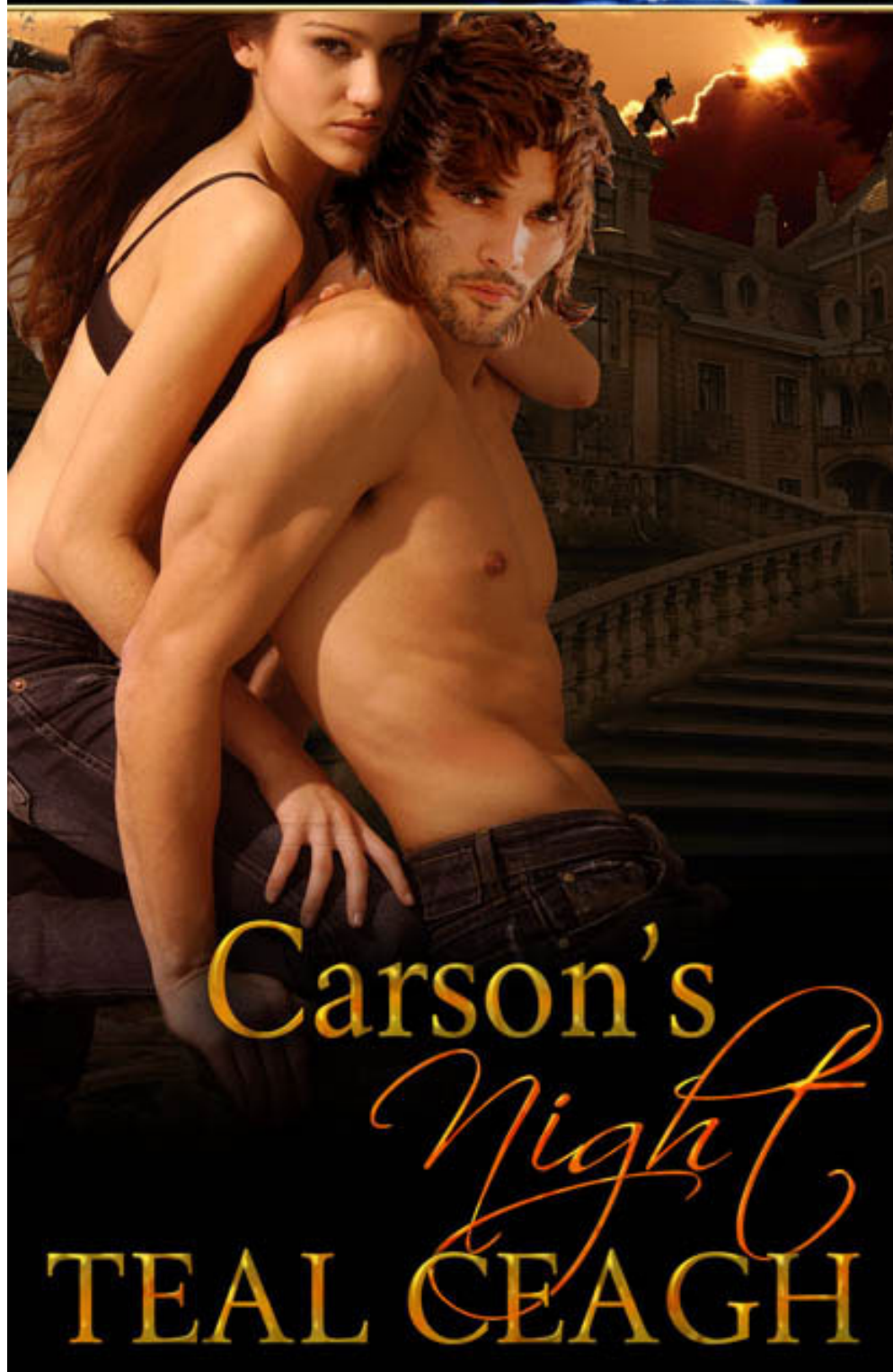


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Carson's
Night
TEAL CEAGH

Carson's Night

Teal Ceagh

It's August 1977 in New York City and the weird sculptor Moss Alex Meinhardt lies dead at the foot of an ugly gargoyle he's half completed. Natalia Grey's demon-hunter father is also dead, and his new partner, the astonishingly sexy Carson Connors, can't remember how it happened.

Carson isn't sure what role he has played in Natalia's father's death, but after one look at Natalia, he does know that guilty or not, he's doomed.

Natalia must take up her father's sword and her heritage as a demon hunter and figure out what happened, for the gargoyles Meinhardt carved have life they shouldn't have without the help of dark forces. Dark forces she and Carson must defeat – once the gargoyles have risen, of course. But the night is hours away yet...

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Carson's Night

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CARSON'S NIGHT

Teal Ceagh

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my whole family, who put up with my mental absence for an entire weekend while I wrote it. Especially Saul, who had the idea for this book in the first place.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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

Bloomington: Macy's Department Stores, Inc.

Pink Floyd: Pink Floyd (1987) Limited

U.S. Postal Service: United States Postal Service

YMCA: National Council of Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States of America

Chapter One

August 1977, New York City

Tally moved from sleeping to waking in one breath. With the next, she eased her hand under her pillow and gripped the handle of her knife as she pretended to sigh and roll onto her side in her sleep.

Iron fingers clamped onto her wrist. "It's me, Tally. Nick."

She opened her eyes. The dark shape in the room looked like him. "Turn on the light," she said.

He reached for the light without hesitation, proving he knew his way around her bedroom. She stared at the person who eased himself down onto the chair beside her bed. He looked haggard and ill-used and that frightened her enough to sit up in her bed despite wearing only her Pink Floyd tee shirt and panties. She brought the knife with her. It was an automatic move, a trained move, triggered by the alarmed created by Nick's appearance.

Nicholas Sherwood should not look tired. He was a vampire and did not need sleep or rest. Yet he blinked at her now like a man who had seen too much of the night.

She glanced at her bedside clock. The hands hovered over the two and the three. Just after three in the morning—it would be dawn in about three hours. "Nick?" she coaxed, her heart hammering.

"I need you to get dressed and come with me, Natalia," he said softly. He reached down beside him and picked up something. He raised it and placed it vertically between his knees and rested both hands around the long hilt.

It was her father's Japanese sword. His katana.

Nicholas looked at her over the top of the hilt. "I'm sorry, Tally. Your father died tonight. You must take his place now."

* * * * *

Tally was too numb to cry, which was just as well, for the cab driver was normal human and they had to guard their tongues. Nick paid off the driver. In the predawn hush the vampire looked up at the flat face of the old dockside warehouse, his expression grim. "Ready?" he asked, settling the light coat around his shoulders better. He was very tall, about six foot two and the sword made the coat hang awkwardly.

She shook her head.

He gripped her shoulder. "Neither am I," he confessed. "But we must do this now." He led her with gentle firmness over to a dark doorway. It stood open, a black maw she was wildly reluctant to step through. Inside was misery and death.

"Where was my father's partner? The new one?" she asked. "Why wasn't he watching out for him? Why didn't he stop this?"

"Inside," Nick told her in a murmur.

"Why were you here, anyway, Nick? You don't usually work with my father."

"Just wait until we get inside, Tally."

"Why? What's in there?" She tried to turn to look at him but Nick's grip on her arm was too firm. He was a vampire, after all. He could rip her apart like humans can shred paper, she knew that. Still she tried to resist.

But he didn't use his strength against her. He let her halt and face him.

"What's inside, Nick?" she asked.

"It's easier if you just go in and see for yourself." He tried to smile. "It's nothing dangerous, for now. I won't let anything hurt you."

She felt tears sting her eyes. "Too late, Nick."

He made a helpless gesture. "I wasn't here when it happened. I don't know how he died. I need you to help me figure it out."

"Why me?"

"Because you're your father's daughter and I trained you. I know what you can do."

She sniffed, trying hard to halt the tears rolling down her cheeks. "What does *that* mean?"

Nick swore softly, then reached over and wiped her face. "Damn, I wish you wouldn't do that. It's a completely unfair tactic, especially when you look the way you do, with those big green eyes of yours."

"I thought I was just a lousy human female," she reminded him.

"You're a *pathetic* human female," he corrected her. "But that doesn't mean I'm completely invulnerable to your charms. And I know exactly what you are, Natalia Grey. You are one of the most powerful demon hunters of this age. You just haven't realized it yet. I want you to see what is inside that warehouse. I think you just might be able to help me."

"But you're not going to tell me anything that will bias my thinking, right?"

This time his smile was unforced. "Right."

She found she was able to approach the warehouse with less reluctance and step inside without hesitation.

It was dark inside except for the glow of a pressure lantern at the far end. Nick slid the sword out from under his coat and handed it to her. It felt too long and heavy but she hefted it and let the blade settle on her shoulder, which was a good ready position as she had no scabbard for it. She headed in the direction of the glow of the lantern, the flares of her jeans swishing softly in the silent cavern of the warehouse. It was empty and chilly.

"Tally," came a soft murmur as she drew closer. "You grow more beautiful with each passing day."

Damian. Nicholas' lover. She felt the vampire's hand on her shoulder. His lips on her temple. She looked up into Damian's black eyes, illuminated in the soft glow of the

lantern. His high cheekbones and olive skin and strong jawline were unchanging but they were touched with sadness now. His long fingers stroked her cheek.

"We'll mourn him, Tally."

She could feel more tears building. Vampires mourning the death of a human was a rare acknowledgment.

"Not until I find the one who did this," she ground out, struggling to keep her voice even. "Where is he?"

Damian nodded. "I'll turn the light up. Brace yourself, Tally." He walked over to the lamp, bent over and turned up the gas feed on it. The light spread and brightened and more of the warehouse appeared.

And she saw her father's body. Tally moved over to where Peter James Grey lay in a contorted, undignified and bloodied huddle, his guts ripped out, his fingers curled in pain. Tally swallowed back her revulsion and studied the remains as clinically as she could, aware in a distant way that she was shaking violently. She used the sword to prop herself up.

"G...gargoyle," she pronounced, wiping at her eyes.

"Yes," Nick agreed coolly, next to her. "And your father was hunting one tonight."

"How do you know that?"

"His partner told us."

"Where is the toad? I want to talk to him."

"In a minute. There's something else you should see." Nick nodded at Damian, who picked up the lantern. They stepped to either side of her and warmth and regard flooded her. Despite the subterranean keening sounding inside her at the loss of her father, she knew that she would never truly be alone while Nick and Damian trod the earth.

They led her through the darkness, past huge wooden packing crates, into another cavernous, seemingly empty room with a concrete floor. This one was just as cool as the

last. They stopped at a huge block of raw stone, something that looked like it had been blasted out of the side of a mountain and dumped on the floor, after having the bottom of it shaved smooth and flat.

At the foot of the rock lay another body. Tally crouched down next to the man. This time the cause of death was a bit harder to establish and when she found it, she grew uneasy. She stood up. "My father must have killed him. With this." She dropped the sword so the point rested on the concrete. "But why? Who is he?"

"You don't recognize him at all?" Nick asked.

"You don't know him?" Tally asked. "He looks vaguely familiar to me but..." She frowned. "Is there an office around here somewhere? Something with paperwork in it? Does he have a wallet on him? A driver's license?" She squatted again and patted the man's pockets and found a wallet in his hip pocket. "Can one of you roll him so I can get the wallet out?"

Damian lifted the body for her and that was when they found the top of the pentacle painted on the floor beneath it.

With Damian and Nicholas' combined strength to move the stone, they discovered the pentacle ran beneath the stone in all directions. A twenty minute search discovered other painted pentacles of the same size on the floor of the warehouse, six in all, with powerful beckoning symbols in the center of each.

The wallet told them the name of the man at the foot of the stone was Moss Alex Meinhardt, which meant nothing to either Nick or Damian. Tally knew the name but could not explain why she knew it.

After thirty minutes, she called a halt to the search. "There's nothing here. I was hoping for an office and paperwork that might explain more but this is just a warehouse. It's dawn. We have to give up for tonight and clean this up so the authorities have a human explanation they can draw for events." She looked at Nick. "I want to talk to the partner now."

Nick nodded and picked up the lantern. "Damian, you take care of the bodies. I'll take her to Connors." He led her back through to the other side of the warehouse, to the far end, away from the door where she had come in.

* * * * *

Carson Connors heard the murmur and flicker of light that meant the return of the vampires and stretched his shoulders and neck. They ached from being held in the same position for so long, forced that way by his wrists, which were bound by rope that was secured to a wall strut. The rope wasn't cruelly tight, but firm enough to keep him contained at this end of the warehouse. He didn't blame Sherwood for such a precaution. If it had been him, Carson would have done the same because under these circumstances he was a risk. Perhaps now they could sort this out. He glanced over to approximately where Peter Grey lay, a black shadow in the dark and unformed guilt touched him again.

What had happened here tonight?

No matter how he probed or tried to recall the events of the night, nothing came. No memories formed. There was simply nothing there, no associations to provoke the next event in the chain. He'd broken sweat trying to bring forth the memories and...nothing.

That produced sweat of its own.

He watched the light draw closer. So who was it the two vampires had rushed out to bring in as a consultant on this? Some heavyweight hunter? Peter James Grey had been one of the best and Carson himself was no slouch—he'd been building his reputation in the field, anyway—and couldn't think who Nicholas Sherwood would be able to scare up in the greater New York area in late August at a moment's notice that would be able to help the great Nick Sherwood figure this out.

The two reached him and Carson could feel his heart seize and his cock stir. *Sweet Jesus*, his mind murmured as he stared at her. She was quite simply beautiful, with

perfect symmetry. Her face was heart-shaped, her eyes a stunning sea green with dark lashes and strong dark brows, and pillow-soft lips the color of apricots. Her skin was flawless. He had the insane urge to taste it, to slide his tongue along those cheekbones and nibble the corner of her jawline and that slender neck rising out of the *Dark Side of the Moon* tee shirt. Full breasts lifted the tee shirt and the belt pulled the jeans in around a waist that looked like he could put his hands around it. Indecently long legs hid beneath flared jeans. He'd have those off her. Very soon.

Then he realized with an almost painful start of awareness exactly where his thoughts and gaze were. He dragged, pummeled, tore his gaze back up to her face. Licked his lips.

She was staring at him. Her lips were parted softly and she was breathing quickly. Knowledge...awareness...it was there in her face. She saw exactly what he was thinking. It was as clear as if she had spoken. And she was not offended. She wanted it.

His excitement spiked again. He clenched his fists, feeling the rope chafe and his cock and balls throb painfully. He was suddenly hot, way too hot. He'd do anything to be able to take off his coat, the coat of his trade.

He made himself look at Nicholas Sherwood. "I can't remember what happened, but I know I didn't cause Peter Grey's death."

She flinched and suddenly he realized who she was. Grey's daughter. The genetic traits were there, once you looked past her beauty. Grey's strength was there in her stubborn jawline, her clear-sighted way of looking. And her green eyes. This was why Sherwood had brought her in. The inherited business. He looked at her. "You must believe me," he told her.

"We'll find out," she assured him.

He was impressed. It would have been easy enough for her to simply believe him, to trust her instinctive reaction to him, but she wouldn't allow herself to do that. She would trust only evidence because she knew she was vulnerable right now.

She hefted the sword on her shoulder and let the point drop to the concrete to rest. "Do you know who Moss Alex Meinhardt is?" she asked.

"Sure." He shrugged. "He's that weird sculptor nut who carves giant gargoyles."

"Gargoyles," Nicholas breathed. He looked up at the roof. "And it's dawn." He put the lantern down abruptly and reached into his coat. "And the demon brings them to life."

"What demon?" Carson asked.

There was a low, reverberating *swoosh* overhead. Then another.

He pulled out a knife and sawed through Carson's bonds, freeing his hands. "No time."

"I'll get Damian," the girl said.

"No, I'll get him. I have no need of light. You take Connors and the lamp. Get your father's body. Take all of them back to my apartment. It's warded against the demon." And abruptly Sherwood was gone, leaving the girl and her long sword apparently in charge.

There was another low *swoosh* overhead, then a more alarming sound, the crash and tinkle of glass and wood breaking as a roof caved in.

"Come with me," the girl said. She picked up the lantern and began to run.

Carson threw off the last of the rope and followed and despite the knowledge that there were giant gargoyles pouring into the building, that his partner lay dead and he didn't know why or how, that a demon was on the loose and bent on mischief and that two vampires were seriously pissed at him for all of the above, he only seemed to be able to focus on the sweet sway of her ass as she ran and how much he wanted to cup his hands around each cheek.

He knew that no matter how tonight's events played out, he was doomed anyway.

* * * * *

It was close to nine in the morning before they made it back to Nick's place, for carrying a dead body around New York was not easy. But Carson Connors had hidden resources, for once they made it out into the growing sunlight and the immediate danger from the gargoyles passed, Tally's strength seemed to desert her.

Connors seemed to sense it, for he lowered her father's bloody remains to the ground, dropped his coat over them, took the lantern and sword from her and lifted her chin. "I didn't get your name."

She looked up at him. He was taller than she'd first thought. Next to Nick, of course, he'd looked shorter. But everyone looked short next to Nick. Connors had to be around five eleven, maybe even six foot and now she could look at him in daylight and without the coat, she could see that he was thick through the shoulders and neck. The baseball tee shirt was snug around his shoulders and arms. He was dark-haired and his stubble was dark but his eyes, which she had thought were black, were actually a very dark blue. His hair was brushing his shoulders, as was fashionable these days and locks hung around his face, giving him a rumpled look that she liked, especially with the stubble on his cheeks.

"I'm Natalia. Tally."

"You're Peter's daughter, aren't you?" he asked softly.

She bit her lip, battling not to break down right here and now. Then she nodded.

"We have to get him home," he told her. "And that means I'm going to have to treat his body in ways that are going to look like I don't respect him, just for a while, okay, Tally? But it's the only way we'll avoid getting arrested."

She nodded again. "I've been around Nick and Damian for too long. I know how it works." She glanced at her father and away. "We'll need something to cover him up." She looked up at Connors. "You have a first name, Connors?"

"Carson." He was staring at her. "Sherwood trained you, but not your father?"

"That's a hell of an assumption."

"I'm in the sort of business that works on intuitive assumptions. I've been working with your father for nearly a year but I've never met you. Not even once. So he keeps—kept—you and his business carefully separated. Yet you know the business really well and you've been trained in it. And you know Sherwood and his lover very well indeed. Ergo, Sherwood trained you. Why Sherwood and not your father?"

"None of your business, Connors."

He caught her arm in his hand. His hand was big and warm, unlike Nick's, which was slender and always cool. She looked down at it, then up at his face. He wasn't angry, or impatient. He just looked at her.

"Don't fight me off, Tally," he said softly. "Don't be scared of me."

"I'm not."

"You are," he said flatly. "I know you felt it back inside there." He curled his hand around the back of her neck, under her hair. "I imagine you've had hundreds of men tell you how beautiful you are but you've never felt about them the way you reacted to me just now."

"Oh god, please," she moaned. She couldn't think of anything else to say. He was plucking the thoughts from her mind and speaking them aloud and it terrified her.

"Say it, Tally," he breathed.

"I don't want to want you," she said, and this time the tears did fall.

He didn't just wipe them. He kissed them away.

"Let me get you somewhere safe. Then I'll show you that wanting me is good."

And he did. They reached Nick's three-story midtown apartment, bringing her father's body up in the service elevator, bent over and huddled inside a lined U.S. Postal Service bag.

Nick greeted them at the door and this time he looked even more haggard than before.

"What happened?" Tally asked sharply.

"Damian," Nick said simply.

She pushed past him into the apartment's main room, her heart in her throat, looking for Damian. He was lying on the big leather couch in the main room and was horribly still. A blanket was pulled up to his chin.

She reached for the blanket but Nick grabbed her wrist. "No, it's like seeing us naked," he said.

"I've seen you both naked, plenty of times."

"This is far more intimate," Nick said awkwardly. "He's been...torn up."

She could feel more tears pooling in her eyes. "Will he heal?"

Nick pushed his hand through his hair, one of his mannerisms for when he was stressed. "Yes, with time."

"How much time?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We...they...no one has ever studied these things." He looked down at Damian miserably and Tally impulsively threw her arms around him. Nicholas, she knew, came from somewhere in England in the feudal times and this was not what a proper Englishman did even when he was unhappy, but Nick surprised her by hugging her back, his arms holding her hard and long.

When he let her go, he held her head for a moment and kissed her cheek. His lips brushed her cheekbone as he murmured by her ear. "Connors wants you. I've never sensed longing with such power before. Let yourself want him back, Tally. I know you do."

She jerked in surprise and pulled back to look Nick in the eye. "Is nothing sacred with you, Nick?" she said in a normal voice.

He smiled a little. "No." He pushed her hair off her face. "You forget with whom you're speaking." Abruptly his accent was stiff and far more pronounced than usual.

"Snob," she teased, stepping away from him.

He grimaced and swallowed. "Worried," he corrected, with a glance at Damian.

"He's a tough old Spartan. He'll pull through." She whacked him on the shoulder.
"Can you put my father in the little bedroom upstairs?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'm going to use the guest suite up there too and I'm going to raid your wardrobe and use your Bloomingdales account, okay?"

Nick nodded again.

She hurried to the stairs, trying hard not to look at Carson Connors standing in stiffly in the corner of the room. But she could almost *feel* his gaze on her back. No, not her back. Her ass. And her legs. And her waist. It was like a mental caress.

Her breathing was faster before she even left the room.

Connors wants you.

She grabbed the newel post at the bottom of the grand staircase and held it, recovering her breath. Yes, she wanted Carson Connors but why, oh why did he have to be human?

Chapter Two

"What did you murmur to her just then?" Carson demanded, moving around the couch.

Sherwood looked up, his eyes narrowing. "Ah, you noticed."

"I don't have vampire hearing but for a human I hear better than most. You told her something, probably about me."

"A good assumption, as you are the only one in the room we couldn't speak freely in front of." Sherwood strung his fingers together and let them hang between his knees. He looked relaxed and comfortable on the low chair.

Carson didn't let that fool him. He kept his guard up and the couch between them. "We're not going back to destroy the gargoyles while they're in their stone sleep?"

Sherwood shook his head. "It would seem like a natural move, especially as we know where they're nesting—a rare advantage with gargoyles. But there's a powerful demon out there guarding them. Azazel. He's hunting me because he knows I will kill him the moment I can re-gather my resources. All I have is Tally, who is untried." Sherwood's gaze flickered to the still form on the couch and back up to Carson. "No offence."

"The gargoyles will abandon the nest tonight. You know that."

"You're not the only one with experience hunting gargoyles, Connors. We'll find them again. When we're stronger."

"So we hide instead?"

"We regroup," Sherwood amended. "This apartment has been specifically warded against Azazel. He cannot enter without invitation."

"You're a witch too?"

"I have friends."

"And money. Those sorts of wards don't come cheap."

"No, they don't," Sherwood agreed. He sat unmoved, staring at Carson.

"We regroup until when?"

"I would prefer than Damian be on his feet again. He is a good right hand to have in a fight."

"He's a hunter?"

"A Spartan," Sherwood amended.

Carson considered that. The Spartans were considered one of the most effective foot soldiers in history. Sherwood wasn't indulging his personal whims by delaying long enough for Damian to recover. With a short sword and a long knife, Damian would be a deadly fighting force. Find a way to give him a shield as well and very little would stop him. Only being caught unguarded and weaponless by a handful of gargoyles had slowed him down tonight. Carson had a feeling neither vampire would be caught flatfooted again.

Gargoyles were the only creatures whose bites were toxic to vampires and until tonight demon hunters had crossed them off their list as extinct. The only reason he and Peter had been hunting them had been pure chance—they had heard a police report of a murder victim with bite marks that had sounded suspiciously like what a gargoyle would do to a victim.

Was that why they had sought out the weird sculptor, Moss Alex Meinhardt?

Carson frowned to himself. The memory wasn't there. It was part of the blank hole in his head.

"You frown, Carson," Sherwood said. "What displeases you now?"

"My lack of memory about tonight's events," Carson said honestly. "I wish I knew what happened."

"As do we all." Sherwood shrugged. "We will find out."

Carson grimaced. "In the meantime you could tell me what you told Tally."

The vampire smiled. "Persistent, aren't you?" The smile faded. "I told her you wanted her and that she should consider letting a liaison happen."

Carson could feel his jaw descending and caught it up. "What, you're her pimp now?"

"Damian and I have been almost surrogate parents for her since she was born. Her mother died when Tally was very young and her father spent most of his time on the road—you know the lifestyle of hunting as well as anyone. Love advice is often part of a parent's role."

"When I need help seducing a woman—"

Sherwood stood up and abruptly was right there next to him. So much for keeping the couch between them. Carson could feel his heart shudder with the suddenness of it. He realized that if Sherwood wanted to kill him, he could do it whenever he chose to. There was no way Carson could stop him. Not in this apartment, anyway. Not without preparations, not without sneaking up on Sherwood with every defense in place. Not without using every underhanded, backstabbing method known to man. No wonder vampires had thrived despite centuries of hunting and persecution.

Sherwood tilted his head a little. "Now you understand," he said softly, as if he had been following Carson's thoughts. "Never forget whose side we are on."

"Hers," Carson replied.

"Exactly." Sherwood smiled. "And your role in Peter Grey's death has yet to be established. I don't believe you are guilty of wrongdoing but I don't believe your hands are without blood, either. If we learn the blood is of the wrong color, Connors, I will not be the first to cut them off. You know who will be, don't you?"

His heart was thundering. "Tally."

"I'm tempted to warn you not to let her beauty blind you, but if you *are* playing for the wrong side I'd rather see the look of stunned surprise on your face when she hacks

out your heart with a rusty knife inside thirty seconds and barely raises her own pulse while she does it."

There was a feral expression of genuine enjoyment on Sherwood's face. Carson was fervently glad that he was on the right team. Then he considered the gaping hole in his memory and shivered.

"Is there a shower I can use?" he asked and wasn't surprised to find his voice was hoarse.

* * * * *

After her shower, Tally made her way into the kitchen, hoping against hope that Nicholas might have some real food she could eat while Bloomingdale's delivered the new clothes she had ordered and billed to Nick's account. She looked inside the mostly empty fridge and sighed, then looked inside the freezer with more optimism. There were some frozen waffles that were probably there from the last time she had stayed over, and she headed for the pantry to see if there was some syrup, pushing up the overlong sleeves of Nick's dressing gown. The copper and gold satin and brocade garment was so English and so proper that even in her own mind she couldn't call it a bathrobe and she felt vaguely guilty that it dragged on the ground because she wasn't as tall as Nick.

She found real maple syrup and grimaced to herself. It was close enough. She was too hungry to give Nick grief over not keeping his kitchen stocked to human standards when he never used it himself.

"Think you could make enough for two?"

She stifled her gasp, whirling.

Carson Connors stood at the other end of the kitchen. He wore jeans and nothing else and had clearly come in search of food after stepping out of the shower. His hair and skin were damp and his shoulders gleamed dimly in the soft overhead light.

"You move silently enough, I'll give you that."

"Bare feet," he said simply, moving toward her. His eyes looked black in this light. He hadn't shaved—Nick and Damian did not need to, so there would be no shaving equipment in any of the bathrooms here. She liked the stubble on Carson, though. It made him look human. Different.

She realized she was standing stock-still in the middle of the floor as he approached her, and made herself move back to the counter and put the syrup on it. "There's only frozen waffles," she said.

"Don't care," he said. "I haven't eaten in over twenty-four hours."

"We could order in something. Or do both, if you're hungry enough."

He stopped by her shoulder. "I'm hungry enough for all three."

She could smell him. Hot male. Spicy. Clean.

Her breasts swelled beneath the gown, the nipples hardened. Her pussy throbbed. Her mouth grew dry.

There was no need to ask what the third option was. She swiveled her head to look at him. He was watching her steadily but when her gaze dropped to the base of his throat she saw the pulse there was beating fast and hard. She looked up at his face, into his eyes again, trying to spot what was driving the runaway beat there but nothing showed.

"You're playing with me," she told him. "That's not a good idea."

"So Sherwood tried to warn me." The corner of his mouth lifted and he reached out and pushed at the over-wide neck of the gown. It dropped off her shoulder, exposing it and most of the upper slope of her breast and trapped her arm against her side. He stroked her flesh, making her shiver. "I think Sherwood and I have different ideas what 'danger' means, though." His fingers were sending delicious fiery threads through her body, straight to her clitoris. Her pussy clenched, squeezing out juices. She was ferociously aware of her nakedness beneath the gown and that Carson merely had to tug on the satin sash and the gown would slither to the floor around her feet.

She bit back a moan. She wanted desperately for him to do just that. She wanted him to take her in the most primitive, crude and roughest way. She ached for it.

Her breath quickened.

Carson pulled at the neck of the gown again, bringing it lower, exposing more of her shoulder, her breast.

For a moment he stood and simply studied her. His own jeans, she realized, were peaked at the front, bulging with his erect cock.

He stepped closer to her and cupped her face in his hands. "I have wanted to do this since I first saw you." He touched his lips to hers and her breath rushed out of her. His tongue swept over her lips, gently.

Then he kissed her and she knew then that she had never been kissed before. Not properly. Not like this. It felt like Carson was pouring himself into the kiss. Hot energy raked through her, made her nerves fizz and her body come alive like a hot coal. As his tongue thrust into her mouth, sweeping deeper and deeper, she clung to him and drew him to her, encouraging him with wordless sounds and murmurs.

She seemed to sink deeper into the kiss the longer it continued, until she was unsure of where she ended and Carson began.

Finally, he broke the kiss, his chest heaving. "No woman has ever kissed me like that," he said, panting. His eyes were very black.

"I could say the same thing about you, Carson." Her lips were swollen.

He touched them with the tip of his forefinger and the gesture was endearing. "I need to skip to dessert," he said, his voice low and rough. "*Now.*" He picked her up around the waist and she found her legs were automatically curling around his waist, her arms around his neck. "Which way?" he demanded.

She thought of protesting but it would have been a token one. She wanted him. Why not let herself have him, as Nick suggested? She was safe inside a warded household and Nick was nearby and her father had trusted this man too.

Tally pointed. "Hurry," she added.

He strode from the kitchen and following her murmured instructions, up the stairs to the guest suite, to the big bedroom with the elegant king-sized four-poster bed. She suspected it was a replica of a more refined time in Nick's past, for she always felt like she had stepped back in history when she used the suite. Now she was glad of the big bed and the self-contained rooms.

Carson put her on the bed and strode back to the door and shut it with evident satisfaction. "Now," he said, his voice a low rumble.

Her pulse jumped.

"Now," she echoed.

"Except I won't have you in his robe. Take it off." He remained at the door, his arms crossed.

She slipped to the end of the bed and stood up. Her heart was racing again as she pulled at the sash and felt it slither undone. That was all it took. The gown was so large on her, the neck slid off her shoulders and puddled about her ankles in a sea of satin and brocade. She remained still, except for the rise and fall of her breasts as her lungs worked quickly and her heart slammed in her chest.

Her nipples were hard, excited peaks.

Carson came toward her, moving slowly like a prowling animal and she thought she might expire if he did not speed up. Her breath hitched and caught in her throat and he smiled at the sound.

"Ah...you've been trained in the art of hunting but you have a thing or two left to learn in the bedroom, my sweet." He stepped behind her and pulled her hair back over her shoulder and that was worse, having him behind her. Her heart accelerated. She didn't know what he might do next when she couldn't see him.

His hot lips pressed against her shoulder, making her gasp. She began to tremble. "Come around where I can see you," she complained.

"Oh no, I don't think so," he said, with a soft laugh. "Then you might relax. Are you taking birth control pills, Tally?"

"Yes."

"Then there is no need for..."

She heard the soft sound of a metal zipper being lowered and her heart seemed to stop for a second. He was undoing his jeans. She strained to hear more.

There. The whisper of denim against skin.

She didn't think her excitement could possibly rise any higher, but just the sounds of him removing his jeans and the knowledge that he was naked, now were enough to bring her to the point where she was very nearly hyperventilating. Her pussy was sopping with moisture and pounding with swollen pressure. She so badly wanted him to touch her. Anywhere, but most especially she wanted his cock inside her. *And his hands on my clit. And my breasts. And my...oh, anywhere! But hurry!*

And she wanted to see him now that he was naked.

When his hands fitted around her waist she gave a tiny shrieking gasp, one that shuddered because of the indrawing of her breath. He was still behind her and nothing else but his hands touched her.

"They nearly do touch," he murmured, with apparent satisfaction.

Tally reached for his hands.

"Don't," he said quickly. "Keep still."

"But I want to."

"Soon," he assured her. "It's my turn to play now."

She dropped her hands and fisted them. "Hurry," she said.

"Absolutely not." His hands slid upward at a leisurely, dawdling pace, stroking in little, maddening circling, making her flesh ripple and respond, making her shudder and whimper. She knew the destination of his wandering fingertips and the knowledge

was a burning brand in her mind. She closed her eyes, waiting out the torture but that made it worse. She could feel the tips of her breasts thrusting out to receive his touch.

When finally his hands cupped her breasts, she cried out. She couldn't help it. The welcome sensation was so delightful. He squeezed gently and his fingers caught at the pebbled nipples, tugging at them.

Her knees seemed to weaken and her clit to bloom with each playful tweak and stroke.

"Yes, on your knees, then," he murmured.

She let herself sink to the soft rug, knowing she would not be able to remain on her feet while these sensations raged through her. She settled on her knees and the dressing gown was pulled out of the way.

"Spread your knees," he instructed and she could tell from his voice that he was still standing. She shivered and spread her knees as he ordered and her thighs parted, leaving her exposed and accessible. She knew that was what he had intended and her pussy pulsed in anticipation.

His hands slid over her shoulders and captured her breasts again and she moaned. The exquisite tugging and pinching and chaffing were making her clitoris quiver and beat in a way that told her she would not last much longer. "Carson," she begged. "Quickly, please."

"No." His voice was thick with arousal and firm with authority. This was a man who knew what he was doing. "Shut your eyes, Tally."

"I'm too close," she said desperately, trying to make him see. She turned to look at him but his hand grabbed her head and held it still.

"You don't trust me yet," he ground out, his voice right next to her ear. She could hear the deep arousal in it, the dark note. "You don't know yet how to leave your pleasure in my hands and know that I will work to utterly and completely satiate you."

Her whole body seemed to ripple at the promise in his voice and words. Then she processed the long-term implication behind them and fear touched her. "Carson—"

"Don't speak for now," he said and his tongue thrust into her ear.

The sensation was so erotic, so unexpected, she moaned, another shudder running through her. No one had ever done that to her before. She could feel her climax gathering, deep down inside her.

Then he let her go. His hands lifted away from her. His mouth moved away from her neck. His hot breath stopped fanning her ear.

The muscles in her pelvis rippled in response. She tried to turn to see what he was doing and again, his hands steadied her head.

"I see I must teach you to trust me."

She shivered. There was such wicked intent in his tone. Such promise.

"Keep still. Close your eyes."

She closed them and her heart jumped as something soft and silky touched her eyelids. She recognized it by its scent. The sash from Nick's robe. She felt it circle her head. Carson tied it so it sat firmly enough to hide all the light from her gaze, but that was all.

The loss of her vision enhanced her hearing and brought her nerve endings alive in a way that made her skin start to tingle. She turned her head, questing to hear every little sound Carson made.

He made *none*. She could hear nothing but her own labored breath and the echo of her slamming heart in her temples.

"Carson..." she pleaded.

Hot, moist lips closed around the tip of her left breast and teeth tugged at her nipple.

She cried out, clutching at his head, as a wave of sensation shot through her. She was turning inside out, her belly clamping with pure delight.

Carson pulled away, making her hands drop, empty once more. She whimpered and was appalled at the helpless sound emerging from her own mouth.

"Music to my ears. Do you know how hard that makes me?" Carson murmured, his voice so low she couldn't pinpoint where it came from.

A brush of something over her hip. It made her jump and her pelvic muscles ripple. His fingers? Then more fingers over her upper breast. Then the back of her waist. Her inner thigh...her shoulder...swiftly the medley of light brushing strokes melded together into a symphony that played over her body from her knees to the top of her head. Nothing was spared and she had no way to tell where the touch would come next. He moved so swiftly and so unpredictably that it felt like many pairs of hands running all over her body and she gave up trying to guess where he would touch her next and simply accepted the sensations and sank into the pleasure they gave her.

She began to vibrate under their stimulus, her breathing a swift pant. Her pussy was so ready to accept him, it pushed out excess fluids that spilled out onto the tops of her inner thighs. Tally heard herself moaning when she was not panting or whimpering.

Carson tugged at her wrist, bringing her forward and she found herself on her hands and knees. Her trembling worsened. Was he in front or behind her? "Where are you?" she cried.

"Where I can admire you best." His voice was almost bodiless. "You are most beautiful like this, Tally, when you are writhing and greedy for me. And you are greedy for me, aren't you?"

"Yes!" she replied, her voice hoarse with need.

"Hmmm...I don't think you're quite there, yet."

"No!" She could have wept. But before she had a chance to react further, a finger probed between her legs. A simple sweep of a fingertip through her moisture-laden cleft, from her anus to her swollen clit.

She sucked in her breath, her back arching and her bottom pushing back.

Carson chuckled. "Ah...the promise! Such delicate fruit!" Then, nothing.

"I'm going to kill you," Tally breathed.

His lips touched hers, snatching her breath away yet again with the unexpectedness of it. "I'm going to give you such pleasure, Natalia, you wouldn't dream of killing the source of such unique joy."

"Your arrogance is certainly unique."

"Not arrogance. Knowledge." His tongue swept over her mouth and his lips nibbled on them. It was erotic and highly arousing despite the more direct stimulus she had already received.

She sighed and heard his breath catch.

"You're a drug, Natalia Grey," he growled. His hand came around the back of her head and he was kissing her properly, his mouth hard against her lips. There was no finesse to this kiss and she knew that he wasn't giving pleasure this time. He was taking. Inhaling.

Abruptly, she was released and the same silence descended. No, not the same. She heard his breathing now. Not as hurried as hers but there, nevertheless. She was affecting him too. Warmth spread through her at the idea that without even touching him she could exert that much power over him.

Then his fingers slid inside her pussy and coherent thought scattered. She breathed out a choked moan as his big fingers invaded her, her muscles automatically clamping down around him. Two of them, sliding up against the walls of her vagina, stretching her, for he was spreading them.

Then a third slid inside her and her hips bucked as the intense erotic sensations burst through her. Little moans erupted from her lips as Carson worked his fingers inside her. There was plenty of lubrication for what he was doing. She was awash in moisture. He slid his big fingers and their rough knuckles in and out, spreading her, teasing her, rubbing against the walls of her pussy and Tally let him, while her body

seemed to melt into a quivering mass of nerves and sensations and no thought except for the marvels of pleasure and the need for more.

Distantly, she was aware of his fingers sopping up her juices and spreading them but she no longer questioned anything he did. She had short-circuited her logical processes and was a purely sensory creature only interested in the erotic, the sensual. When his finger rimmed her anus, she pushed her hips back, encouraging him. The sensation was unique, unusual. She liked it. He slipped a finger inside her and she hummed, liking the odd feeling. He probed deeper, slipped another fingertip inside. Slowly, he worked the fingers, stretching her, spreading her natural lubricant, making her moan, making her like it. Making her writhe and pant.

His own breath was heavy and hard now. She could hear it below her own.

The fingers in her pussy were withdrawn and a hot blunt probe pushed up against her folds instead. Carson's cock. He still had his fingers in her ass and she realized as his other hand gripped her hip that they were going to stay there. She felt a feathering of fear, then he slid the tip of his cock into her.

He was huge, it felt like. She could feel her pussy muscles stretch around him, accepting him, trying to draw him in like a craven wanton. Even her fingers dug into the carpeting. She whimpered. So close. So close.

"Shhhh," he murmured but his voice was unsteady.

She was coming unglued. "Fuck me, Carson," she cried, in a throaty voice that was not her own.

His cock pushed a little deeper, opening her up.

She went mad, wiggling, trying to work him deeper with her own motions, whimpering and moaning. Thought ceased. The orgasm that had been gathering in her depths finally moved, swelled and began to lift, taking over her body and her senses.

She hyperventilated.

But still it wasn't enough. Not enough. She dug her fingers into the carpet and tossed her head. Sweat gathered on her temples and she cried out her frustration.

His cock slammed into her, buried deep inside her in one satisfying stroke, filling her as no other man ever had. She stilled for several heartbeats, as she savored the sensation. But then Carson's finger and thumb closed around her swollen and ready clitoris and stroked it with deadly, knowing expertise, as he pulled his cock almost all the way out of her and rammed it back in with another hard, deep thrust. He mirrored the action with his fingers in her anus.

Tally climaxed almost immediately, with an orgasm more powerful than she had ever experienced in her life. For a moment her hearing seemed to fade and ebb and even her heartbeat seemed to slow and perhaps even halt as she hung endlessly on the very peak of the climax, her body locked in that perfect moment. Even her breathing ceased.

Then she screamed as the pleasure crashed upon her in wave upon convulsive wave, made deeper, harder and more profound by Carson's fingers in her ass and his cock in her pussy and his masterful milking of her clit and expert control of her body. He had done this to her. He had orchestrated this mind-altering, out-of-body experience.

He did, indeed, know what he was doing.

But he was not finished with her yet. Even as she panted, trying to recover, he withdrew from her body and flipped her on her back. She was not a petite woman but he handled her like she was a china doll and made her feel delicate and feminine. His arm was around her waist and he was tugging at her blindfold. She closed her eyes, bracing for the light as the sash was pulled away, then carefully opened them.

Carson's eyes were black and sleepy-looking as he leaned over her. "You screamed my name," he said. His voice was heavy with arousal.

"I did?" She couldn't remember screaming.

His hand picked up hers and spread it on the rug, above her head. He did the same with the other. It made the muscles in his chest expand and his shoulders look big and round. She caught her breath. For the first time she looked down and saw his naked body and the cock that had been inside her moments before. It glistened with her fluids. It *was* big and it throbbed as she watched, with a tracery of veins extending its length. The head flared, red along the edges. He used his knee to nudge her thigh aside. His thighs were strong. Not bulging in muscle but not spindly, either.

"I'll have you screaming my name again," he promised.

Her heart thudded. "Again?" she asked.

"Always. Every way," he told her. He brought her hands around in a big circle so that they were down next to her hips, then pushed them *under* her hips, so that both his and her hands were propping her hips and pelvis up. Offering her to him.

He smiled, the wisps of long hair trailing over his eyes giving him a wicked, devil-may-care look. "You didn't think this was a one-time offer did you?"

Before she could even begin to formulate a response, he lowered himself to the rug and roughly shouldered his way between her thighs. He slid his tongue the length of her cleft, lapping up the juices she had yielded, murmuring sounds one might make when eating a particularly nice meal. His tongue slid between her folds and probed deep into her pussy and even around her anus. He spared not a single inch of her. He even swirled around her temporarily replete clitoris, which throbbed. By the time he was done, she was squirming at his touch, her heart racing.

There was something sinful and thrilling about watching his dark head working between her thighs and the stray hair falling over his eyes. The working of his sensual lips and tongue were hypnotic.

Eventually his tongue slid upward again, to circle her clit, probing at it. She moaned, her body shuddering. She could not possibly experience again a climax as powerful as the one she had just had...could she?

Tally watched Carson's mouth descend upon her mons, sucking her clit inside, before the deep, powerful wrench of pleasure hit her and she realized that, yes, it might be possible after all. Her head rolled back involuntarily as the spike of intense excitement rolled through her.

Carson did not spare her. Nor did he linger. This time, he pushed her to a swift, silvered orgasm by the most direct route possible. He did not stop to tease, to linger, or indulge in delaying tactics or subtleties. Her climax spilled through her with the purity of light, a heady simple thing that nevertheless seemed to snatch away everything but her heartbeat. She couldn't even reach for him, for her hands were still locked under her hips, along with his.

Did I scream? she wondered, dazed, as her breath returned to her.

Her hands were free and Carson was above her, his cock pushing into her, his gaze on her face. There was sweat beading at his temple and his expression was one of a man on the edge of...pain. His cock slid deep and came to rest for a brief second before he began to thrust in hurried, hard movements. The tendons in his neck stood out, showing strain.

"Not enough, not nearly enough," he growled as he thrust into her. He came with a choked cry and the little erotic grind of his pelvis was enough to set off another small climax of her own, as she curled her leg over his hip.

She found she was shaking when he became still above her. Carson noticed too and cupped her face in his hand, frowning. "I hurt you?" His cock was still inside her and still erect, as far as she could tell and he was supporting himself on his elbows and knees. She shook her head.

"I think...I'm hungry. For real food."

He closed his eyes for a second. "Food," he growled. "I'm sorry. With the shock of your father and a broken night's sleep, you're probably starving."

Her father. The fact of her father's death touched her again as it had been all day, like something she kept tripping over mentally, that she kept forgetting to put away

and kept ramming her shins into painfully every few minutes. It didn't get any easier with repetition. Would it ever? There was just a gaping raw hole where her father used to be. She fought against tears for a moment, got the better of them and looked up at Carson. "Food would be good," she said evenly.

He must have watched the byplay of emotions on her face. "You're allowed to mourn him, you know," he said gently.

"Not until I know how he died. Then I'll mourn him. Then I'll grieve. First, I have to kill the bastard who killed him."

And Carson actually flinched. She felt it as their bodies were still connected. He lifted himself from her and stood up.

"You think you have something to do with it," she breathed.

"I was clearly there," he pointed out. He walked over to where his jeans lay and thrust his leg into them. His rear, she noted absently, was just as wonderful as the front view. For a hunter constantly on the road, he was either genetically blessed, or inordinately disciplined. Perhaps he spent a lot of time in the YMCAs around the country, or surfing.

"To help my father. You were his partner."

"But your father died and I didn't have a scratch on me." Carson pushed the other leg in, pulled the denim up his thighs and fastened it. No underwear, she noted. "In a warehouse full of gargoyles who killed your father, and one very pissed off demon who wants to take out your two vampire friends at the very least, I'm the only one left standing."

"Not without a scratch," Tally responded. She rose from the carpet and because there was nothing else for her to put on but the grimy jeans and tee shirt she had been wearing all night, she reached for Nick's robe and slid back into it. "You lost your memory. Something happened to you for you to end up with a hole in your mind." The sash was a few feet away and she bent over and picked it up, holding the robe closed around her, then wrapped the sash around her twice and tied it closed.

Carson was staring at her, his eyes narrowed. "Of course," he said slowly. "Why didn't I think of that? That *is* what happened to me. They took my memory. But why settle for that and not simply just killing me? What's the payoff in leaving me alive? Peter killed the sculptor, the gargoyles killed him, they found me, did whatever they did to me to make me forget..." He grew still and his focus moved inward.

"Then Nick and Damian arrived on the trail of the demon and everyone still alive scattered, leaving you with two bodies and no explanations," Tally finished.

Carson nodded. "That much I seem to remember. I at least remember all hell breaking loose when those two appeared out of nowhere. That long sword of Sherwood's isn't an original, is it?"

Tally smiled. "I think it might be. And from his own ancestral hearth too."

Carson blinked. "He's a real lord? That accent isn't a put-on, then?"

"Genuine blue blood. He doesn't like to talk about it, though. You know vampires. They hate reminiscing. You have to catch them in a really mellow mood and get them to tell a story that strikes them as funny, or whimsical or something."

Carson rubbed the back of his neck. "Even with you?"

"*Epecially* with me," Tally said firmly. "I'm human, a girl and they've watched me grow up. I remind them at every turn that my stay on this earth is temporary, that I am not like them. They have tried so very hard to not remind me of their longevity, that one day I will die and they will go on. They think I have not thought of this, dealt with it and accepted it. They forget that I have lived with them all my life and thought of nothing else." She gave a small smile. "I find living with humans far more difficult."

Carson drew in a breath. "My god, what a wonderful childhood you must have had!"

She grinned. "It was a particularly carefree one, I must admit. But I only know that now. At the time I just ran wild and loved it, while either Nick or Damian watched over me and hauled me out of extreme scrapes of one kind or another. I didn't know it then but it was the perfect training for a hunter. It gave me nerves and daring to try

anything. My father would have been horrified at the stunts I attempted if Nick or Damian had cared to let him know. Later on, my boyfriends often were appalled or terrified or flat-out disapproving. They seemed to think someone who looked like me should behave with more grace and dignity. I went through boyfriends like oatmeal.”

Carson threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter Three

Tally dressed in the rayon wrap print dress in dark blues and greens that Bloomingdale's had sent over. It was a bit snug around the bustline, but wearable. There were some platform shoes in a teal green that the wardrobe consultant had included in the parcel, just in case, that matched flecks from the pattern in the dress and she slipped them on and went downstairs.

Nick was reading but put his finger in the book and the book on his lap when she sat on the hassock next to his feet. "You smell of sex and satisfaction," he stated baldly. "Was he good?"

She could feel her cheeks heating, but Nick and Damian had never let her be a hypocrite in anything. "He's not like normal men at all, Nick. He's...different."

"He's a hunter," Nick said simply.

"He's human," she countered.

"Very," Nick said, showing his fangs. "But he made you scream, little one."

She drew in an unsteady breath.

"Tally doesn't want to fall in love with just a human," Damian whispered next to her.

She swiveled to look down at him. "You're conscious!" Relief flooded her. She wanted to hug him and leaned forward to do so, then hesitated. She reached for his shoulder instead but didn't know if that would hurt too much. Finally, she stroked his forehead. "You scared me."

"I'll be fine. Just claws. No bites, so no toxin."

Tally looked at Nick but he wasn't sitting anymore. He had put the book down and was looking out the window down onto Central Park. "Where is he?" he rasped, his voice a growl.

"Carson?" she asked, suddenly uneasy. Nick was pissed about something. That growly tone of his was a dead giveaway. "He went out to get food."

Nick nodded and turned to look at her. "Who said *anything* about love?" he demanded.

She stared at him. "Who *did* say anything about love?" she asked, baffled.

"I did," Damian whispered. "Because it's too late, Nick. The elephant is in the room with us. Might as well talk about it. Look at her. Smell her." He coughed hard and fell silent.

Nick whirled back to the window.

"What are you talking about, Damian?" Tally demanded fiercely.

"You love him," Damian said simply. "A human's pheromones change when they're in love. Yours have changed." He gave a smile and small shrug.

"No..." She was horrified. "I can't be!"

"When he walks back in that door, you'll know," Nick said from the window. He came back to the chair he had been sitting in and sat down once more. He looked tired again. "Why doesn't she want to love a human?" he asked Damian.

Tally hung her head. "Don't. Please."

"You want to carry this shadow all your life, Tally?" Damian whispered.

"I thought it was a good thing," she muttered.

Nick made an impatient sound.

Tally looked him in the eye. "I wanted to fall in love with someone like you two," she said simply. "Someone not human. A vampire, an otherworld creature. I've spent my life in this world. I know it better than the human world and I like it here. I prefer it. I even thought that perhaps you two would one day come to love me like you do each

other, for I know you like women in your beds as much as you like men. I know now that could never happen, so don't look so stricken. But I never, ever wanted to fall in love with a simple human man, settle down in a house with a picket fence! I don't want to end up a wife and mother, for heaven's sake!" She brushed at her cheek, which was wet again.

They were both staring at her.

She swiped at her cheeks again and sniffed. "Please say something," she begged.

Nick deliberately inhaled then blew out a breath. "I didn't spend all these years training you, Natalia Grey, just to have you become a wife and mother. That is not your destiny. I don't think falling in love automatically shuffles you off into the kitchen anymore. It has fallen out of fashion. And Connors, as you put it yourself, is different. He's a hunter and he knows very well that you are one, too. Hunters, even if they are human, don't quite qualify for full human status. They have one foot in both worlds and you know this yourself as you've been straddling both worlds for years, Tally. So Connors and you yourself don't really qualify for the 'merely human' tag you seem to abhor."

She bit her lip. "You're really stretching the logic there, Nick."

Nick grimaced. "You asked me to speak. I don't even like saying his name, Tally. Give me credit for trying." He moved and was suddenly at the window again. Vampire speed. She stared at his stiff, straight back.

"Give him time," Damian said softly as Tally stared at Nick's back, the pain of this small rejection more hurtful than she might have imagined.

She turned to Damian. "Sometimes I just don't understand either of you."

"You'd have to live as long as both of us to do that," Damian said seriously.

She shook her head. "I don't think it's that at all. I think sometimes you're both just being childish and selfish but you've learned to hide it better than most."

Damian grinned. "That's what happens when you've lived as long as we have."

She thumped his shoulder, very gently. "You're older than him, Damian. Kick his butt for me."

"Okay. When I can stand, consider it kicked."

The front door of the apartment opened and closed.

"It has to be Carson. No one else can cross the ward right now," Nick said from the window."

Tally felt her stomach clench emptily. "I'm starving," she confessed.

Carson came into the main room, carrying two big brown paper bags, his gaze quartering the area just as her father's always did whenever he first entered a room.

But then she forgot to breathe.

She had forgotten exactly how gorgeous he was. How perfect his physique and features. Even with the stubble and the stray locks of hair brushing over his midnight blue eyes. He was wearing the pea coat again, which just emphasized his shoulders and neck.

He saw her and his mouth turned up in a smile and her heart stopped.

"Hey," he said softly and it was just for her.

She wasn't sure how she got there but she was suddenly in front of him, her arms around his neck. He must have put the bags down, because his arms were around her and his lips were just where she wanted them, on hers, hot and possessive and sensual and perfect.

There was a muffled thud and she realized he had shed his coat, with the tools of his trade stashed in the inner pockets – iron knives, salt-loaded guns and other weapons and equipment. Tally slid her hand up into his hair and wound her leg around his waist. She couldn't get close enough to him.

"Tally," Carson murmured into her hair. "God..."

With a groan he brought a hand under her hip, holding her steady. The other lifted her other leg and wrapped it around his waist. He carried her upstairs again and this

time he needed no directions. He placed her on the bed on her back, lifted the skirt of her dress and saw she wore no panties and groaned again. With a hand that trembled, he fumbled with the fastening on his jeans, lowered them only enough to release his cock and slide it into her. She was more than ready. She was on fire for him and at the touch of his cock on the inner walls of her vagina the flames leapt up and her in a sheet of white hot fire that roared through her body like an underground express.

As Carson came, so did she, her fingernails scratching at his shirt and digging furrows in the cotton.

Afterward, he lay beside her and gazed at her face, his eyes moving from feature to feature. He didn't speak.

Tally led with her heart, knowing that it was the only part of her life where she would be able to do so. "It's only fair you should know, Carson, that I've fallen in love with you."

He grew still, his eyes focusing on hers. Then his eyes closed. "Thank god," he said hoarsely and rolled on his back. He brought his arm over his eyes.

She sat up, alarmed. "Carson?"

"I fell in love with you about five hours ago," he said, not moving his arm. "I've been trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do about it, short of suffer like an idiot for the next eon or two." He rubbed the arm across his eyes and sat up. "Is there a reason you don't look profoundly happy about the idea, Tally?"

"I'm fine," she said stiffly, plucking at the bedcover.

"No, you're not. Does it having anything to do with why Sherwood looked ready to pluck my heart and eat it when I arrived just then? I know he doesn't like me."

"He doesn't like that I love you. It's nothing personal."

"He doesn't like that I'm a rival in the hunting game and I've only been in it for three years, while he's been around for one hundred and ninety and your father

considered me good enough to be his partner. It's very personal. What else is there, Tally?"

She looked him in the eye. "You're different, Carson. You're not like human men I've known...in bed I mean. I...don't know you very well."

His smile turned smoky, hot and wicked. "But you liked what you do know," he finished.

"Yes," she whispered, her cheeks blazing. "Where—" Her courage failed her.

"Where did I learn that?" he finished.

She nodded.

He climbed off the bed. "I'm going to get the food and come right back. We both must eat and I bought hot meals." He slipped from the room and while he was gone, Tally removed her shoes and settled cross-legged on the bed. It was nearly one in the afternoon. No wonder she was ravenous. She hadn't eaten since yesterday.

Carson reappeared with the two brown bags, which he placed on the small table by the window. There were two warm stuffed baguettes, freshly squeezed orange juice and apple pie.

For a while they ate in total silence.

When Tally could spare enough attention away from her food, she asked, "You weren't born into a demon-hunting family, were you?"

Carson shook his head as he wolfed down his apple pie. He reached for hers when she pushed it toward him and tackled it hungrily. "Born and raised in Minnesota. I was even married for a whole nine months." He looked at her. "I learned later it wasn't really my idea. The most beautiful girl in the town, who happened to be the daughter of the most powerful and richest man in the county, decided that I was the only man suitable enough to be her husband and set about to make it happen any way she could. Mostly that was by using Daddy's name and influence and straight emotional

blackmail. In the end it was straight blackmail. She told me she was pregnant. It was a lie of course."

"You divorced her?"

"An incubus seduced her and killed her when it was done with her," Carson said flatly. "At the time, I had no idea about this underworld of ours, and the police finding of depression and suicide made absolutely no sense at all. Not if you knew Debbie, which I finally did after nine months of her bullshit. And her father didn't believe it either, which made us uneasy partners. He gave me an open check and told me to find the truth. It took me eighteen months, but I did find the truth at last. And he didn't believe me. He kicked me out of the town, out of his life and made sure I could never step back into the county without being arrested." Carson pushed the pie bag away with a convulsive shove and wiped his mouth.

"But by then you knew about the demon world."

"Yeah," Carson growled. "And I had nowhere else to go. So I started hunting. First, I went looking for the incubus."

"Did you ever find it?"

Carson shook his head. "Not yet. I'm not in any real hurry. One day I'll cross its path and we'll have words. But that's not why I'm in this, Tally. Don't ever think that. I'm not looking for a white whale and leaving destruction in my wake."

"You don't give off that impression," she assured him.

"Mostly, I'm doing it because it interests me," he told her. "For nearly thirty years I had no idea there was a whole other world of creatures and people mingling with humans, undetected, sometimes living *as* humans. And there are humans who go among them and even hunt them. It's a whole different universe, with different rules. I found myself drawn in. And the more I was drawn in, the more I learned, the more I liked it. I started hunting but I didn't stop at hunting."

Tally felt her whole body ripple as his gaze fixed on her.

"I figured," he said softly, "If I was a hunter, I might as well *be* a hunter for true. I'd only been in this world a short time for me to figure out that real hunters, those who had been born to the trade, the human ones, well, they're not quite *human*. They don't think like real humans do. They don't react the same. They don't have the same values. And if I was to be a good hunter, I needed to learn as much as I could about this new world I was in, as soon as possible. Absorb and experience as much of it as I could. And that led me into some very interesting places."

"I'm quite sure it did," Tally murmured and shivered. This was a reflection of Nick's words.

Carson slid off the bed again and went back to the table where the bags were still sitting. He delved into the still untouched second bag. "I didn't just buy food while I was out, Tally." He began laying items on the table beside the bag and as she stared at them, her heart leapt and slammed against her chest. Some of the items she couldn't name and others she wasn't sure entirely how they would be employed. But she recognized exactly what the array of objects were.

Sex toys.

She pressed her thighs together as her pussy and clit throbbed and her breasts seemed to grow heavy and tipped with lava. They chaffed inside the dress.

Tally licked her lips. She had no idea what Carson intended to do with her, or with those things lined up on the table, that was the problem.

Something of her dilemma must have shown on her face, for Carson picked up the slender white rope coiled on the table and came toward her. "Remember when I spoke of trust this morning?"

She nodded.

"You ended up letting go in the end, didn't you? Just letting go and letting me give you any sort of pleasure I wanted to and just accepting it. Remember?"

The reminder made her whole body clench with an echo of that thrill. She had been mindless with need. She nodded again.

"That's all I'm asking you for now, Tally. You just have to let go and in return you get that incredible pleasure." He dropped the rope on the bed next to her where it lay gleaming softly like a pearly-white doily. He snagged the button on her wrap dress and pulled it undone and the front of the dress sagged open. Underneath, there was a pair of ties that held the dress closed and he pulled the ties undone with a tug. The dress fell open completely, revealing her bare breasts and naked body. Tally was unable to say no, as he slid the dress off her shoulders and dropped it over the back of the chair next to the table.

He took all the pillows off the bed. "Lie down," he told her.

Tally glanced at the rope one last time, before lying down. Carson kissed her, then picked up the rope and her wrist. She sucked in a shuddering breath as he wrapped the rope around her wrist and lift it toward the bedpost.

"You can say no at any time, Tally," he said, his voice a low, confident rumble as he secured the rope to the bedpost. "Any time you genuinely don't want this, if you really want out, just let me know and it all stops. Immediately and at once." He looked her in the eye. "Do you believe me?"

She nodded. She did believe him.

There were three more ropes on the table. Her excitement level rose as she realized what they were for. Carson secured her other wrist and both ankles to each bedpost in turn, spreading her out across the big mattress. She was exposed and completely at his disposal to do with as he wished. She trembled with the possibilities of what might happen next.

Carson took off his clothes, moving with unstudied casualness, until he caught her watching him with a hungry appreciation. Then he smiled. It was the same warm, intimate smile he had given her when he had first arrived back in the apartment with the food bags. The smile she hoped was for her alone.

"That look. Are you as hungry as your expression says, Tally?"

"More," she said and her voice emerged rough.

He finished pulling off his jeans and turned to face her. His cock was already erect and lying against his stomach. "It's just as well. I can't seem to get enough of you." He moved around the bed, knelt on the edge and leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Nothing too extreme this time, my love, I promise. Just slow, easy pleasure."

My love. The phrase seemed so natural, coming from his mouth.

He moved to the table and came back with a silver chain. It seemed quite nonthreatening and when he lay down beside her, she relaxed. He laid his hand on her belly and stroked and her stomach quivered in response. Bound this way, she seemed far more responsive, for she could make no move in return. She was helpless to do anything except accept what he did to her. It made everything much more intense. She could not stop him from doing anything.

Carson's mouth closed over the tip of her breast as his fingers pinched the other and she sucked in a sharp breath in reaction, her hips thrusting. His teeth were nipping at the tip as his tongue rasped over it and his mouth kept up a powerful suction, and all the while his fingers were pulling and rolling the other one. She could feel her clit blooming and throbbing in reaction and she couldn't even bring her thighs together to try to assuage the heavy pulsing. She began to pant and moan.

Carson released her breasts for a fraction of a second, then cool slim fingers closed around her right nipple and squeezed it. She gasped, looking down. Something like a alligator clip was at the end of the silver chain and it was around her nipple, clamped shut and Carson was tightening a screw on the side of it, just enough to hold the clamp around her nipple.

"What is it?" she breathed, as the sensation built in her nipple, a pleasure-pain that was unique.

"A nipple clamp." He applied an identical clamp to her other nipple, tightening it the same way and the chain slithered off the slope of her breasts as she moved.

The heavy chain tugged at the clamps, producing a secondary sensation in her nipples that caught her breath again. "Oh!" she breathed.

Carson went to the table again and returned and this time, she could not see what he held. He placed something between her legs, then picked up one of the discarded pillows and slid it beneath her hips. That caused the chain attached to the nipple clamps to slide around, making her breath catch and hold a couple of times. Finally, she was resting upon the pillow, with Carson sitting between her thighs.

He smiled at the view. "Perfect," he declared, smoothing his hand over her belly. He slid his finger into her cleft, making her catch her breath as it nudged her clitoris, probed her pussy and pushed gently against her anus. More fingers, then. More teasing. The moisture that her pussy had already produced began to push from her again as she moaned and writhed on the pillow. This sort of teasing when she was so helplessly bound was unfair. She could not even thrust her mons into his hand.

Then he picked up the mysterious object and worked with it for a second and she felt the touch of cool gel on her folds. Lubricant, she realized. She had heard of this ointment before. When she was already so wet with her own natural oils, though, extra lubricant seemed unnecessary. But when Carson spread the gel down to her anus, understanding flooded her. So did flaring excitement.

He meant for something more substantial than his finger to probe her, this time.

As his finger slipped inside her, she moaned.

"Ah, you like that, don't you?"

"Yes," she said with a gasp.

A second finger joined the first, stretching her. For minutes his fingers worked the tight muscle, stretching her, preparing her but she trembled in anticipation. Her pussy grew even more moist and her clit throbbed.

When at last he withdrew his fingers, she was panting.

The touch of the blunt probe against her ass almost made her cry out. She clutched at the ropes running from her wrists.

"Relax, Tally. Relax and let me slide it in," Carson crooned.

She tried to obey but her excitement was hard to push aside. The probe pushed at her and she felt it spread her wide, then it was inside her, burrowing deeper, until it was seated and still.

"What is it?" she asked and even her voice trembled.

"I've heard all sorts of names for it but around here, most people call it a butt plug. It's not a pretty name but it's the most common one." He looked at her. "In you, it's *very* pretty though." His voice was hoarse, thick with excitement.

She looked between his thighs. His cock was beating and throbbing, red and purple at the head.

"Fuck me, Carson," she whispered. "Please."

He leaned over to each bedpost and yanked on the ends of the ropes, which pulled undone instantly, releasing her ankles. The same pull unraveled the quick release knots holding her wrists. Carson slid his hand under her knee, bringing her thigh up against his hip as he lifted himself over her. "This time, if you must scratch, I want you to draw real blood, not cotton fibers. I have no objection to battle scars."

He did not thrust into her with abandon, but pushed the tip of his cock into the entrance of her pussy with care. As soon as she felt the squeezed passage, she understood why. He fought for every inch, sweat beading on his temple, as her pussy stretched and expanded around his cock and her crowded back passage.

She groaned when he was fully inside her.

"You're so tight and hot," he gasped. He leaned down and kissed her. "You're going to love this." He swiped his tongue over her nipple, then carefully withdrew before pushing back inside her again. This time the passage was a bit easier.

With each succeeding thrust, it was easier and faster, until Carson was thrusting into her with pounding strokes that dug deep and hard and Tally was gasping for breath, her orgasm building. She knew it would be like this morning's, a profoundly heart-stopping one, coming from somewhere deep inside her, for it was building with

the inertia of a runaway train. She grasped at Carson's shoulders, straining to reach that point, needing to find it.

Carson reached down and pulled gently on the chain of the nipple clamp.

The pleasure of the clamps tugging at her nipples triggered the climax she so desperately was reaching for. She arched back, the orgasm rolling through her, holding her at the peak for a moment, as Carson thrust into her and spilled his seed with a hoarse, hard cry. Then she screamed, as her lungs could finally draw in oxygen.

But that was all her depleted mind and body could do. She barely had the strength to murmur a thank you as Carson slid a pillow beneath her cheek before she fell asleep. She felt him at her back and drifted to sleep thinking that was his rightful place.

She woke close to sunset, judging by the long shadows cast by the sunlight coming through the windows and sat up, knowing something was wrong but unable to identify it. The space under her pillow was empty and the bed beside her was empty.

Carson stood at the end of the bed by the post closest to the doors and the shade cast by the late afternoon put his face in shadows. "I have to leave this house, Tally. I'm afraid that if I stay, if I let you love me, I'll kill you."

Chapter Four

Tally scrambled from the bed. Sometime while she had slept, he had removed the butt plug. Now she was simply naked. She reached for the wrap dress and shoved her trembling arms into the scalloped sleeves in furious thrusts and fastened it with jerky movements.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demanded, walking right up to him where he stood at the foot of the bed. He was already dressed.

"I watched you sleeping and I did some heavy thinking, which I've been really short on for the last few hours," Carson admitted, scrubbing at his chin. "I guess other parts of my anatomy have been driving the bus instead."

She raised her fist, ready to sock him one but he caught her wrist and held it firm. "Yeah, I deserve that but hear me out, Tally, please?"

She was starting to shake and she didn't want him to notice, so she wrenched her wrist out of his grip and spun away. "Fine. Say your piece," she snapped. She wrapped her arms around her middle. "But hurry it up. I have some gargoyles to hunt tonight."

He spread his hands. "First up, Tally. For the record. I love you. I love you like there's no tomorrow and this is going to kill me."

Her heart seemed to seize. When she thought she could speak, she whispered, "Then why..."

"*Because* I love you. God, Tally, I live a life where being rejected by society is normal, where being told there's no rooms here, there's no tables available at this restaurant for the likes of you, mister, is a daily occurrence, where people look over their shoulders at me then cross the road. If I let you love me, Tally, I'm exposing you to all that. That's the life you'll have."

She opened her mouth to speak, to deny it but Carson lifted his hand. "You've been sheltered from the worst of it. Your father worked damn hard to make sure your life was as normal as possible and thanks to Nicholas and Damian's resources, you pretty much grew up normal. No one looked at you strangely, or rejected you, or kicked you out of town." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "It's 1977 and things are changing now but only in the big cities. Step outside of New York or L.A., say and you're in for a nasty shock, Tally. People are still judged by who you know and outsiders are treated with suspicion and dread. Drifters and strangers find it tough going and hunters, who must act strangely and keep bad company, find it even harder."

"You've got it wrong, Carson," Tally tried desperately to interject.

"You'll find I'm right once you've been actively hunting for a few months," Carson said softly. He headed for the door. "I watched you sleeping, Tally, and I've spent a day loving you and suddenly all I wanted was normal. For you. With you. Because I know you'll never accept my life. Not for long. And if you do come with me, if you stay with me, I might just get you killed like I somehow killed your father."

She stared at his back as he got closer to the door, unable to think of a way to make him stay. He was so wrong but she'd already tried that.

Think of something! she railed at herself. But panic was clouding her thinking.

He was three steps from the door when he sagged to one knee. "Where do you think you're going?" he said, his voice harsh and cruel.

"What?" Tally said.

"Tally...run," he gasped. Then he turned his head to look at her and smiled. It was a nasty expression. "She's not going anywhere." It was the harsh, croaking voice again. Blood was running from Carson's nose. As his head turned, the light spilling through the window fell upon his eyes. They glowed briefly red. "The seed of the gargoyle-killing Peter James Grey? She's staying right there."

Her gut turned cold.

Carson's face worked. *Struggled*. "Tally, go!" Carson's voice. And he staggered, as if a war raged inside his body.

Tally realized that was exactly what was happening.

She sucked in her breath. "*Nicholas, get up here!*" she screamed. "*Bring your sword!*"

Carson—no, the demon Azazel, she amended—spun to face the door as it was flung open. Nicholas had used vampire speed and warm relief spilled through her as Damian staggered into the room right behind him. Damian was white and shaky, and clearly needed to feed, but he was on his feet. The black sweater he'd worn that morning hung in tatters around his midriff, showing white flesh beneath.

The demon hissed when it saw the broadsword in Nick's hands, which was made of solid iron. "But use it and you kill your friend," he croaked.

"Connors is no friend of mine," Nicholas countered in a flat, truthful voice. "Although now we know why you let him live while you allowed your gargoyle pals to kill Peter Grey. You needed an entry to my home, something that would let you pass the wards."

"He has been very useful. Although this day has been tedious in the extreme, watching his useless run of emotions. Human are pathetic creatures."

Tally tried to stifle her reaction to this. She didn't want to remind the creature that she was behind it. But the day's "useless run of emotions" flickered through her mind and she recalled the two paper bags sitting on the table near her hip. There were salt packets in one of them. Cautiously, she eased over to the table.

"Humans have their uses," Nick said cautiously. "You weren't above using the sculptor."

The demon smiled and Tally shuddered seeing that demonic expression on Carson's face. "Was that not a brilliant idea? My own private army and not a single demon hunter equipped to handle them, because they've all been extinct for a century!"

"So you forced the sculptor to carve the gargoyles, then you brought them to life?" Damian asked.

"With an ancient summoning spell."

"How many gargoyles?" Damian demanded.

"Why?" The demon seemed puzzled.

"We're curious. It's never been done before," Nicholas said gently, soothingly.

Tally reached into the bag, searching for the salt packets, digging deep.

"There were six unoccupied pentacles on the floor of the warehouse," Damian suggested.

Azazel nodded. "And six successful summonings," he agreed.

"These were all the spirits of former gargoyles?" Nicholas asked.

"The Stonebrood clan," Azazel confirmed.

Tally shuddered. Even she had heard of the last rogue gargoyle clan, destroyed — finally — in late Victorian times at a steep price in demon hunter deaths and injuries. It had taken the combined efforts of a dozen hunters to track down and kill the last existing gargoyles and most people had considered it a good night's work even at the price it had cost.

But none of this showed on Nicholas' face and he had been there.

Her hand closed around the salt packets and she slowly withdrew them.

Azazel clapped his hands together lightly. "All this has been simply lovely but it's too late now." He turned to look at the window and Tally froze, squashing the packets in her hand.

Sunset. Gargoyles rise at sunset.

"He's been playing with us," she breathed.

"Of course I have, human," he said. "You think I actually enjoy speaking with creatures like you?" He turned back to face Nicholas and Damian. "Or foul wrongness like you?"

"They're coming for us here," she said. "He's just waiting for them, bringing them here." She started ripping at the packets.

Azazel started laughing and the sound was a horrible, ripped and raw noise erupting from Carson's throat.

"Demon!" Tally called.

He turned to her and she threw the salt in a fine spray all over his face.

The result was spectacular. He drove his fists into his eyes with a scream and fell to his knees. The scream became a wail that went on and on. Tally moved toward him hesitantly.

"Don't touch him," Nicholas warned her. "Not yet."

He threw his head back, gazing up at the ceiling, neck strained, eyes bulging, the wail becoming a harsh exhalation.

Then he collapsed onto his back and lay still.

Nicholas moved to his side and slapped his face and he blinked.

"Who's side am I on, hunter?"

"Tally's," came the tired reply.

Nicholas held out his hand. "You're you again," he said. "I'm actually pleased about that."

"Azazel would have known that too," Carson pointed out, rubbing at his eyes.

"But he cannot speak her name unless she gives it to him. You just spoke it. You're not the demon." Nicholas thumped his shoulder. "Stick to gargoyles, Connors. Demons are clearly not your strong suite."

"Listen," Damian said, his head cocked.

Then the door exploded inward in a shower of wood and paint chips. There was a body in among the exploding chaos and Tally gasped as she recognized her father. Azazel had jumped from Carson to her father's remains, animated them and had returned to attack them.

"How can he do that?" Damian asked Nicholas.

"I don't know," Nicholas said grimly, hefting his sword. "This demon has powers beyond any I've ever seen. Step back, Damian."

The unarmed vampire wisely stepped behind Nicholas. Carson moved back toward the window and Tally. He glanced at her. His face was grim and his eyes red-rimmed from the effects of the salt. "Do you have any sort of weapon at all here?" he asked.

She shook her head. "The only iron is Nicholas' sword and I used up all the salt on you. On Azazel, I mean. And this demon has powers that I don't even recognize."

He glanced at her. "Salt stopped it. You have to assume iron will."

Azazel staggered toward Nick as he lifted the sword above his head for a decapitating strike. It was clear that Azazel had only nominal control over her father's body. It jerked exactly like he had to take charge of every single aspect of the body's functioning, instead of simply letting it take care of itself, as a fully functioning body would.

But as the sword swung down, Azazel's hand swung up and the hilt of the sword slapped into his palm.

Nick was tall but her father had not been a short man, either. And he'd had strength too. If Azazel was leveraging that strength now, then Nick, even with his vampire strength, if Azazel was at just the right angle, would be hard put to finish swinging the sword.

Azazel whispered a word. It sounded like gibberish.

And Nicholas' eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed on the floor like a stringless puppet.

Tally screamed.

Azazel threw the sword away from him. It clattered against the far wall and came to a stop, far out of her reach. He pointed at Damian and repeated the same word. Damian fell in the same tired, ugly heap on the rug as Nicholas.

He turned to face them where Carson and Tally stood by the window. Carson stepped in front of her and for a moment she was willing to let him stand there as her shield because she was truly afraid. She had never seen Nicholas and Damian so easily defeated before. A single word...

But she was a demon hunter and this was her work as well as Carson's. She could no more allow him to shield her than she could allow him to protect her from the rougher side of this life. It was what it was. And she was born to it.

She stepped around him and to his side.

Azazel grinned. "First you, meatsack, then your bitch. I'll do her and make her beg for more, then I'll waste her."

Coming from her father's mouth, the words were truly shocking. She tried to remind herself that this was not her father. Not anymore.

She looked around the room, feeling the onset of tears. This stuffy, old-fashioned room with its heraldic designs and throwback details—

Tally moved before she barely processed the thought. There was no time to think it through anyway and if she had, she would have frightened herself out of the idea. She turned, rested her hand on Carson's shoulder for leverage and lifted herself up onto the table.

Azazel was two steps from Carson, his hands lifting. It would be close.

She reached up, ripped the curtain rod from its mountings, bringing the curtain with it.

Azazel was just starting to look up at her now, his mouth opening in surprise. Good.

She flipped the curtain up into the vertical, the decorative and sharp spindled finial end pointing end-down and hoisted it up.

Azazel was starting to back up, alarm just starting to show in his face.

"Die, motherfucker!" she told him. She jammed the curtain rod into his mouth and kept driving in down deeper and deeper into his gullet. The iron curtain rod and finial, designed to match the medieval four-poster bed and other feudal details in the room, had been picked for quality.

The curtain rod drove through the demon's gullet like a knife through butter. With a wretched scream, the creature fell to his knees—again—and then onto his side, wrenching the curtain rod from Tally's fingers. Then he lay very still.

"Hurry!" Carson called, lifting her down from the table, his hands around her waist.

"Why?"

"The gargoyles! Listen!"

Then she heard it. The same low *whoosh* she'd heard this morning. Fright tore through her. They hadn't moved fast enough.

"There's still time," Carson told her. "Gargoyles are terrible trackers. We just need to run."

Nicholas and Damian were sitting up and Carson strode over to them. "Move it," he ordered. "Gargoyles are about to land. We're bugging out." He thrust out his hand.

Nicholas considered the hand for a moment, then took it.

"My father!" Tally cried.

Carson shook his head. "We can't, Tally. There's no time and his body will slow us down."

Damian got groggily to his feet. "If we take him with us, it may give Azazel another way to reach us."

She shuddered and nodded. "All right," she said tiredly, defeated. "Okay."

Carson picked up her hand. "Come on," he told her.

"Get your sword on the way out. It's downstairs," Nicholas said.

Your sword. It was her father's sword. But she nodded anyway. She was the hunter now. She had just proved it.

As they hurried down the stairs, they heard the first of the gargoyles smashing in the walls and window of the room they'd just left. It gave them a speed they didn't think they had in them.

* * * * *

Tally carefully balanced her father's katana on the edge of her hand. It was perfectly balanced...and still far too long for her tastes. She put it back on her father's desk and looked around the small, cozy living room she'd grown up in. They'd made it back here by about ten p.m. After carefully circling the block several times, looking for lurking strangers and looking in the air above the building for hovering shadows, they had scrambled for her apartment and thankfully slipped inside.

Now in the cool of the evening, they were relaxing.

Carson was the only stranger in the room but he looked oddly at home there. Nicholas was sprawled on the sofa, thinking. Damian was in the kitchen, cooking—a practice he found therapeutic on occasions, as he'd had to cook meals for her, growing up.

She found herself reaching for the katana again.

"You should go to Japan and get one made for you," Nicholas said. "Your dimensions but short, for stabbing. That one slowed you down."

"Why does she need to do that?" Carson said sharply, from his corner by the library case, making them both look at him.

"Katanas are highly engineered instruments—" Nicholas began.

"Yes, yes but why does Tally need one?" Carson insisted. "It's not like she's going into the business."

Tally sucked in a short, hard, hot breath as she stared at Carson. Nicholas didn't move an inch but she felt his wariness slip over him like a glove.

"I mean," Carson said slowly, looking from one to the other of them, "she's not going into the business with me."

Nicholas relaxed but Tally felt an even greater sense of betrayal. She realized in a vague way that sounds had ceased emerging from the kitchen, but didn't care. Let Damian witness this. No problem.

She glared at Carson. "You won't work with me?" she questioned.

Carson glanced at Nick. "Can we discuss this somewhere else, Tally?"

"No. Here is just fine," she said. "You can't insult me in front of them, then hurry me away to apologize elsewhere."

He sat up. "Insult you?" He sounded amazed.

"Apparently you seem to feel I'm inadequate as a partner. Somehow insufficient."

"For god's sake, Tally, no!" He hissed through his teeth. "I can't work with you because I'd die a thousand deaths each minute and be constantly watching over my shoulder for you. I wouldn't be able to do my work, because I'd be constantly worried about you. I put you behind me tonight and I nearly passed out when you stepped out next to me again. And every time you went and did something brave and wonderful and goddamn heroic I just about threw up. I can't work if I'm constantly stopping to count your fingers and toes and making sure they're all still there. I love you, Tally. Don't you get that?"

She longed to touch him, to hug him but not with Damian and Nick in the room. Especially Nick. Instead, she settled for nodding. She blinked to clear the tears from her eyes. "I guess I can work alone," she said softly.

"I'll work with you," Nick said, riding over the top of Carson's protest.

Carson protested all over again. "Why on earth would you?" he demanded. "You've already got a partner in the field. Damian."

"Damian just keeps me company. He isn't a demon hunter. He's a warrior by trade but there's little call for them these days." Nicholas shrugged. "I've been without a formal partner for a couple of decades. It's time."

"Why?" Tally asked softly.

"Because you just killed the demon I was hunting, so I owe you. Because I sense your potential. Because it would please me. Because it would make your life easier and calm Carson."

She blinked at this quick litany of reasons.

"That's not all, is it?" she said, testing.

He looked away. "I gave you reasons. Leave it alone."

"He wants to hunt gargoyles now," Damian said. "And he knows you're going after the six."

She glanced at Carson and saw that he was smiling. "Because of Damian," he added.

Damian caught Carson's eye. "I'd let him. Nick's stronger than you and can protect Tally better. He's been training her for years, just for this life. He knows precisely what she can and can't handle." He headed for the kitchen again and ducked his head to look through the pass-through at Carson again. "I'll work with you until you find yourself a real partner. Someone has to teach you about demons."

"How did you know I was going after demons?"

"You didn't argue when we said that Tally was going after the six gargoyles. You already know she's damn good, so you don't have the arrogance to assume you'd get them before she does. Therefore you have to be going in the opposite direction. Demons."

"But she's already killed Azazel. Why would you think I'd still have any interest in demons whatsoever?"

"Because you've got an ego the same size as Nick's and he told you he knows more than you do about demons." Damian shrugged. "*Ipsa facto*." He turned back to his cooking.

"I hate you guys."

"No, you don't," Damian said placidly. "You hate feeling stupid. You actually like knowing we're around for Tally."

"Just shut the hell up."

"Stop handing me perfect openings then," Damian suggested.

* * * * *

For a guy who hadn't eaten in over twenty centuries, Damian sure knew a thing or two about cooking, Tally reflected as Carson led her up the stairs. It was quiet and still up under the roof here and warm from the day's heat.

There was an attic bedroom that had been converted to a guest bedroom, years ago and there was an old double bed there that they could use. She couldn't use her father's room. That would be too much, too soon, right now.

Carson turned her to face him as they reached the attic.

"Are you sure, Tally?" he asked.

"About what?"

"Me? Us?"

She linked her arms around his neck. "Do you promise never to lock me away in the kitchen or the suburbs? To never take up a day job yourself? To never grow old, boring, or — god forbid — normal?"

His breath caught. "You don't want that?" There was hope in his voice, warring with caution.

"Carson, think about it. Who was in the kitchen cooking tonight, despite not having eaten for over two thousand years? And what was I doing?"

His mouth curved up into that smile.

"There it is," she breathed and kissed him. Her kiss quickly became *his* kiss and his hands slid into her hair and roamed down her back to tuck themselves around her ass and pull her into him. His jeans were hiding a very hard erection.

"How much do you remember now?" she asked, suddenly shy.

"All of it," he told her. "All of what happened in the warehouse, including your father's death. He was alive when the demon took me, Tally. He knew what they intended to do with me, including your death. He died with that knowledge." He kissed her temple. "I would do anything to be able to tell him it turned out all right." His fingers slid the button of her dress undone, making it sag to one side. With expert knowledge he pulled the ties undone to let the dress fall open altogether and slid it from her shoulders. He picked her up, carried her to the bed and laid her on it.

His own undressing was rather more hurried and inelegant. He pulled his garments off and tossed them without regard. And once more Tally found herself sighing over his sheer perfection. He really was a magnificent-looking man. Even in this poor light his skin gleamed.

Carson lay next to her and for long minutes just looked at her face and touched it.

"You really are so incredibly beautiful," he told her.

"You aren't so bad yourself."

He lifted her thigh over his hip and his cock nudged her entrance. She was wet and ready for him. Just seeing him naked had made her so. He lifted her hips and slid into her. She felt him throb inside her, but he didn't thrust. He held still, even though she could feel his pulse racing. "Now that you will be a hunter," he said softly, "You will have a big stick to beat them off with."

She jumped. "You knew," she said.

"I guessed. You are so very, very beautiful, there must be hundreds of men out there for whom beauty is a trophy to collect, regardless of what the lady thinks about

it." He kissed her nose. "You forget. I have been in some dark corners of this world, Tally. Are you sure you want to go there?"

"For the freedom that it will give me? Yes, I'll pay that price."

Carson still hadn't moved his cock inside her and she could feel the tension, the need to wriggle, to clench, to somehow encourage him to do so.

But he caught her face in his hands and made her look at him again. "Marry me," he said.

Her breath caught. "Why?" she breathed. "I thought we wouldn't do normal?" She wanted him to move!

"We won't. We can't. For us, normal will be impossible, Tally. But that is one human ritual that will give us a legal bonding in the eyes of the world and I'm selfish enough to want that. I want to give you my name. Say yes, Tally."

"Fuck me, Carson and I will," she said breathlessly.

"Ah...!" He slid his cock inside her a few times and she sighed, feeling relief as familiar sensations began to build in her. But then Carson stopped moving. He looked at her, his brow lifted. "Say yes now!"

She shook her head. "Not quite yet," she breathed, clutching at his shoulder desperately. "Just a little bit more."

He gripped her hip and began to thrust into her in earnest and his head bent so that he could suck in the tip of her breast.

Sizzling sensation burst through her. Tally knew she would not last very long at all. She pummeled at Carson's shoulder as he slid his hand beneath her hip and began a slow, heavy thrusting.

Her orgasm bloomed, tearing through her from her toes to her fingertips.

"Say yes, Tally," Carson whispered in her ear.

"Yes!" she breathed.

"You'll marry me?" he asked, startled.

“For better or worse,” she promised.

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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