged softly.

"If I must," Damian replied.

"This time, yes," Nicholas said.

"Please, yes," Riley begged. The hard, overwhelming swell of excitement was almost on her now, ready to take her where she had never been before. She wasn't afraid, but she wasn't ready to let it take her before Damian was inside her. She was shuddering with it, her breath ragged.

Damian brought his cock up against the opening of her pussy and eased it inside. Just the head.

She cried out and he laid his hand against her neck. "Let me in, Riley. Relax. Let me in." His black eyes were inches from hers.

Nick kissed her ear. "Breathe, Riley. I have you. We have you."

She tried to breathe. To relax. She looked into Damian's eyes and consciously let go.

Damian slid his cock a few inches farther inside her.

It was overwhelming. The delight she had found in Nick's cock and a dildo were nothing to this. Two real live cocks. Two real men. She drew hot air into her lungs, staring into Damian's eyes. "More..." she breathed.

He smiled and pushed the rest of his length into her. She could actually feel their two cocks almost touching each other inside her.

"I can feel you, Damian," Nick murmured.

"Mmm..." Damian breathed.

Riley lifted an arm and wrapped it around Damian's neck. "It's perfect." She realized that her cheeks were wet.

Nick was lifting her to her knees between them and Damian wiped her cheeks. But the movement was too much. She grasped at Damian's shoulders as the overwhelming sensations tripped off the blooming crests of her climax.

"God, no!" she begged.

Their hands came around her waist, two strong pairs. Both cocks began to thrust in unison. Slow, controlled, intended to avoid hurting her.

But she couldn't stand it. "Fuck me!" she beseeched them, her hips thrusting and grinding, as she tried to find relief.

"No time!" Nick warned.

"I'm ready," Damian growled. His fangs were down, and his eyes were the darkest, most aroused she had ever seen. This was Damian at his most vampiric. She turned to look over her shoulder. Nick was the same. Intense, brooding. Aroused. Driven.

Focused on giving her pleasure.

Riley threw her head back. Her eyes closed. She gave herself up to the pinnacle of pleasure they were giving her, as their cocks rammed into her together.

Their fangs both pierced her shoulders at the same time, high up by the nape of her neck, just as her orgasm hit. Aphrodisiac injected itself into her system, and she felt them drawing blood from her as she climaxed. Her climax was pushed into another stratosphere altogether. Riley screamed, feeling like the back of her eyes might explode outward. Every nerve she possessed lit up with silver fire. Her breath locked in her body and for long seconds she couldn't breathe at all.

When she *could* breathe, it was to scream again as the climax tore through her, ripping nerve endings to shreds, tendon from bone, and flesh from muscles.

Her sight faded. Her hearing faded.

Her consciousness faded...

Chapter Fourteen

Her head was pillowed on Damian's shoulder and her body on his chest. She could feel his knee behind her back, supporting her.

"I remember this," she said. "We've gone full circle."

"God, I hope not," Nick said.

She opened her eyes. He was sitting next to Damian on the bed and still naked, like Damian. And her. Only a few minutes or so must have passed. There was a quietness about Nick... It took her a second to realize what it was. Nick was happy and peaceful, and he was letting it show.

"What happened to me?" she asked.

Nick picked her up easily, like she weighed nothing, and put her in his lap. "You passed out. It happens sometimes for humans who aren't used to it." He brushed her hair away from her shoulder and touched her neck. She felt the tips of his fingers pass over the bite marks. They were sensitive, but not painful. "We won't do this every time, but this time, it was essential."

"I realize it enhances sex." She bit her lip. "That's understating it a bit, isn't it?"

Damian grinned.

"But why is it essential?" she asked.

Damian glanced at Nick. Both of them were silent for a moment.

Riley looked from one to the other. "Are you both being awkward because this is some secret vampire thing?"

Nick pushed his hand through his hair. "Sort of..."

Riley looked directly at Damian. Of the two of them, he had the least resistance to speaking about uncomfortable subjects. "Spill it, Damian," she said flatly.

Damian crossed his legs and threaded his fingers together. A defensive posture if ever she had seen one. "We know there are other vampires in the city here, but we have never associated with them. However, by biting a human we are sexually involved with, it sends a signal to other vampires. It's an ancient custom. A symbolic one that has become ingrained in the vampire psyche. Marking a human signals that human is the vampire's property. Their servant and mate. The human cannot be harmed or interfered with by another vampire. And the human can call for the help and assistance of the vampire they look to, as well."

Riley's heart was hammering. But Damian hadn't finished yet. He spread his hands a little, to emphasize the final point. "The bond is for life and it is unbreakable."

She reached up to touch the bite marks on her neck, and swallowed. "You couldn't have just...married me or something?" she whispered.

"No law exists that would let us both marry you," Nick said. "And the marriage would not have the weight of meaning we wanted to ensure our world understood where you stood in our esteem, Riley."

"Your servant," she pointed out.

"That was its original meaning," Damian agreed. "But marriage once meant a wife became a husband's servant, too. The meaning has changed over the millennia. It's a symbol, Riley. If you want the virtual translation, then look at it this way. In the eyes of the underworld, Nick and I married you tonight. Those bite marks will heal, but their psychic markings will remain and everyone in our world will be able to read them."

His gaze was steady. So was Nick's.

"That is why you made so sure I wanted to stay," she whispered, her eyes burning with more tears. She swiped at them. "Goddamn it, all I seem to do is cry around you two."

Nick leaned forward and licked her cheek, catching a stray tear, then hugged her. "I like it," he whispered. "As long as it's just when it's us."

Her stomach rumbled loudly and both Damian and Nick looked down at it, their eyes widening.

Damian slithered from the bed. "I forgot! I'm sorry! I'll get something cooked straight away!"

Nick started laughing. "You've made life complete for him. Someone to cook for."

"And how have I made life complete for you?"

His smile faded. "How did you guess?"

"You have a contented air. You've come to a decision, Nick. Something has changed."

He nodded. "I've decided to clear my conscience. But...I'll need your help. And Damian's."

* * * * *

The old man in the wheelchair was quite plainly dying. The bluish-gray tinge around his mouth and nose would have been hint enough, without the oxygen line running beneath his nose.

But the eyes were alive and snapping authority. And the jaw was solid and firm. So was the back. He stared at Riley from across the huge expanse of leather-inlaid desk, his frail hand resting on the blotter. There wasn't a scrap of paper to be seen on the desk. Just the blotter, which was squared off perfectly with the edges of the desk.

The nursing aide stood a discreet twenty paces away, in the far corner of the private office, where the big bookcases towered.

"You asked for this meeting, Ms. Connors," William Blakeson said. "You have five minutes." Despite his frailty, the man's voice was still strong. He had run a countywide business empire for fifty years, and the authority still showed.

"You know who I am." Riley didn't make it a question.

"Of course I do." He smiled, showing even, white teeth. "Anyone with the name Connors asking for my time gets a background check." He jerked his chin toward Damian and Nick, who stood behind her. "I don't know who they are, though."

"I have to ask your nurse to leave," Riley said, with a glance at the aide. "Or I can't continue."

"He stays," Blakeson growled. "Or your friends go, too."

Riley looked him in the eye. "You really want to find out what happened to your daughter Debbie thirty-eight years ago, Blakeson?"

His gaze shifted to the aide and back to Riley. Then he swiveled his head to the aide. "Get out."

The aide inclined his head and moved to the big double doors, and stepped out. He shut the door with a quiet click.

Blakeson studied Riley. "You even look like him around the eyes," he said with a snarl. "My daughter was obsessed about the bastard." He sighed. "Is he still alive?"

Riley swallowed. "He died in 1983."

Blakeson's eyes narrowed. "How'd it happen?"

"A gargoye killed him."

Blakeson slapped the desktop. "We're back to that stupid crap? *Again?*" He reached for the control on his wheelchair, but Nick moved then. He was around the desk, and his hand covering the controls before Blakeson got his fingers over them.

Nick smiled at Blakeson, his fangs on display. "You don't want to leave just yet," he told him. "We've got something to show you."

Riley looked at Damian. "You're up."

Damian hoisted the heavy duffel bag he was holding from over his shoulder and dumped it onto the desk in front of Blakeson. "We went hunting," he told Blakeson. "I use the term loosely, because Nicholas is the old pro, and Riley actually turns out to be the better of the two of them at sniffing out an incubus, which Nick actually finds hilarious. Which was a relief, because I thought that he'd get pissed about it after a couple of centuries of being the big hunting expert."

Riley hid her smile. Damian's running commentary was designed to bewilder and frighten Blakeson. And it was working. Blakeson was picking up on the odd references to centuries of time and demonic creatures and was hunching in on himself.

"I came along to supply the muscle, so to speak." Damian pulled out an iron knife with a long blade, and ran the blade along the thin rope that tied together all the D-rings that ran the length of the pack. The bag unraveled and fell open, revealing a man curled up in a tight ball.

Nick and Damian both pounced, grabbing his arms and legs and holding him down before he could do much more than uncurl himself. He was a twenty-something young boy, gorgeous in an olive-skinned, innocent, wide-eyed way. He had the sort of good looks that modeling agencies drool over.

"Oh, dear god," Blakeson muttered.

Riley picked up the knife Damian had dropped, and walked around to stand beside Blakeson. "Meet your daughter's killer, Blakeson."

He swallowed. "It can't be. Debbie died over thirty years ago. This boy...he can't be more than twenty..."

Riley turned Blakeson's chair so that he was looking at her properly. "Hear me, Blakeson. Hear me as you never heard my father. There *are* demons and beasties and things that go bump in the night. When your daughter died, you sent him off into the world to find what killed her and he *found* it." She lifted her hand toward the incubus lying on the table between Nick and Damian. "And you didn't believe him."

There were beads of sweat on Blakeson's upper lip. "Your father just wanted the money," he breathed. "My money."

Riley nodded. "Yeah, that's why he kept coming back to mooch off you over and over again after Debbie died."

Blakeson licked his lips. Both of them knew that her father had done no such thing. Once Blakeson had kicked him out, thirty-eight years ago, Carson Connors had never set foot in Minnesota again. Blakeson glanced at Riley before returning his gaze to the incubus. "Prove it," he said, his voice firmer. "Prove your father right."

"Salt," Nick said softly.

Riley dug in her jeans pocket for the packets she had put there earlier. She pulled out one and ripped the top off. The incubus started to struggle when it saw what she had. She sprinkled the salt over its chest, and it thrashed and bucked, Nick and Damian just barely holding it down. Smoke began to rise from its chest and it howled and screamed, the sounds it made more animalistic than human.

Its eyes turned all black, and flickered red.

"Mary, mother of God," Blakeson muttered. "This thing killed my daughter?"

"Yes," Riley told him.

Abruptly, the creature heaved Nick and Damian aside in a wild, convulsive contortion of its body that would have broken the spine of a normal human. It leapt from the desk, its hands reaching for Riley's neck, blind to everything except the pain caused by the salt she had sprinkled over it.

"Riley!" Nick yelled, leaping back to his feet.

She brought the knife up in an automatic reflex, and the point speared the chest of the incubus as it landed on top of her. The demon impaled himself on her knife by his own weight.

The scream turned into a banshee howl as it writhed. Riley shut her eyes as the demon burst into flames over the top of her, and opened them again as Nick and Damian started slapping at her clothes, beating the smaller flames out.

Blakeson was clutching the arms of his chair, breathing in through his air hose, trying to get enough oxygen. He looked gray all over now.

The two helped Riley to her feet. She looked at Blakeson. "Proof enough for you, Blakeson?"

He nodded, and closed his eyes. She was astonished to see a tear squeeze out. "All these years... I thought... Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" He opened his eyes. "Guilt is a bitter pill." His mouth turned down.

"It is indeed," Nick said softly. "I used to think badly of Carson Connors, too."

* * * * *

As the elevator rose to Nick's penthouse studio, Riley yawned. "Did we really have to *drive* from Mankato? They have planes now, you know."

"And how would you go about explaining the boy in the duffel bag, hmm?" Damian asked, his hand stroking the back of her neck.

"There's that," she agreed.

"Or the sword in your coat, the broadsword in mine, or the iron knife in your pocket?" Nick added.

"Besides, there's compensations," Damian crooned, his fingers gentling, growing languid.

The reminder sent a hot wash of longing through her. She caught his eye, and heard Nick's quick indrawn breath beside her as he remembered. They had reached Ohio when she had woken to darkness, alone on the backseat and reached through to the front where Nick and Damian sat, and unzipped both their trousers...

Only a few minutes of stroking had caused Damian to veer off the interstate onto the first rest stop he saw, and find a protected, dark corner of the parking area. In the shadowed dark they'd pulled her from the car and bent her over the trunk. Damian had taken her from behind, driving into her with hard strokes. And Nick had taken *him*, sliding his cock into Damian's ass as Damian had fucked her. Riley had watched it in the reflections on the glass of the back window, her climax slamming through her at the erotic hints she could only just glimpse.

She licked her lips now as she recalled the moment. "Nice compensations," she agreed, her voice heavy with lust.

"There's someone in the apartment foyer, waiting," Nick said, his voice low. Urgent.

Damian's smile faded, and he pushed Riley toward the back of the car, behind him.

She elbowed him and stepped in front of him again. "I have the sword," she reminded him, and gripped the hilt under her coat.

Both of them were listening now. Damian was frowning. "They're upset," he murmured.

"It's a woman," Nick added. "And I can smell stale food."

Damian's frown cleared. "It's your friend from Pittsburgh," he told Riley. "Sabrina."

"Sabrina? Here?"

The elevator opened and Riley hurried into the foyer.

Sabrina sat on the floor next to the apartment door. There were fast-food sacks next to her, proving she had been waiting for some time. And her face was blotchy and smeared with makeup that had run down her cheeks, showing she had been crying. When she saw Riley, she began to cry again, her face screwing up as she tried to hold it in. She held up her arms and Riley fell on her knees next to her.

"What are you *doing* here?" Riley said. "Never mind that, never mind." And she hugged her.

Sabrina wept into her shoulder and tried to talk at the same time. "The super let me in. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't know where else to go."

Nick and Damian were picking up the sacks. Nick unlocked the apartment door.

Riley sat back and looked at Sabrina. "What happened?"

Sabrina pulled a crumpled letter out of her jacket pocket. "I never did believe all that crap you used to say about how we c-could be anything we wanted to be, but you dragged us both to c-college anyway. And look! I got it. The job of a lifetime. I graduated, and I got it."

Riley glanced at the letter. She didn't understand. Something was missing. A piece of the puzzle. The size of Sabrina's disaster didn't match this good news.

Sabrina bit her lip and fresh tears began to flow down her cheeks. "Oh, Riley...I'm pregnant!" she whispered.

Both Nick and Damian looked over their shoulders at her, from inside the apartment.

Riley began to smile. She picked up Sabrina's backpack, got to her feet and held out her hand. "Come on. Come inside. Don't worry about it for now. We'll figure it out."

About the Author

Teal Ceagh is a multi-published, award-winning author who still finds it a deep privilege that she's allowed to spend all day telling stories, and that readers are willing to listen. Romance stories are her favorite. She lives in northern America with her husband and several hundred "keeper" books.

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