



*Desire cuts both ways...*

Nothing gives Dina more pleasure than leaving the vampires she hunts to the mercy of the dawn. And yet most humans she is sworn to protect seem all too happy to offer up their necks. She has vowed never to be like those needy creatures yet, three months ago, she allowed a vampire to kiss her. The memory still makes her body burn—and her skin heat with humiliation.

For over twenty empty years, Luke has lived in a world of dead pleasure and burning sunrise, feeding off those who long for immortality and taboo thrills. Only his art makes him feel half-alive. Until one night in a dark, moody nightclub, where a reckless, amber-eyed bloodwolf left behind her clean, sharp scent—and an ache in his blood nothing but another taste can ease.

Finally, with the chance to purge Luke out of her system, Dina moves in for the kill. But she comes to a horrifying realization. She can no longer shift, and the desire to taste him—body, soul and blood—is making her crazy. As an enraged bloodwolf threatens to rip them both apart, she may just be crazy enough to trust Luke with her life.

Warning: Contains interspecies lust between a bloodwolf and a vampire, and desire thick enough to cut with a blade.

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# Night Haven

*Fiona Jayde*

# Dedication

To Jill, Beth and Lacey for the unwavering support.

# Chapter One

She should have kicked his ass after she'd kissed him—tall, dark and undead, wearing ancient leather with a matching attitude. Dina should have guessed he was a vampire three months ago instead of being sucked in by those dark, smoldering green eyes that looked like they could pin her to the wall and leave her shuddering.

He hadn't smelled like blood then, and she'd needed to wipe away a horrid evening. That night had been the first and last time that she'd agreed to be set up. She'd slammed her fist into her date's arrogant snout the second time Roguell had said she should be having babies—no doubt with him—instead of out hunting vampires.

So she'd made out with one instead—a perfect way to end a hellish evening. And here she was dejaing this vu while a blonde armed with a sloppy smile draped herself over the same guy. Even in the dim lights of the bar, Dina could track them easily though the hip Thursday crowd.

Because it wasn't party night, the music didn't scream and bang with drums and vocals. Instead, the trio on the small raised stage plucked out cool blues. Tomorrow, the tables would be cleared to cram in girls sporting barely-there skirts and knockoff perfume. They would dance on the black shine of the bar secure in their own invincibility and youth. Just like the grinning blonde who leaned closer to the vampire Dina was hunting.

Brooding and handsome—another reason Dina had lost her mind that night. His type always appealed to her—the square hero's jaw, wavy brown hair that glinted a bit in the light, the long lean body under the soft leather of his jacket.

He'd kissed like a wet dream.

He was a damned vampire, which was why she had spent the last few months haunting Santa Barbara bars until she found him again. As soon as he showed a bit of fang, she'd have enough justification to kill him and clear her conscience.

A bloodwolf making out with a vamp. If she'd heard that about someone else, she would have died laughing.

She glanced again in his direction. The bastard took his time and she couldn't dust a vamp until she was dead sure he was about to get really nasty. A stupid rule as far as Dina was concerned. A vamp was a vamp if you asked her, but since she wasn't the alpha, no one bothered.

Watching the blonde slather herself against him, Dina wondered how drunk you had to be to wear a tube top in November and feel sexy. The man candy probably helped—though he didn't look particularly interested in what Barbie packed under spray-painted red.

Dina didn't care of course, but his lack of interest seriously delayed her plans to dust him. It wasn't quite the special effects they showed on *Buffy*—in real life, her kind left dead vampires to the sun. No muss no fuss, and one hell of a skin condition. Dina just hoped to get it over quickly, and with it end the dreams of hot and greedy sex.

Damned embarrassing she hadn't realized exactly what he was. She moved deeper into the shadow of her booth, rubbing her thumbs over a sweaty glass of something pink and vile. At least the kick-in-the-pants smell kept back the stench of human sweat and hormones. She took another sniff of her drink and could almost feel her lupine senses weeping.

Against her will, she thought back to how he'd kept on kissing her even after he'd combed his fingers through her hair and bared her tapered ears to his touch. He'd known exactly what she was, and hadn't cared. Or maybe that had been the point—kiss a damned Lyck before you fight her. Show you've got balls.

She allowed herself one small pitying groan while embarrassment flushed over her again, thick reedy waves of it. She'd finish him tonight and end the evidence of her own idiocy.

Her hands tightened over the glass when Barbie thrust out her breasts and flipped back all that fake sun-colored hair to show off the fragile column of neck. Watching it, Dina thought of letting the vampire have one good bite before the rescue party. Give Barbie something to take home.

Except the vampire pulled back, held her at arm's length while she tried to slither closer.

"Come on, baby." Slurred crooning vocals of a happy drunk. "I know you wanna." For added emphasis, Barbie slicked red-tipped hands over her neck. "I know you want a taste."

He muttered something soft, intense and coarse, something that caused Barbie to laugh in disbelief. And when he once again peeled Barbie from his chest, his dark green eyes met Dina's.

She wondered why her hands trembled when she reached up to tuck her hair back and expose tapered ears. A bloodwolf threat similar to that of a vamp showing his teeth.

"You need fresh air," he murmured to the blonde, his voice a low caress on Dina's senses. She didn't know why her pulse spiked up.

"Don't you tell me what I..." The nasal whine trailed off as Barbie followed the direction of his gaze. "Typical asshole. Like any other man." Her voice rose over the beat of blues, and heads started turning.

The last thing that they needed was a scene.

"Get out." Keeping her voice perfectly pleasant, Dina pushed herself out from the shadows.

Under the perfectly plucked eyebrows, Barbie's eyes widened. Dina knew what she saw—a freakishly tall woman dressed in black, more muscular than curvy, straight brown hair tucked behind tapered ears common to wolves or aliens or both.

Not someone you messed with.

Another step towards them and Barbie fled, taking with her the stench of soaked adrenaline laced with a whiff of crack.

The vampire didn't move closer, but he didn't bolt. Keeping her movements casual, Dina closed the distance between them. His gaze locked in with hers, direct and dark and thorough. Tough chin, a slash of lips that looked both sensual and cruel. She wished he had a smear of blood, something to keep her focused on the job instead of remembering his mouth over hers.

"Nice shirt."

Tonight, she had dressed up her usual black with a long-sleeved T that spelled out "Fuck U" in black glitter. Perfect for work with just a bit of charm.

"Bad night?" Dina sidestepped a swaying couple in matching cowboy boots. "I thought your kind was all blood, all the time."

He smirked, gave a small upwards jerk of that hero's chin. She wondered if he saw her heartbeat pulsing somewhere in the hollow of her neck. *Get over it.*

"And you're an expert in my kind?" He emphasized the last word slightly in that clipped, low-pitched voice. Enough to make it sound insulting.

"Expert enough to dust you." She hadn't witnessed him actually take a bite, but no one had to be the wiser. She could simply dust him now and never see that cruel mocking smile again.

The thought churned her gut.

She faced him with small shivers racing down her back, trying not to remember how his arms felt banded around her, his body hard and hot against her own.

"You want to dance, bloodwolf?"

She couldn't risk fighting him, not here amidst the crowd. Instead she flashed a smile, short and sweet. "Let's take it outside."

"Now that's an invitation."

He moved. Before she could react his hands gripped her shoulders, firm yet kind. She had one second to push back, to scream, to growl, to punch him. Instead, Dina just watched his face as he leaned down and put his mouth on hers, hot, hard and nearly brutal.

Her breath shattered with shock as he pulled her against his body, teased out a low moan, biting her lower lip. She fisted her hands in his hair and let herself be taken, ravaged, swaying among the other dancers under the cool and bluesy beat.

Dina didn't know when his touch became gentle, when his arms eased and merely hugged her close. His lips left her mouth to trail kisses over her jaw, up towards her ears.

"What the hell are you doing?" She pushed away, fighting to keep her heartbeat calm and even. Her mouth tingled but she refused to lift her fingers to her lips. "I should kill you right here."



“Yeah.” He backed away, his mouth mocking. “Yeah, you should.”

Her heart pounded now—insult and shock pulsing under a slick layer of aroused fear. Once more she had let him put his hands on her. He could have torn open her throat with one smooth move.

“Get out.” The words came out in a low trembling hiss.

“After you.” He raised a brow when she didn’t move. Even if she was an idiot, she wasn’t about to give her back to a damned vamp.

Another sizzling moment and he shrugged as if he didn’t really give a fuck, and walked towards the back entrance. Dina pushed through the crowd after him, forcing herself to breathe, already reaching for the short blade hidden at her lower back.

She’d cut strips off his skin before piercing his heart and leaving him for morning.

As if he read her mind, he smiled darkly when he turned and stepped aside. “Go ahead,” he said again and this time Dina took the invitation. Better to get out first and secure the scene instead of stepping out blindly.

The alley behind Kennedy’s was dark and crisp with cold November air, the stench of alcohol and trash a foul assault on her nose. His body was a shadow in the dark, silent and still.

She clutched the cold smooth handle of the push blade and swung out, barely missing bone and skin. Another strike, which he evaded just in time for her to ram a fist into his granite jaw.

Pain flashing up her arm, Dina jumped back and crouched, waiting for him to make a move. Willing him to make a move so she could kill him with a clear conscience.

A second passed. Another. He remained still, not lifting a limb to strike her. Instead she felt his gaze burning her skin.

She didn’t like the taste of fear and arousal, arousal she didn’t understand. Trembling, she let the knife drop to the ground, its clatter drowned by the thunder of her pulse.

She wouldn’t back away, she wouldn’t step closer. Trapped by his gaze, Dina damned clothing and caution and dropped her balance to the ground, forcing herself to shift into her other form. Instinct would overpower thought, she wouldn’t feel the tug and pull of lust inside her belly.

His gaze caressed her skin.

She bared her teeth at him, curling her hand into the ground. Another moment and she’d feel the kick and pulse of magic melding her bones into her other shape, forcing her into wolf form. She’d change while he watched, give him a good, long look. Maybe then his gaze would stop tugging at something inside her, maybe then she would tear him apart instead of wanting to jump him and give in to this greed for more.

The cold November breeze teased goose bumps on her skin. Still standing in the shadows, the vampire flicked his wrist to light a cigarette. The short flame lit his face, illuminating harsh lips and cruel watchful eyes.

“You let me know when you’re ready.”

Shock was a chilling coat of sweat. She couldn't breathe because a fist squeezed at her belly. Her blood ran cold while she gasped for breath. She couldn't shift, couldn't feel the magic burning. Shaking, mindless, Dina groped for her knife, waited for him to leap, to grip her throat, to end it.

He took the cigarette out of his mouth, puffed out a ring of smoke. Holding her gaze, he uttered the same words that she had given him earlier.

“Get out.”

With shock clogging her throat, she did.

## Chapter Two

He had one hell of a death wish. Then again, the bloodwolf with the amber eyes and carnal mouth could do the one thing Luke wouldn't do himself.

The morning tore into the sky, pink streaks of light burning his eyes with color. For the past twenty years, he ended every night wondering how far he could stand up to dawn.

Bright light fought its way into the high attic window. Like always, he waited to curtain it off, foolishly clinging to the hope that he could look the rising sun square in the face and have the guts to burn.

The bloodwolf's scent still clung to him—reckless and dangerous and sexy. No perfume, no floral imitations to mask her natural fragrance. Just female arousal and nerves mixed in a heady combination. He liked the nerves, liked feeling her heart shuddering under him. Liked *feeling*, because that in itself was rare.

Maybe he shouldn't have kissed her knowing what she was, but he couldn't resist those dangerous gold eyes, that tough and sexy body. Remembering the feel of her pressed hard against his chest made Luke's blood hum again.

Her clean, sharp aura enflamed him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd craved someone to touch. The women who offered themselves to his fangs were just a dirty means to appease hunger. Faceless, forgotten until the need for blood stirred once again.

As the light brightened safely behind the drapes, he sketched her face with quick strokes of his pencil. Strong features—too bold to be delicate, too striking not to take a second look. Stubborn, he figured, as he enhanced the fragile curve of her jaw on paper. Strong build, a soft and carnal mouth. He spent a lot of time on it, smoothing the lines, shaping it till the bottom lip curved just as he had it in his mind, full and delicious, tasting both fresh and dark, strawberries dipped in the darkest chocolate.

Maybe he'd draw her just like that, parting her lips for a fat succulent strawberry. His body jerked with nearly painful need, and even that was satisfying. It kept hunger at bay for now, because he couldn't stomach thinking of feeding after tasting her mouth. He kept tracing the pencil over it even as footsteps creaked behind him.

"I like it." Walt leaned in to study the paper, his gnarled fingers splayed over the desk. Luke wondered how he stood it, growing old and frail while Luke stayed the same through the years, bitter and young and cold.

"Different than your usual. Softer." Walt's voice sounded different than usual as well. Heavier, as grief settled inside.

“What are you doing up?”

The old man gave him a small smile. “Long night.”

His wife had refused the chemo treatments. She’d slipped away last month, in peace and silence, and even as Luke grieved, watching his friend cope with the loss, he envied them. He couldn’t call himself alive because he’d died already. And he couldn’t find the strength to burn with morning’s light, not with his best and only friend alone and quickly aging. Maybe he’d find the strength after Walt passed.

“You want something to drink?” Luke had stayed up with him before, talking, looking through pictures, packing up her clothes. Wondering what it was like to have someone become part of his life, her wants and needs wrapped up with his.

“Your stock is dry.” There was wry amusement there, as if Walt was remembering how twenty years ago Luke was the first to open a bottle. And twenty years ago, drunk and invincible, he’d let a female vampire make him her willing toy.

His fingers tightening on the pencil, Luke pushed away the memory of sex and blood and death. He thought he’d loved her, had been enthralled by her sheer greed for him. Was shattered when that greed had worn off.

“I say you double the price.” As if reading his mind, Walt tried to change the subject. “Not quite your style, but could be great as a collector’s piece.”

The drawing didn’t match the heavy black and whites mounted on his walls, his art the only thing Luke kept from being human. “It’s not for sale.” As if by its own will, his hand once more traced that lush mouth.

Walt chuckled. “I didn’t think so.” He straightened up with creaking pops of stiffening joints. “You did really well this month.” He held out an envelope, politely averting his eyes when Luke peered inside. Just as he had that first time when Luke had finished college and tried to take the world by storm with art. The bills inside had been considerably less. And he’d had no idea what the world had to offer.

With a quick flick of his fingers, Luke took out a few bills, shoved the rest back to hand to Walter. “For rent.”

The old man shook his head. “You know it’s too much.”

“Property values are up.” And there were hospital bills and cemetery plots to pay for.

“You do this every month.”

“Better than drugs.”

Walt closed his mouth at that, although the argument had been the same for nearly eighteen years. Ever since Luke had been able to afford to pay for the small attic above the old Victorian where Walt and Alice had spent their lives. Ever since Walt started to sell Luke’s art.

“You’re right.” A small pause. “Thank you.”

As if the money could repay the basic kindness they had shown him when Luke was devastated and alone, hiding from daylight, bleeding, hungry. It had been Walt who had suggested that Luke sell his art. It had been Alice who had brought him packs of blood from Cottage Hospital—though only God knew how she'd swiped them.

Long after Walter made his way downstairs, Luke kept tracing the face in front of him, sharpening her features, brightening her eyes. He drew her hair loose and shiny, her tapered ears delicate and long. A bloodwolf, for God's sake.

He wondered what she'd taste like with pleasure overtaking her, her blood flowing with it. Arousal mixed with disgust as he slammed down on the rollaway wedged in the corner and got out another pack of cigs to take him through day.

It wasn't a fluke. Dina couldn't shift and it had been hours since she'd run away with a vampire's taste still on her lips, his scent surrounding her. She'd spent the rest of last night and today alternating between the punching bag and trying to center her damned body. The magic flowed in wolves whose mind and body were united, a feat achieved through meditation and pain of intense physical conditioning.

She'd badly skinned her knuckles and the magic hadn't come. And no matter how much she scrubbed, Dina couldn't get rid of the vampire's scent teasing her senses.

She should have killed him when she had the chance.

Telling herself she was simply annoyed rather than scared out of her mind, her wet hair haphazardly braided to keep it out of her face, Dina pretended to focus on tonight's patrol. If anyone knew of her loss, she would have to stay back while the strong Lycks took care of business.

No one would know, she reassured herself again and tried to pretend interest in vampire gangs in Isla Vista. The college town was heaven for vamps, with a population heavy with drunken underage dopes happily willing to be bitten.

She had no pity for the ones who let themselves be taken. She hadn't felt pity for them in nearly ten years. Ever since she'd had to kill Darlene.

Scowling, Dina jerked her attention to the present, refusing to think back to that night, long before her father made her younger brother alpha because she didn't have passion for their cause. That night when her best friend willingly let herself be turned into a vampire and had to fill her newfound taste for blood.

"...plenty of abandoned structures on the bluffs."

Once more, Dina forced herself to focus. Her brother stood in front of three large monitors with a map of Isla Vista split between the screens. Off to his left, Zachariel manned the large console heaped with keyboards, monitors and books. The whole room with its shelves of tech equipment was a geek's wet dream, including the mesh chairs Dina and the other bloodwolves leaned back on. The nerd-squad image

was tarnished a bit by Earth, Wind & Fire cheerfully humming something in the background. Zach didn't talk much but Dina couldn't fault his taste.

Using a slim pointer, Manakell circled the area along the cliffs. "We should beef up patrol around here." In the past four years since their father died and his mate left him, Man's bright and yellow eyes grew darker every day.

"We look too old." Dina hadn't realized she'd spoken out loud until Man simply raised his eyebrows, coolly inviting her to make her point.

She wished she'd left her hair loose, so that the other bloodwolves wouldn't see her flushing. She hadn't challenged Manakell four years ago when they were both ravaged by grief of losing their father. Her brother was the chosen alpha and she had lost the passion for their cause.

She sure as hell wouldn't challenge him now, with the magic leeches out from her blood.

With five other bloodwolves looking at her, Dina kept her voice steady and firm. "We're much older than that crowd. We'll stand out too much."

"Unless you bust out the club wear." This was from Sammael, a snort to lift the tension.

She simply flipped her cousin off, and the room temperature rose a notch. Zach kept on clacking at the keys.

"Point is, Isla Vista vampires are regulars. They blend. We won't."

"Won't matter." Manakell looked at her directly, his stance relaxed, his voice intense and cool.

Dina didn't let her gaze drop when she shrugged. "Your call." She had bigger and badder things to deal with. If Man found out what she lacked, he would be forced to tell her to stay home, then forced to do something about it after she flatly disobeyed him. A familiar pattern, because the same thing happened to his mate and didn't that turn out peachy?

"Gonna keep shut about last night?"

She remained calm and even managed a cocky fuck-you smile when she turned towards Roguell. "Excuse me?"

He stood to tower over her, a clear challenge of a male intent on dominating. Somewhere to her left Man growled, soft, low, enough to let on he wasn't happy. Sam shifted in his chair, enough to show support.

Dina ignored them both and hoped no one could smell her fear.

"Last night, at Kennedy's. You had a clear shot. You didn't take it."

Now was the time for irony, even if her heart was loud in her throat. "No bites, no stakes." She shot Manakell a sunny smile. "Isn't that right, brother?"

Man didn't look at her. "That's right." The soft words held an unspoken threat and even if it ruffled Dina's fur, it also calmed her belly. Alpha or not, her brother had her back.

She let the rest of the meeting wash over her, picking apart last night, coolly examining the way she had responded to the vampire. She let him touch her, kiss her. He hadn't smelled like blood. Instead his scent was that old soft leather mixed with the musk of male. Again she sank into the memory of him, his body against hers, his mouth hot and hungry.

"If you can't fight, you're no good hunting."

She hadn't noticed Rogue until his hand was on her arm. The meet was over, she heard Man and Sammael arguing somewhere in the house. Amidst the empty chairs and the blanked monitors, she was alone with Rogue.

"You really intend to tell me what I do?" She kept her voice ice hard as her hands fisted at her sides.

His grip went painful on her forearm, his fingers digging hard into her skin. She'd die before she'd show him that he hurt her.

"Problem?"

Keeping a feral grin in place, she slid a glance towards her brother. "Not till I count to three."

They both heard the muttered "bitch" and both chose to ignore it as Roguell stalked away.

Man followed him with a long, thoughtful gaze. "You want to fill me in?"

She was too tired to snap at him. "Nothing to fill about." *I made out with a vampire and can't shift any more.* "That thing, where we can't kill vamps without proof." It was a good way to change the subject. "You never said why." And though she'd always thought of it as stupid, she'd kept her mouth shut, careful not to do anything that could have been seen as a challenge—either by him or by the other Lycks. Especially by the other Lycks.

That was before. Right now, she didn't care. Maybe if he threw her at the wall, she'd get the wolf back in her blood.

"You never really asked." Man crossed his arms, the gesture more tired than arrogant. "One of them helped...me."

The pause had been so smooth Dina wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't looked for it. A vampire had helped Valoelle, Man's mate. Man's ex-mate—if that was even the right word. Which probably explained the "don't kill till you're sure they're bad" approach.

"They aren't all after easy blood."

"They're animals." She didn't have the energy to pack heat in her words.

Man shrugged. "We're the same damned thing with wolf mixed in."

She peered into his face, noting the tired eyes, the tension of his stance that had nothing to do with her and everything with being the alpha. "We don't feed on—"

"We do." Soft and sharp voice, a shard of glass slicing through silence. "We feed off our mates, crave their taste the same as a vampire. Except most vamps aren't particular. Sometimes..." He shrugged again. "Sometimes I wonder if it's better."

“Daddy would’ve—” She shut up but the words flew out anyway, beat at Man’s weary eyes until they hardened.

“He’s gone.” The implied “I’m not him” hung heavy in the air. “If you can’t handle hunting, you need to let me know.”



## Chapter Three

Her fragrance caressed him every time Luke breathed. He didn't know how he could sense it two days later, that potent mix of woman and arousal and raw-edged nerves.

The sweaty dreams in the few hours that he slept tortured him further. Visions of strong slim limbs, that lush mouth crying out in pleasure, teeth sinking into his own fevered skin.

She was a bloodwolf for God's sake. A woman made from the same magic that spawned him, a race that called their young by angel names. A mix of blood and wolf and man, created to balance the scales after the Earth priestesses unleashed vampires on the world in an attempt to live forever.

Luke didn't know how much of that was true, but the wolf Valoelle had been convinced of it. And since he'd saved her life and got his ass kicked in the process, he figured she didn't have much need to lie.

Walking among the trees at Alameda Park, Luke tried to get the bloodwolf's aroma out of his head by focusing on the night air filled with dying leaves and human sweat. Lovers and druggies came here to find solitude among the shadows. And he despised himself for being one of the vampires hoping to score a snack.

He didn't go to a club tonight. Couldn't risk seeing her again, not with her scent driving him insane and her bold features burned into his memory. With her eyes watching him from the drawing on his desk, Luke hadn't fed in days. Even now, with hunger tearing his gut to shreds, he shuddered with disgust thinking of blood.

He hoped he'd find somebody out for a thrill, a faceless fix devoid of any feelings. He didn't even know the bloodwolf's name, and yet the thought of touching someone else revolted him, adding to the sick clenching in his stomach.

A vampire who hated feeding. Luke would've laughed if it wasn't so pathetic.

The smell of blood, sudden and sharp, caught his attention. His stomach recoiling, Luke followed the trail a few yards to the right. The scene in front of him could have been easily mistaken for a kiss, as two bodies wrapped around each other in a parody of passion. He couldn't quite tell the gender of the one on the bottom, but in the shadows of the oak tree, he heard an encouraging, excited moan.

Fresh blood called out to him, with the venomous beauty of a snake.

They gave away their blood for a slim chance of immortality, a high brought on by danger, the thrill of the taboo. Vampires did exist, and humans happily bared their necks for them.

Sometimes Luke saved them, those who came to their senses, struggling, calling out for help. Most times he let them be, because he knew firsthand they wouldn't welcome being rescued. They wanted it—just as he had. And he could tell them immortality meant nothing. He was already the same ash he would become once he finally found the guts to face the sun.

Ignoring the aching of his insides, Luke watched to see if pink-striped hair on the bottom would let a vampire drain his life away. The whiff of blood teased at his senses. Once more he thought of those gold eyes and that clean musk of female desire, dark and beautiful. He used the memory of her to keep insanity away.

He closed his eyes for a short second, let her wash over him as he kept a keen focus for any sounds of struggle. There were none of course, but still he waited, a part of him hoping he could help.

Her fragrance grew stronger, edgier. As if he conjured her, the bloodwolf burst out of the shadows, made a slow move to plunge her knife into the curved back of the vampire, only to be swatted away as if she were a fly.

Silent, Luke watched her regain her feet, slow, graceful yet sluggish, as if her balance didn't add up and her body refused to listen. Fluid, she reared up, sent the vamp backwards with a weak snap-kick to his jewels. The knife gleamed in her hand, a short and wicked blade extending from between two of her fingers. It sliced through empty air.

Her hands were clenched, her face a mask of crazed serenity. She would change now, he imagined, turn herself into the wolf that flowed inside her blood. Luke waited for it, tensed for it, knew she would smell him, and he wouldn't lift a hand against her even if she ripped him up to pieces. He knew it as much as he breathed.

Except she remained standing tall, as if waiting for the vampire to fly at her, tear at her flesh with angry teeth and hands. Luke's vision was already dark when he smelled blood rising above the blur of senses.

He moved without thinking, felt his muscles sing as he ripped the vampire off her. A short, cracking jerk broke the vamp's neck and Luke watched it fall onto the hard November dirt. Somewhere, the teen scrambled away, taking his sloppy whimpers with him.

The bloodwolf lay unmoving on the ground, the soft curves of her chest rising and falling with each harsh breath she took. The eyes that locked with his were dark and gold and desperate.

She bled—a nasty rip over her shoulder that tore through fabric and skin.

"Get up." He kept his tone quiet, afraid to move closer to her, afraid the beast inside him would take over. And yet, somehow, the scent pumping from her—blood, desperation, pain—soothed almost as much as it grated.

"You up for round two?" Tough voice, weary eyes.

Luke didn't know why he found the combination so alluring. "You're hurt."

She touched a fingertip to that soft mouth and wiped at her own blood. He followed her motions with his eyes and wondered how the hunger didn't shred him.

"Try it." The words didn't have much punch as she got up—or rather hauled herself up as if by will alone. She faced him, bleeding, tired, beautiful.

For once, the craving didn't demand instant satisfaction. He didn't want her blood. He wanted to devour all of her, her fragrance, her skin, her vulnerable and defiant mouth. "I could've tried last night." A pause. "I didn't."

She shook her head at that. Luke wondered if she knew she had a tiny pulse inside the fragile hollow of her neck. He wondered what it'd taste like when he licked it.

"You can't shift, can you?" He kept his voice quiet, flat. "You walk around bleeding, every vamp in the city will want you." He sure as hell did.

"Is that a threat?"

"You tell me, bloodwolf."

Those fascinating gold eyes narrowed. "I'll handle it."

"Find one of your kind to take you home." If only to protect her from him. The usual hunger was nothing compared to this craving to devour her. All of her.

Her chin jerked up. "I got this to protect me." She lifted her fist, the knife gleaming like a flipped-up middle finger. His body hardened more as Luke barked out a laugh.

"You think I can't take you?" She crouched now, the blade a bright point in the shadows. Her scent changed, mixed with the copper shade of desperation.

Luke moved seconds before she lunged, leaned away from the knife that missed his face by inches. Her hand was still extended when he grabbed her, pulled her against him, holding her fist and the blade in front of her. Her breaths were quick jerks of her chest, her fragrance deeper now, darker.

"You're too slow, bloodwolf."

Her body trembled, her buttocks firm and tight against his cock. Luke let her wrench away before he let himself kiss the smooth shine of her hair.

The sharp wind caressed the dying trees as she came at him once again, a snarl on her face, her blade bright and gleaming. Luke moved, let her own momentum push her to the ground. And either he was crazy, or that short second while she stayed still, he got the sense she wanted him to cover her.

"I won't fight you."

"Yeah, right." She didn't lunge at him when she got up. Small semblance of progress.

Hunger forgotten, his body throbbed for her. That's when he heard a rustling of footsteps—a vampire, maybe two, smelling wolf blood and wanting their piece of the action.

The way she swept her gaze around her, Luke figured that she heard them as well. With a swift movement he stripped off his jacket, held it out to her while she lifted her eyebrows.

“So I can smell like you?” Her stance was light, her face determined.

“Better than smelling like a wounded bloodwolf.”

It was a short relief when she finally snatched the leather from his fingers and threw it around her shoulders, dimming her scent. Since her blade was already pointed at him, he took the opportunity to split his palm, using his blood to dull the smell of hers.

That carnal mouth trembled open in the dark. “Why—” She paused a moment, tried again. “What the hell are you doing?”

His hunger numbed for now, as did the insane need to touch her. Those gold eyes still held his. “Damned if I know,” he told her quietly, and it was absolutely true. “I got a place a couple of blocks away. You can clean up, cover your scent.” He figured she would laugh as soon as he stopped speaking. Instead she looked around, not trusting him, not seeing a viable alternative.

Her eyes were direct and solemn when they met his once more. “You touch me, you’re dead.”

Relief was laced with something deeper. “I’m already dead.”

She must have lost her mind along with all her other senses.

The leather of his jacket touched her skin, a subtle caress that promised more if only Dina would allow her mind to go there. Even if she didn’t stink like blood, ripping it off her shoulders would show how much his scent affected her. And frankly, she would rather die.

This whole damned thing spiraled beyond stupidity. Stupid of her trying to rescue that damned kid knowing full well she didn’t have the strength to fight a vampire. Apparently, fear and adrenaline weren’t enough to unite the mind and body. Dina still couldn’t feel the magic in her blood.

Maybe she couldn’t shift—but she could feel the mixed traces of male and leather wrapped around her. It teased her skin as she walked with a vampire out of the park.

He hadn’t touched her—not that night, not now, though clearly he knew she didn’t have the strength to fight him. He hadn’t touched her, and those times when she pushed herself into him, his hands were hot but they weren’t bruising. She still had enough instinct left to know he wouldn’t hurt her.

And when she caught his gaze, hungry and hot, the shivers in her belly had everything to do with nerves and nothing to do with fear.

“What’s your name, vampire?”

“Luke.” Low raspy tone, as if he felt the heat pulsing inside her.

“I’m Dina.” She didn’t know why she told him her name. Too late to take it back now.

“Dina.” He said it slowly, as if seeing how her name would taste on his tongue. “Not a common angel name.”

“Too many Gabbys in the family.”

He chuckled, soft and sexy. She really didn’t like the way the sound shivered on her skin.

“You seem to know a lot about my kind.”

He shrugged, a move that somehow reminded her of Manakell. “I had plenty of time to ask questions.”

Dina let the pause stretch as they walked side by side in companionable silence. His scent still hugged her. The park was now replaced by tidy fences and mowed lawns. Humans living in those neat curtained houses had no idea who went bump in their nights.

“When were you turned?” She didn’t like how her voice turned tentative.

“Turned. Right.” The short laugh didn’t have a trace of humor. “There’s no turning. The thirst just grows in you. You fight it.” His tone changed slightly, grew more rough. “You fight it until you give up.”

“Did you?” She’d seen him push away a willing female.

“Plenty of necks going around.”

She was surprised to hear disgust in his voice. As if he hated those who freely gave their throats for him to feed on. “Were you waiting for the kid?”

He gave her a swift look, his green eyes shadowed. “I wanted to see if he would struggle.”

She frowned at him. “Why?”

“So I could help him.”

“You sat on your ass watching him being drained.” A hot quick stab of anger. “But if he screamed, you’d help?” Hadn’t she been saying something similar, ever since Darlene was turned into a vamp? Hadn’t she wondered why she bothered saving humans when they did nothing to save themselves?

His voice stayed quiet. “If that kid wanted help I would have given it.”

She only shook her head, hearing her own thoughts thrown back at her. Nothing made sense. Not this, not her own body and its lack of strength and magic. Not this strange and intense need for his touch.

The vampire stopped in front of a sprawling Victorian with peeling paint and wooden shutters. “That’s me.”

Like she was idiot enough to trust him and go up there. And yet the need to touch him, to see if he tasted as good as he smelled, crawled through her veins.

A lone window was lit amidst its dark mates.

“My friend lives in the main house,” he said as if reading her thoughts. “He won’t bother us, unless you’d like to meet him.”

Right. As if she was about to walk into a vampire nest.

His lips curled in a mocking smile. His eyes stayed quiet and intense on hers. “Walter is human.”

“Sure.” She wasn’t going up with him. He was a vampire. And she... At this point, Dina didn’t know if she trusted herself. “Just...forget it.” She started to shrug out of his jacket.

“Keep it.” His eyes nearly burned her. She frowned—maybe now he would show his teeth, make this whole thing easier. She didn’t need to think when she was fighting. She didn’t want to think.

He gripped her arm when Dina took off his jacket.

She bared her teeth at him. "You don't get—"

"Yeah." In a blur Luke closed the small space left between them. "I don't get." His mouth hovered above hers, sweet, hot and teasing.

She had the chance to kick, to slam her fist into his ribs, to curse him. Instead, she just moved in.

Her pulse roared in her ears. Dina fisted both hands in his hair, feasted on his lips. His arms banded around her, his mouth harsh and brutal, savaging her, soothing the burn while enflaming it. She pushed herself into his chest, felt his heart thunder. His taste exploded on her tongue, his scent driving her wild while his lips moved hot and restless over hers.

She moaned when the rough heat of his fingers pushed under the thin cotton of her shirt and found skin. Slow, torturous, his palms slid over her, caressed her back, his thumbs brushing the undersides of breasts that suddenly felt heavy. His lips trailed pleasure on her neck, licking at the feverish skin, pressing small, burning kisses just below her ear.

Before her chest exploded Dina gulped in a breath of air, then tugged on his neck to bring his mouth onto hers again. In a flash of greed, she bit down on his lower lip, enough for blood, enough to momentarily satisfy the curiosity of what he'd taste like. When she opened her eyes, his gaze burned dark with surprised need.

"Upstairs." His arms gentled around her. A question, Dina realized. The choice was hers to take.

"Yes." She couldn't think beyond the taste of him.

The stairs were a blur, harsh breaths and mindless wrenching kisses. He trapped her at the door, his body hard and burning, passion laced with a hint of greed. Propped by the door, she wrapped her arms and legs around him, fit herself to him, core to core.

Somehow they were inside, rolling like mad on the thin carpet, his weight heavy relief on top of her, mouths mating, impatient hands tearing through fabric, groping to find more skin.

Over the roar in her head Dina pushed him back, straddled his thighs, heard something ripping. His T-shirt became tatters in her hands, his solid chest gleaming, rising with each shuddering breath. With a short growl she bit a flat male nipple, felt a deep jolt of satisfaction at his groan.

His hands moving on her skin, Luke rolled with her, pressed his erection into the apex of her thighs, ground into her with heavy teasing motions. In the dark, Dina saw his fangs before he lowered his lips to her neck, trailed light kisses down to tease the hard peaks of her nipples.

She fought for every breath. She had to have his mouth. She wanted to feel teeth grazing her skin. Shaking, his weight pressing her to the floor, Dina pushed her hand between their bodies and felt him jerk when she slid her palm over his swollen length before fumbling for the zipper.

His hands closed swift and brutal on her wrists.

"Let me." The words barely had sound.

She barely had the breath to nod.

His gaze locked on hers as his palm spanned her belly, his other hand trapping both her wrists above her head. Dina arched up under the slow caresses of his fingers, a subtle circle around her navel, a dip to touch the skin under her jeans.

She forced the words from dry, parched lips. "Do it."

"Not yet."

He watched her as he slowly drew down her zipper and pushed his palm lower over her pelvic bone. Not nearly close enough to where she burned.

Her thighs clenched hard around his hand when he brushed at her center. She was trapped in that green unflinching gaze, frightened, aroused, helpless to do anything but feel.

"Let me," he said again, and since she couldn't speak, Dina simply nodded.

Slow when she wanted quick and brutal. Tender when she craved speed. Light and erotic and impossible when she wanted to crest the wave and ride it out till the onslaught on her senses ended. Luke stroked her with clever fingers, soft tiny shocks of pleasure, just enough to keep her quivering on the edge.

She arched up, her body a tight string inside a vicious spiral of sensation. Her wrists were free now, her left hand clasped with his, fingers entwined, anchoring her as Dina rode the storm of pleasure. With need born of both wolf and magic, she gripped his neck to bring his lips to hers, used her tongue with the same torturous rhythm as his fingers. And when the pleasure sharpened to a blinding point, she sank her teeth into the patch of skin where his neck met shoulder. She filled herself with his taste, felt him shudder. And screaming, leapt over the cliff.

His eyes were a dark and burning green when Dina found the strength to look at him. His hands still threaded in her hair, she lifted up to swirl her tongue over the mark she'd carved into his neck.

She knew him now, his scents, his senses. She needed him to taste her the same way. His eyes were wide and bright, his lips partially parted when she gathered her hair in her hand and arched her neck an inch away from his beautiful mouth.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Shocked she looked up to find Luke scrambling away. Her breaths harsh, Dina shook her head, trying to clear the hot haze pumping in her veins.

In the dark room, his chest gleamed and his eyes were shattered. And he still bled from where she'd made her mark.

"I won't take blood from you." He backed away as if she were a monster. "Not like this."

Her heart pounded, dread now instead of passion. She tasted him on her lips and realized what it was. What she had done. She forced her body upwards, hissing a breath through her rapidly tightening throat. His taste filled her mouth, metallic, potent, dead.

Of course he wouldn't bite her. Even if he understood what she had done, he wouldn't risk drinking from her. Lyck blood could make him mortal. And stupid her had offered him her throat just like a little girl wanting happily ever after. A Lyck marking a vampire as mate.

"This never happened." She kept her voice low and marveled that she could even get the sound out. Inside, she shook, her chest closing in tight. The room smelled like her blood, his need and her arousal, the scents coiling around her neck and holding tight.

He got up, slowly, her mark a dark rip on his gleaming skin. "Dina."

"Don't." Blindly, she groped to find an exit, bumping her hip into his desk. A movement caught her gaze when pens rolled off a sheet of paper where lines and shades combined to form a face. *Her face*. Serene and cocky features stared out from a white paper on his desk.

With shaking hands, Dina snatched it up, tore it with swift trembling fingers. Before either of them could say another word, she ran into the night.



## Chapter Four

The ache of Dina's mark had nothing to do with the grating inside him. Hunger beat at him and still Luke couldn't stand the thought of tearing open a plastic packet of stale blood, much less finding the next thrill seeker willing to let him bite his or her throat.

She'd offered. Freely, without the haze of drugs or the high of danger. She'd bared her soul, and he rejected her because he couldn't get past his own regrets. In the far corner of the attic, her bright and vicious eyes stared up at him in accusation from the torn sheet of paper on the floor.

He'd let her go into the night while she bled, while she was helpless. And she'd probably gut him if he followed her. Beside the corner of the paper with her eyes, her knife lay on the floor, its edges sharp and lethal.

Pride didn't matter, neither his nor hers. Grabbing her blade, Luke ran down the stairs, her fragrance so strong he didn't have any doubt of the way.

The smell of her teased at his nostrils, arousal mixed with pain. He'd hurt her because of his own ache. Because he was disgusted by his past while she innocently offered him all she had. Her blood, her soul, her trust. A bloodwolf, for God's sake, trusting him enough to arch her neck for him, expecting nothing in return.

He didn't have any problem spotting her, walking briskly alone on empty streets as the breeze chilled the air. She rubbed her arms clad in a thin black fabric and laid another guilt trip at his feet. Of course she wouldn't take his jacket—Luke doubted she'd want his scent anywhere on her after tonight.

Silent, he kept enough distance between them so she wouldn't spot him. He didn't know how much wolf senses she retained, or how long whatever her condition of being unable to shift would last. Maybe it was an illness of some kind, something that confused her senses and let her open herself to a vampire.

He would protect her until it went away.

Better that way, for both of them. A bloodwolf had no business with a vampire.

She lived on instinct—he knew that of her kind. No calculation, no premeditated thought. She wanted and she took and when she offered, it was freely. And his vampire ass had no business taking what she wouldn't give in her right mind.

Hunger chose just that moment to twist his insides. In his mind's eye, he saw her neck again, a beautiful arched column, her skin gleaming and smooth in the dark night.

The bite mark on his neck throbbed when he pressed his fingers to it. Her aroma whipped at him with strong teasing waves. He had to feed, and at that point Luke realized he couldn't. Not ever. Not from a willing faceless human out for a thrill, not from an empty plastic packet. His body wanted her, this bloodwolf with her carnal lips and reckless attitude.

She'd taken the first step. She'd offered. He followed her with the intent that she would end it too.

Dina knew exactly what she looked like as she ran up her porch and nearly knocked her brother sideways in the process.

She wasn't in the mood for questions or the alpha 'tude. Instead, she simply brushed past him into her place, hoping he'd get the message and slink off, leave her alone to get all traces of Luke off her.

No matter how she ran, it kept getting stronger, as if he followed her into the night. He had no reason to, she knew that just as much as she knew why the magic had left her. The unity of mind and body had been broken—she'd sealed the deal when she'd marked a vampire with her teeth.

"You're bleeding." Man's voice was somber as he followed her into her house, instantly making the small space feel crowded.

"One hell of a night." She wanted him to go away, because she was this close to breaking down. Luke's taste still burned her lips, made her crave him in ways she'd never craved before.

She didn't turn the lights on, not that the lack of them would hide her from her brother's eyes, but at least that way she felt safer. Skirting the punching bag that hung from the low ceiling, she headed towards the tiny bathroom.

Forget the loss of magic and her strength. She'd put a mate mark on a vampire, and that pretty much meant a ticket to the looney.

"You need help?" Man's voice was muffled by the bathroom door.

"I'm good." Dina splashed water on her face and hoped he'd go away so she could scream in private.

"Sure. You're good. Like always."

She threw open the door at that.

"What the hell do you mean?" She wasn't in the mood to fight. At this point, he had all her blessings to exert his alpha and she would gladly keep her mouth shut.

"Nothing." A shrug followed that sharp and mocking word. "Maybe I want to know what's up with you. Maybe I want to know why Rogue goes batshit every time he hears your name. Maybe I want to kick his ass for sniffing at you, but if I do you'll go all alpha bitch on me and I don't want to fight you."

She was too tired to deal with him, too rattled, too emotional. "I won't go alpha bitch on you." Her eyes met his, direct and true. "That's your job."

"Right." A snort, a small release of tension.

Strange, talking to him like a friend, baiting him like a brother. And still she couldn't talk about this. "Rogue got his ears twisted since I clocked him on our first and last date."

His eyebrows rose. "I hadn't heard."

She shrugged, winced just a bit when the scabs over the scratches on her shoulder split wide open. She still had enough wolf in her to heal.

"Wasn't much to tell." Just like there wasn't much to tell about the vampire she'd bitten tonight, the vampire who'd saved her, the vampire who saved humans if they asked for help.

She shook her head again, realization blooming slowly. "It's not about killing vampires." She didn't phrase it as a question, simply watched Man's eyes narrow as he tilted his head. "It's about saving humans, whether they understand or not."

He nodded slowly. "Yes."

This was the passion she'd lost, the reason she hadn't been named alpha. She hadn't understood the simple rule of their cause, refused to do so after she had killed her human best friend who went into a blood rampage with her new thirst and undead strength.

Man arms crossed on his chest, his stance growing more tense and tired.

She didn't have the patience to hide under both their prides. "Daddy picked you. And it was final." And Dina realized she was okay with that decision. "I'd never challenge you for it, even back then."

Her brother gave her a long look, as if gauging how far to trust. "You have one hell of a left hook," he finally said and had her grinning. If nothing else, this one part of her life turned out right.

"Better remember that."

"Rogue is on your case." Man changed the topic, as this new and fragile peace bloomed.

Dina dabbed astringent over her shoulder, let herself wince in front of him. As far as truce, this was a small and yet giant step to let her brother see a weakness. "Rogue is the last thing on my mind."

"I can smell that."

She whirled around. "Excuse me?"

"I smell a male on you." No judgment—not yet anyway. "Have him kick Rogue's ass and he'll back off."

"I kick my own ass."

"Sure." He rocked back on his heels, as if not sure how to proceed.

"Listen." Dina took another step along the newfound peace. "With you and Valoelle..." She trailed off when he frowned, but then pushed onward. "Did she mark you?"

His gaze suddenly sharpened—she figured he looked for a bite mark on her neck. Another sign of that fragile peace—he didn't demand for her to show it. Not that she had something to show.

Man's eyes stayed calm. Dina imagined that he forced himself to keep his hands inside his pockets. "Yes." A single word that held a world of implication. Valoelle had left him, and though Dina couldn't

comprehend how that was possible, maybe she had a chance to just get over Luke and end this crazy notion that she'd marked him.

"How... How does it work?"

"She took my blood, I hers. We were complete." Man shrugged and flatly spat out the answer. The topic of his mate was not one most could broach.

"Didn't it bother you to go all vamp on her?"

He winced now, clearly in pain thinking of it. She should have simply shut her mouth.

"It didn't matter." He never said her name, as if the sound of it brought back memories. "It's a wolf mating thing." And it had run its course. Dina wanted to ask when he stopped feeling it, but judging by those dark gold eyes she figured now wasn't the time.

She almost felt him push away the pain where she couldn't reach it. "Why all this interest?" Again his arms were crossed over his chest.

"Just wondering. Maybe Rogue got me thinking." She didn't flinch at the small and vicious tug of pain, and wondered if Man saw right through her.

"If you want me to twist off his ears..." he paused to give her a small smile, "...remember, I am the alpha bitch."

"Yeah. Right." She wondered how alpha he would get if he ever found out whom his sister marked. Not that it mattered. Nothing would come of it.

Maybe she'd have the magic back. Pain was supposed to unify the mind and body, and with Luke's scent so close, her clenching gut did a good imitation of it.

"Shouldn't you be in Isla Vista?"

Her brother studied her with a probing quiet gaze. "You want to talk, you know where to find me."

It was her turn to give him a small smile. "Yeah."

The scars were already fading when Dina turned back to the mirror and looked at herself in the dark shadow of night. A tall and muscled woman with a strong jaw and wolfish ears, with tired amber eyes and badass attitude. She knew nothing about art, but she remembered the face Luke had drawn, the softened features, parted lips, full luscious mouth.

He didn't know what he was dealing with. She was still brooding in the mirror when something crashed through glass.

## Chapter Five

She knew that he would smell her fear. Even as something hammered in her throat, Dina forced her blood to calm. Maybe she couldn't fight him, but she'd be damned if he would know she didn't have her strength. "You didn't have to break my window."

In the middle of her tiny living room, Rogue showed his teeth. "You wouldn't have let me in."

No point in arguing. "You're right. I wouldn't have. So get out."

He took a step closer, predator stalking prey, his pale eyes glistening with bloodlust. He would try to mate her, Dina realized, and at this point he wouldn't care if she was willing. Dread beat a rapid-fire tattoo over her skin.

Maybe she'd have a chance if she ran out into the night, but she was through running away, from anyone. Magic or not, she'd make her stand, with or without the wolf inside her.

"You got something to say?" *Just keep him talking.* She needed something, anything, a weapon. A quick grope of her fingers at her back told her she'd lost her blade.

Slowly, Roguell came closer, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed with insulting pulls. "I smell a male on you."

"I know." No point denying it. Maybe he would respect another man's scent and back away, except she didn't have a mate mark, nothing to prove another's hold on her. Fear, cold and unwanted, shivered through her.

"Where is he?" His smile full of teeth, Rogue turned a full circle. "Not here to protect you. He isn't here to do jack shit."

A small flick of his wrist sent the punching bag into an angry spiral. Her hands clenched into fists, Dina waited for him to make a move.

He slicked a hand through long pale hair, and looked at her with hooded, narrowed eyes. "You need someone to watch you."

An obvious insult to Manakell and a deliberate attempt to piss her off. She wasn't known for patience. Rogue obviously counted on it.

"You aren't the one I had in mind." *Words, just use words.* If she let loose with fists again, he would have every reason to take her down and even Man would not have any say.

She didn't lie to herself. He had the strength to tear her apart. Without magic, she had the simple choice of offering her throat or fighting to her death.

As if reading her mind, Rogue shifted, tearing through his clothes, bone and skin melding into silver and grey fur. A huge wolf stood beside her punching bag, staring at her with Roguella's madness-tinged eyes. His teeth snapped in a warning, she watched his fur rise on his back, his tail standing up parallel to his body.

Without a choice she crouched for an attack, bared her teeth at him. Hoped that it would be over quickly.

He showed his teeth and went down on his forepaws, coiling for a jump. She watched the muscles hunching on his flanks and pushed back the sudden and bright flash of terror. If nothing else, he wouldn't smell desperation on her skin. She'd rather have her throat torn out than let him know she was afraid. She'd rather die than let him hear her screaming.

Rogue leapt high in the air, and her last thought was to clamp her teeth onto her bottom lip, keeping the scream at bay. Something pushed her away before he reached her. She hit the floor in a painful and graceless lump, scrambled back up to see a strong, dark human body tangled with a wolf.

She heard a low menacing growl followed by one just as ferocious. Her bones ached as she forced herself to move, rushed forward to see Rogue snapping his jaws around Luke's forearm. Luke pushed his arm farther into the wolf's throat, into the soft black tissue past the teeth.

Blood spilled into the air, its sweet metallic taste familiar and full of rage. It filled her up with each harsh breath as Roguella tried to snap his jaw through flesh and bone. And something swelled inside her, dark and pure and simple.

The throb of ancient magic slid through her bones, thickening her blood and skin and muscles. The world changed, darkening, rounding. Scent became vision and instinct became thought. Somewhere, in the part of her that remained human, Dina rejoiced at the sweet kiss of pain accompanying a shift.

Her wolf senses roared at the scent of enemy and blood.

Her head bent low, she growled, felt the echo of it reverberate inside her. She didn't question her newfound strength when she leapt on Roguella's back and pushed him onto the floor, ignored the flash of pain as his teeth missed her throat and landed on her recently healed shoulder.

She forced him on his back, his belly open, his throat taut. She only had to sink her teeth into it.

"Get out." The words felt thick around her tongue, as if it was a foreign object. Beside her, she could feel Luke bleeding, his scent wrapping around her like a lover's caress.

"This isn't over." Still in wolf form, Rogue muttered the words but didn't move.

She sat back on her haunches, gave him the distance to make his choice. They both knew if he tried again she'd have to kill him.

When he finally curled his tail between his legs, Dina just turned away and let him flee.

She had the magic back. And when she faced the vampire, his green eyes were wide as he held out his bleeding arm.

Her choice should have been simple. She was a bloodwolf. He was the enemy she was created to defeat. His blood dripped down his open hand, and she could have snapped it in a heartbeat. Instead, as softly as she could, Dina licked at the bite mark on his arm and quietly exhaled watching it close. Like her kind, he healed quickly.

He was a vampire. His taste filled her, potent and rich and dark. This couldn't be right, she couldn't want him, couldn't crave his touch. She backed away while he watched her, her head still low, her ears pulled back, her clothing a torn heap under her feet.

The magic left her. Unable to hold on to her wolf form, Dina felt herself melding back into the human, vulnerable and naked.

Watching her, Luke simply lowered his hand.

"I don't need anyone saving my ass." She didn't know what else to say, except the need for him built up inside her, a need she couldn't deny.

"Obviously." He reached for her then dropped his hand when she backed farther away. "I'm sorry. About earlier."

"Don't." Under the collar of his jacket Dina could almost see her mark. She didn't look into his eyes when she snatched up her torn clothing to hold against her breasts. Standing naked in front of him made her open and vulnerable and soft, and she couldn't stand it. Couldn't move away.

His eyes burned her. "I couldn't take your blood."

She should have left, slammed something. Instead, Dina stood still, hypnotized by the green fire in his eyes. "You didn't want to turn mortal. I get it."

To her surprise he shrugged away the words. "I don't want you to be like all the others." A pause, as if he forced himself to spit out the words. "I've had plenty of women offering their necks."

She smelled his heat when she inhaled. "That's why I kill your kind."

"Then do it." With a swift motion Luke tossed off his jacket, shrugged off his shirt, baring his chest and heart to her. A knife gleamed in his hand, the one she'd left after she'd marked his skin.

"I can't control this hunger." He advanced slowly, and she still couldn't move away. "I can't stomach the thought of feeding from somebody else." He flicked his wrist so that the sharp flat blade bit into his palm and extended his hand with the smooth handle out towards her. "You have to finish it."

Shocked, Dina didn't move. "You drink from me, you become mortal."

"That's just a myth." He was so close she could hear his heart beating inside that muscled chest.

She swallowed, hard. "You're crazy."

"Yeah, I am." He took another breath. "I want you so bad I can taste how you would feel inside me." His body shook with every word. "End it right now, before it gets too late."

She was still naked. He was beautiful. "It is too late."

He jumped at her light touch, fisted his hands beside him. "You don't want this."

For once she knew exactly what she wanted. “Yes. I do.”

A quick step closed the distance between them. She inhaled deeply, taking in the musk of pure aroused male.

“Don’t do this. Don’t—” He groaned, he kissed her. Hard and deep, his mouth possessed hers, demanding, pleading. His arm banded around her waist while the other cupped her head, his fingers threading through her hair. He pressed her hard against the nearest wall so he could fit his body against hers.

With heated urgency he used his lips over her skin, moving over her neck, her collarbone, tasting between her breasts. A sweet kiss on each nipple hardened them to aching points. He worshiped them until her knees wouldn’t hold her.

This time she wouldn’t give him control. With a low sound in her throat, Dina gripped his arms, his shoulders, tugged on his hair to bring him back up so she could bite his mouth.

His cock prodded iron hard against her stomach, and when she pushed down his pants to wrap her hand around him, his shocked breath filled the room.

*Mine.* The word beat at her mind as Dina stroked him while he shuddered in her hand. His eyes were a deep, dark green when she pushed him onto his knees in front her, slid down to face him. Softly, she used her lips to tease him.

Slow, torturous seduction. His fingers cupped her head as she reared up, guided herself over him, trembled when he finally filled her, so full and hot she buried her face in his neck to keep herself from screaming.

He pulsed inside her; she moved over him. His eyes were clear and bright, and his breaths jagged in the silence.

*Mine.* The word pounded inside her head as he locked both arms around her to move her on his body. *Mine.* She slammed herself hard onto his cock, rose up with slow exquisite torture. Her lips found the mark on her neck, she pierced it again, tasted him fully.

*Mine!* She rode him hard now, licking at his neck and softly growling.

In a sharp move, the arms that held her pulled her away from him. She growled deeper this time, licked her lips, savoring the taste of him. Those hooded eyes were heavy as Luke brought her closer to him, slowly, carefully. She saw the silent question on his face.

Her answer was to grip his thighs with hers, push herself deeper over him. His heat pulsing inside her, Dina tilted her head and held her breath.

His mouth closed over the junction where her neck became her shoulder. She shuddered at the soft, soft lips cruising over her skin, licking as if prolonging that dark final moment. Trembling, she fought to drag air into her lungs, anticipating, craving.



Another shudder as he slid his fangs into skin, pleasure becoming a sharp fragment of purest crystal. With slow careful pulls, Luke drew her essence into him, his hands gripping her waist, moving her on his cock in sensual rhythm.

She still couldn't breathe when he lifted his head, his eyes darkening with knowledge and desire. Their blood was one, mated, fused together. And when he caught her mouth once more, the pleasure peaked and shattered as Dina writhed over his body, arching into a taut soundless scream before finally splintering into trembling pieces.

His arms were still around her when her breath slowed, his heartbeat steady under her ear. The large hand on her buttock moved in slow lazy circles when she finally found the strength to lift her head and meet his somber gaze.

"Problem?" She felt so fluid, so alive. She wanted to run naked in the woods and ride him under the cold autumn skies.

With a gentle finger Luke traced the mark over her skin. "I'm sorry. I hurt you."

"I'm not. And you didn't."

The hand over her buttock tightened just a bit before he softly kissed her shoulder.

"Are you...okay?" Lame, but she didn't know what else to ask him. Her blood should've made him mortal. A quick check showed that he still had his fangs.

"It's just a myth." His voice was a deep rumble under her, his hand still on her rear.

"It isn't." But she didn't feel like arguing while cradled in his warmth, the scent of a contented male floating around her.

"So this thing where you bite me." He pushed a lock of hair from her face, as if to see her eyes. "It means—" He searched for the right words. "Something about mating."

She didn't want to talk about it. "Its just for wolves. Besides"—she quickly changed the subject—"how do you know so much about Lycks?"

"One of your Lycks once saved my ass. Manakell. You know him?" His eyes flickered away as if remembering.

Chuckling, Dina licked one of his nipples. "Man's my little brother." And wasn't it a kicker that he already knew this vamp?

"I'll know who'll kick my ass tomorrow." Luke's eyes grew sober. "He all right?"

"He deals."

A pause. "The mate thing."

"Yeah." She wouldn't meet his gaze. "It's just a Lyck thing. While you got the mark, no one bites you but me."

In a short move she found herself under him, his body a warm weight trapping her in the darkness. His mouth trailed a slow path up to her neck. He parted her thighs with his and had her gasping. “That works both ways?”

He didn’t move until she nodded, then filled her in one smooth stroke. Soft this time, gentle kisses, slow caressing hands. Shimmering endless pleasure that took her breath away and left her floating.

When Dina found the strength to open her eyes, the sky had lightened and Luke’s brow furrowed in a frown.

“It doesn’t burn as bad,” he said, looking straight into dawn with his arms tight around her.

## About the Author

To learn more about Fiona Jayde please visit [www.fionajayde.com](http://www.fionajayde.com) Send an email to Fiona at [fiona@fionajayde.com](mailto:fiona@fionajayde.com) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Fiona! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TotalExposure>.

Look for these titles by Fiona Jayde

*Now Available:*

Pas de Deux

*One wrong move, and she could be dancing on her grave...*

## **Pas de Deux**

© 2010 Fiona Jayde

Two years after an injury put her dancing career on hold, Lynnrina Kovaleva is determined to reclaim her place on the stage. On the eve of her comeback production, she takes the edge off her nerves with a one-night stand in the strong arms of celebrity bodyguard Mateo Rivera.

Ex-cop Mateo is celebrating one hell of an anniversary: eight months since he was declared unfit for duty. When a delicate beauty boldly propositions him in a bar, he chooses to lose himself in her body rather than lose his mind to alcohol. This choice comes back to haunt him when he's hired to protect a prima ballerina who's been receiving threats.

Despite her shock at seeing him again, Lynn must not allow their intense attraction—or any creepy fan letters—to undermine her performance. Mateo can't reconcile this coldly focused dancer with the passionate woman who seduced him. Yet he sees fire under the ice, pain hidden by the smooth mask of perfection.

The vivid memory of their entwined bodies wars with the job at hand, but he must keep Lynn safe—regardless of the cost. The most difficult challenge, however, will be keeping his hands to himself.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Pas de Deux:*

Her legs ready to give out, Lynn only wanted to reach her dressing room and sit for a small precious second. Sit and not move a single inch. She went straight for her stash, barely chewing the first chocolate before tearing open another one and actually biting off a piece. It hurt to chew. Her whole body was aching. A month until opening night, and she wasn't sure she had the stamina to carry it. Six different duets, each of them grueling. Her aching feet throbbed at the mere thought.

She took another piece, letting the taste melt on her tongue before she swallowed. A tub filled to the brim with soothing hot water was just a few minutes away. She simply had to find the strength to get her body up and moving, and face Mateo in the hallway. She'd seen him watch her with those cool onyx eyes. Dark gaze, dark clothes that should have been pretentious yet weren't.

Pushing the thought of him away, Lynn thought about soaking in a tub until her fingers wrinkled. Just a few minutes more. The quick knock on the door made her softly groan. She didn't want to put on a bright face, didn't think she had the strength for it. Another piece of Midnight Dark. as the door swung open.

"I didn't say come in," she muttered with a mouthful of chocolate just as Mateo's gaze focused in on the bag of Ghirardelli's.

"You ready?"

She was too tired to think about it. "I need a couple of minutes more."

"You tried to get rid of me." Cool voice, his hands tucked in his pockets. Again her dressing room seemed much too small with him inside.

"I have an alarm set up and there've been no more letters." And at this point she was more nervous around Mateo than some anonymous creep. "I don't think I need you..." She paused and started over. "I don't think I need a bodyguard anymore. I can ask Simon to walk me home. Or André."

"We both know that's not why you wanted to get rid of me." Those cool dark eyes were merciless.

"Maybe. It doesn't matter now." She didn't have the strength to shrug. "Give me a few more minutes."

"Your leg bothering you?"

"It's fine." Even her skin was hurting. Only a few more minutes and she could drown in hot water and try to forget she'd have to do it all again tomorrow.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" His voice went soft, nearly soothing.

"Do what?"

"You're exhausted. You're in pain. You work like a damned horse." If she wasn't mistaken, there was a hint of baffled respect in that gruff tone.

"It's what I do." Sometimes she hated it. "I've worked for it my whole life." After the surgery, when she was told there was a chance she wouldn't dance again, the searing panic had been accompanied by a tiny guilty kernel of relief.

"You ever wanted to do something else?"

Because he already knew her dirty secret, Lynn reached into the bag of chocolates. Since he was here and she didn't want to leave just yet she offered him a blue-wrapped piece. His fingers brushed over her palm, his touch brief and electrifying. Even through aching muscles, she felt a tiny coiling of heat.

"I never thought about doing anything else." She was never allowed to. The rich dark taste of chocolate flooded her taste buds. "My family sent me here to dance."

"Where are your parents now?"

"Still back in Ukraine." They used to come for every big show. Now, she was lucky if they made it here once in three years. And Aunt Maria was too busy taking care of her ailing mother. Sacrifices. Always sacrifices.

"My mother hated it when I became a cop." His eyes were distant in the mirror.

"Really?" She hadn't known he was a cop. She'd slept with him and barely knew him. "You were a policeman?"

He nodded, but didn't elaborate.

"You miss it?"

"Yeah." He stood. "Let's go."

Discipline had been ingrained in her for years. She stood despite the screaming protests of her muscles, but when he took her bag she didn't say a thing.

The ride home smelled like cigarettes and leather. The short walk to her door was just a blur.

"Go relax." Mateo walked in after her as she struggled to remember the alarm code. Not even thinking to protest that he knew the code, Lynn staggered into the bathroom to find hot water bliss.

Warmth seeped into her muscles and had her melting in relief. She didn't bother with salts or bath bubbles, just sank into the small claw-footed tub and let the water pour over her and soothe the pains.

When he walked in with a glass full of something orange, she didn't have the energy to hide her body from his gaze.

"You'll scald yourself."

"It feels good."

He sat on the white edge of the tub. Somehow it wasn't strange having him here. "Drink this."

Moving her arm was too much effort. "What is it?"

"Orange juice."

"I'll drop it."

He didn't argue. Instead he brought the glass close to her lips.

"You shouldn't be in here." Since the glass was there, nearly touching her lips, she took a long cold sip.

"Tell me to go." Those onyx eyes challenged her to do just that while she was naked in hot water drinking orange juice.

She didn't have the energy to flush.

Because it tasted good and all of a sudden she was thirsty, Lynn gulped the juice. "You shouldn't be here," she said again and leaned back in the hot and churning water.

When she opened her eyes, he stood holding a huge green towel.

"Why are you doing this?" She sounded like a cranky child. Because of it, she made the effort to stand up and let him drape the towel around her, his movements gentle as he rubbed the moisture off her skin. "Why are you taking care of me?"

"Somebody has to." He carried her out of the steam-filled bathroom, his arms strong and secure around her. She didn't have to pose, to lock her feet, do anything but simply put her forehead on his shoulder and be carried. He laid her face down on the bed.

"I'm too tired for sex games." Except she felt a low tug of arousal lazily floating in her veins.

Warm palms cradled her feet. "I had another game in mind." His breath softly caressed her skin.

He pressed a thumb into the aching arch of her left foot, gently but firmly squeezed and rubbed before giving the same treatment to her other foot. They felt tiny inside his hands, dainty and female, and when he pushed to have her flex her toes, she let herself be pampered. Just this once.

His hands continued upward, pressing into the muscles of her calves, the inside of her knees, her thighs. She stiffened when his fingers softly traced over the scar above her knee. Then she felt his lips over it, tracing it, as if soothing it with soft, soft kisses.

Desire coiled harder in her belly.

She didn't want to move, didn't want to burst the moment. Instead she spread her thighs apart and softly said his name. "Mateo."

"Are you sure you want this?"

She wasn't sure about anything except for this. "I am."

In the warm silence, he traced slow open-mouthed kisses over the back of her thighs, moving higher towards her buttocks. His hands were on her calves, stroking the sensitive skin with light teasing caresses.

A shudder rippled through her as his lips touched a tender spot just below her spine, lingered there before continuing the journey upwards, each kiss along her back a sensual delicious touch. Another shiver when he paused between her shoulder blades to lightly scrape his teeth over her skin, then kiss away the tiny sting that added a small edge of pain to the sweetness of pleasure.

His hands tenderly palmed the soft globes of her buttocks before leaving her skin. Foil ripped. Then his weight pressed into her, covering her with warmth, the tip of him probing inside her.

She lifted up her hips and turned her head so she could see them in the mirror, his muscles taut as he loomed over her with his arms on each side of her shoulders, a tiny cross hanging down from his neck.

A soft and shallow penetration. A slow withdrawal so he could start again, pushing in deeper with each stroke, riding her soft and tender, filling her with his body, caressing her with his cock.

"Is this what you want, *preciosa*?"

She fisted her hands in the sheet, as that hard muscled body covered her pale skin.

He slowed his strokes, just pulsed inside her wet slick heat. "Tell me you want this."

"Yes." She couldn't breathe. "I want this."

A slow glide of his cock. "Tell me to fuck you."

"Yes. Do it."

His hands massaged her buttocks, spread them apart so that he could trace a wicked line right on the crease. She shuddered at his touch, watching him in the mirror.

"Tell me to fuck you." Low rough words.

She dragged in liquid air. "Fuck me."



*When the heart sets its course, even home is no escape...*

## Force of Attraction

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### *Project Exorcism, Book 2*

With a Commission uniform on her back and an engagement ring from the ship commander on her finger, a normal life is finally within Dr. Marisa Langston's reach. If she can just learn to love her fiancé, everything will be perfect. Except for the perfectly arrogant Lieutenant Commander Bradi Janelle. He not only gets on her last nerve, he makes her body burn with a hunger only he can satisfy. Distraction is dangerous for a woman who has something to hide...especially when the ship is sabotaged.

Bradi isn't looking for a mate. Hell, he goes out of his way to avoid the prospect altogether—until the sexy little number in the infirmary makes a mockery of his ladies' man façade. Now, trapped with her in an escape pod, she's way too close for comfort. Too close to deny himself the heaven of her body. And her semi-conscious ramblings reveal way too much information—secrets that are dangerous for them both.

Their out-of-control hormones are the least of their problems. The pod is careening toward his home planet. Once there, Marisa won't be the only one with nothing left to hide...

This book has been previously published and has been revised from its original release.

*Warning: Contains steaming hot baby-making in close quarters, sexy shifters in a galaxy far, far away, and a giant eel. Don't worry, it's friendly. Most of the time.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Force of Attraction:*

Bradi woke slowly, his joints aching and his body on fire. It was normal with his condition for his body to react to changes in the temperature automatically. It was also common for him to run several degrees hotter than a human. That was just one of the reasons why he'd refused to allow Dr. Marisa Langston to evaluate him. Hell, he hadn't ever allowed any Commission doctor to examine him. It'd cost him a pretty penny to pay others to forge his documents, but it was necessary all the same. Besides, he had no family so money wasn't really a concern for him.

Marisa was still sleeping and he didn't want to wake her. She looked like an angel lying there with her arms pulled up close to her chest and it took everything in him not to reach out and touch her. The cut on her arm had finally stopped bleeding but the slightest bump could easily break it open. Rolling on his side, Bradi winced when pain radiated through his shoulder.

Peeking out the POD window, his stomach dropped. There, in the distance, he saw the tell-tale aquamarine color of Margaidia, their original destination and the destination that had been programmed into all the escape PODs should there be trouble. The POD had overshot the planet and was headed on a

direct path for Sargaidia, the uncharted sister planet to Margaidia, and the last place in the universe he wanted to go back to.

Bradi checked the computer and found it frozen over. Looking around the POD, he realized that the entire thing was covered with a thin frost.

*Marisa.*

Dropping down next to her, he touched her lightly. Her body was rigid and extremely cool to the touch.

“Doc?” he asked, shaking her gently. She didn’t respond and his gut twisted. The thought of her freezing to death before he was able to get the POD operational again was a very real possibility.

“Come on, babe,” he said, hoping to goad her into responding. The faint blue line around her lips told him that no amount of prodding would help. Acting quickly, Bradi pulled his shirt off and reached for her. Groaning softly from the pain shooting through him, he covered Marisa’s body with his own. “This isn’t enough.”

Bradi worked his boots and pants off before reaching for Marisa’s uniform. He’d been dying to get her out of her clothes from day one, but this wasn’t exactly what he had in mind. He worked her shirt over her head and did his best not to stare at the luscious pale globes before him. Her pink nipples looked good enough to eat and everything in him wanted to sample them. The faint light from the navigational controls reflected off her pale skin and he had to be closer to her.

The nasty cut on her upper arm seemed to be holding, but the fear of breaking it open left him moving slower than he should to warm her body. Working her boots and pants off, Bradi lingered a little too long near the top of her panty line. Thoughts of Pete kept him from peeking further.

Placing his body over hers, Bradi willed himself to be hotter. His body reacted to his command and he felt his core temperature rise even more. If he had to, he’d shift forms, but the last thing he wanted was for Marisa to wake and find herself under a partially changed man. Somehow, he didn’t think that would go over so well. Fully shifting wasn’t an option either. It wouldn’t make it any easier on her to find herself pinned beneath a black panther.

Marisa moaned and he looked down to see if she was awake yet. Her eyes remained closed, but she moved her hands slightly. Bradi tensed when he felt her fingers running over his back.

“Doc?”

“Mmm,” she whispered, grinding her hips upwards.

The sweet scent of her cream filled his head. His erection, which he seemed to permanently sport while around Marisa, ached to dive into her, sample her flesh and claim her for his own. The tiny silken barrier of her panties served as a reminder that he couldn’t—or rather shouldn’t—take her.

She shifted a bit. “Mmm, I want you in me.”

Bradi froze as she grabbed his ass. “Doc, wake up.”

Cool lips met his and he fought to keep his body from responding. The minute her tongue pushed through and found his, he lost all control.

*If I'm going to die out here anyway, I might as well die making love to her. Marisa is the closest to heaven I'm ever going to be.*

Marisa's hands pushed between their bodies. She wrapped her fingers around his cock and he nearly came on her bare stomach. Never before had a woman's touch brought him so much pleasure so quickly. Reason fought its way through to him. "Doc, baby, wake up, now! You don't want to do this. It's not right."

Her lips fastened onto his as she pushed her panties to the side and rubbed the head of his cock in her wet juices. "It's more than right. I want you. I've dreamed of touching you from the moment I boarded the ship."

Bradi wanted to take the time to love her as she should be loved before entering her, but he was no longer in control. The beast within could smell her cream, her sex, and the desire to mate with her was overpowering. Easing his cock head into her opening, he gritted his teeth at how tight she was. Inching in a bit more, she cried out and grabbed hold of his arms. The pleasure of her tight channel wrapped around the tip of his dick overshadowed the pain in his shoulder as he worked himself into her more.

"Oh...yes," she whispered, kissing his face feverishly.

He savored the feel of her. "You're so fucking tight, Doc." He briefly wondered how she could be this difficult to enter when she and Pete had been together for so long, but he pushed it to the back of his mind, not wanting to think about his betrayal. This was his moment to be in Marissa—the woman who called to him on a primitive level.

Marisa's erect nipples rubbed against his chest as he pushed a bit further into her. Meeting with slight resistance, Bradi hesitated. Could it be? He stopped. She'd been with Pete for close to two years, they had to have had sex—right? There was no way she was a virgin. Not the sexually charged doctor who made him weak in the knees. No.

Marisa dug her nails into his arms and thrust her head back. "More!"

Any concerns he had flew away at the sound of her command. Thrusting into her, she cried out as he brought himself to the hilt. Somehow, she'd managed to accept all of him, her channel fisting his dick to the point he wanted to come, and he'd only just started.

Even a bad witch deserves a second chance.

## Blood, Smoke and Mirrors

© 2010 Robyn Bachar

Wrongly accused of using her magic to harm, the closest Catherine Baker comes to helping others is serving their coffee. Life as an outcast is nothing new, thanks to her father's reputation, but the injustice stings. Especially since the man she loved turned her in.

Now the man has the gall to show up and suggest she become the next Titania? She'd rather wipe that charming grin off his face with a pot of hot java to the groin.

Alexander Duquesne has never faltered in his duties as a guardian—until now. The lingering guilt over Cat's exile and the recent death of his best friend have shaken his dedication. With the murder of the old Titania, the faerie realm teeters on the brink of chaos. His new orders: keep Cat alive at all costs.

Hunted by a powerful stranger intent on drawing her into an evil web, Cat reluctantly accepts Lex's protection and the resurrected desire that comes along with it. Lex faces the fight of his life to keep her safe...and win her back. If they both survive.

*Warning: This book contains one tough and snarky witch, one gorgeous guardian, explicit blood drinking, magician sex, gratuitous violence against vampires and troublemaking Shakespearean faeries.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood, Smoke and Mirrors:*

For the entertainment portion of our evening Lex bravely—or perhaps foolishly—decided to teach the faeries how to play Texas hold 'em poker. The only cards I own are Tarot cards, but he'd brought a deck of playing cards with him in his gym bag, and we used pretzels and chocolates as poker chips. The man displayed the patience of a saint as he tutored my cousins in the basics of the game—I'd learned it when we'd dated, though we'd bet clothing instead of snacks.

Tybalt was enthralled, but Portia was slow to warm to the idea until she figured out how to cheat by magically marking the cards. Poker ended soon after that, and we turned to the Game Show Network for entertainment. Few things are quite as entertaining as watching millennia-old frost faeries shout "No deal, Howie!" at your television screen.

It was a welcome break, and I could almost imagine this was a normal night of fun with my cousins. The addition of Lex didn't hurt, but it added to the strangeness. He was acting like the Lex I remembered—funny, caring, charming. I wanted to stay angry with him, but having him stand steadfast by my side today made that difficult. He was there when I needed him, which felt weird after what had occurred between us in the past.

A little after midnight I kicked the faeries out and sent them home so Lex and I could get a good night's sleep before our big day tomorrow. Not that I predicted being able to sleep with the cold dread

that'd settled into my stomach, but I was willing to give it a try. I gathered up the empty drinking glasses and the bag of chips we'd devoured, and brought them into the kitchen. When I returned to the living room for the second round of mess, I found the lights had been switched off. Barely visible, Lex stood at the window, staring into the night as he held the curtains aside.

"You need to see this."

"What is it?"

"Might want to put your shields up in case they try to take a shot at you," he advised as I crossed the room. With a deep breath I put my shields in place, feeling the energy snap around me and then continue its new odd habit of stretching to include Lex.

"How are you doing that?" I looked up at him, confused.

"Doin' what?"

"You keep getting through my shields."

"Huh. Probably 'cause your subconscious knows I'm not going to harm you, so there's no need to keep me out. Those vamps outside, on the other hand, they're probably not here to play cards." Lex pointed into the darkness, and I looked out the window.

"I don't see anything." Squinting, I pushed my glasses up on my nose and strained to see what he indicated. My eyes slowly adjusted to the rainy night. The streetlights had been doused, and this time it wasn't my fault.

"There." Stepping close to me, he gestured again. "Two in gangways across the street, one behind that oak tree." Following Lex's lead, I managed to spot three figures hiding in the shadows, and they were definitely not my neighbors.

"What are they doing?" I asked, my voice dropping to a tense whisper.

"Waitin'. They can't get in, so they're waitin' for us to come out. Sooner or later they'll get impatient and figure out a way to force their way in. In fact, I'm surprised they haven't tried to set your building on fire and smoke us out."

"They can't, I have a ward against that too. Fire here can't grow any bigger than a stove burner."

"Damn, you are good. Still, with those vultures outside it's not safe here anymore, Cat. You'll have to stay somewhere else from now on." With his point made, he let the curtains fall back into place, plunging the room into darkness, with only the light from the kitchen to see by.

"You're right," I reluctantly agreed.

"You could come stay with me."

"With you?" Surprised by the suggestion, I turned to look up at him. We were standing so close I could feel the heat of his body and the light brush of his breath against my face. Nervous, I took a deep breath and unintentionally inhaled the familiar, unique scent of him. My heartbeat drowned out the steady patter of rain against the windows. With an amazing display of willpower I resisted the urge to bolt,

knowing I'd only trip over something (like the cats that were still standing guard over Lex) and break my neck. Instead I took a slow step backward. "Why, you think it'd be easier to babysit me on your own turf?"

"I'm not babysitting you. Really, I'm protecting them from you," he teased. Grinning, he reached up and tucked a stray lock of hair that'd escaped from my braid back into place behind my ear.

"Thanks, that makes me feel so much better," I joked, a blush heating my face.

"I try. But seriously, Cat, I'll be here as long as you need me." Lex looked down at me, seeming sincere, and I shook my head at him.

"Don't, Lex. You're only here on orders. You'll be gone and on to the next as soon as this assignment is over."

"What if I don't want that?"

"What if I do? I'm all for the life-saving thing, but I don't want you in my life again."

"Are you sure of that?"

Scowling, I took a steadying breath and prepared to launch into an explanation of the myriad reasons why I wasn't about to go through another round of heartbreak with him, but before I could speak he leaned down and brushed a kiss across my lips.

A warm tingling suffused my body as soon as our lips met, the sort of electric reaction I usually associate with casting magic, but much, much better. He was hesitant at first, probably afraid I'd slap him or zot him with a spell, but when I didn't object he slowly began to deepen the kiss. My knees went weak as my good sense vanished, and I slipped my arms around him to steady myself. Lex held me close as he continued to kiss me, and I leaned into him. I'd forgotten how well we fit together. He sighed, as though my lips were delicious and he savored them.

"This is a bad idea," I murmured.

"No, this is a good idea." Lex nudged me back toward the couch, and I sat down in a less-than-graceful flop. Next he joined me and drew me into his arms.

"Oh yeah? How?" My hormones were obviously happy to see him, but I still had a little bit of brainpower left, enough to be skeptical of the situation.

"Because letting you go was a bad idea. I don't want to make that mistake again." His voice was low and strained, and I wished it wasn't so dark so I could see his expression. I sighed, a mix of old pain and new uncertainty, but he kissed me again and I stopped arguing.

I relaxed into the embrace, returning the kiss passionately. I felt better instantly—safe, warm, desired. Lex stroked my braided hair and let his hand rest at the small of my back. I ran my own hands up and down his back, debating whether or not it would be a good idea to tug his shirt off, but then I felt him unhooking my bra. My pulse jumped, and my magic decided to take that opportunity to wreak havoc on a pair of unsuspecting table lamps. With an electric sizzle followed by two sharp pops the light bulbs flashed and

exploded. Startled, we jumped apart, the mood broken. We stared at each other, and I felt a guilty blush heat my face.

“Cat—” he started, and I held a hand up to stop him before he could say anything further.

“I don’t want to hear it. I’m going to get some new bulbs, and we’re going to pretend that never happened.”

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