

Trueblood 5: $Fight\ to\ Remember$

 $Barbara\ Elsborg$



Trueblood 5: Fight to Remember

Copyright © July 2010 by Barbara Elsborg

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-828-0 Editor: Maryam Salim Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Printed in the United States of America

IgoSeId.

Published by Loose Id LLC PO Box 425960 San Francisco CA 94142-5960 www.loose-id.com

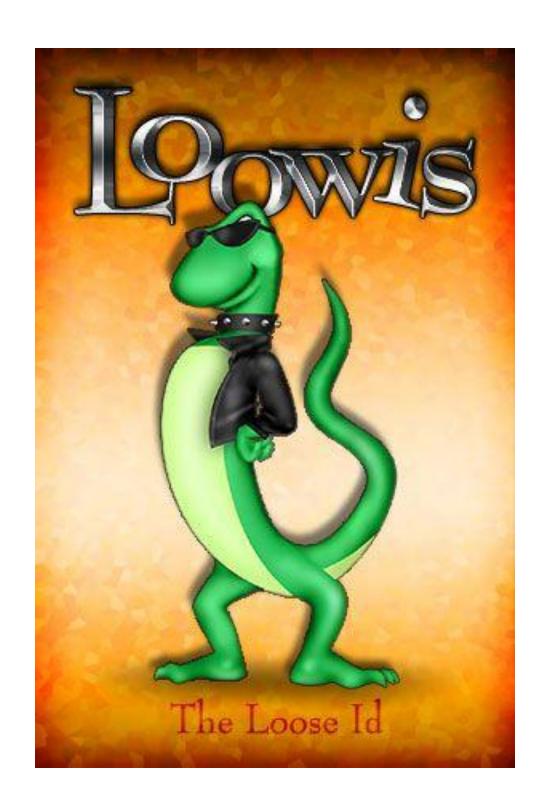
This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.



Loose Id LLC

Chapter One

Rhyl stared at the piece of artwork sticking out of his chest. Three striped fish quivered level with his eyes. Malin had grabbed the driftwood from a shelf and struck so fast, Rhyl only had time to twist so the demon didn't hit the center of his heart. *Pretty damn close*, though. Pain radiated through Rhyl's body as Malin's vaseels tightened their hold on Rhyl's outstretched arms.

The words *you missed* hovered on Rhyl's lips, but being a smart-ass was what had got him into this mess in the first place. In any case, far better that Malin didn't know his aim was off.

"You're worthless to me, boy," Malin snarled. "You don't amuse me, and you're boring in bed. Unlike your brother, you can't suck cock to save your life. If you had been able to, maybe it *would* have saved your life."

Rhyl was fairly confident there was nothing wrong with his cock-sucking skills, only with his attitude toward sucking Malin's cock once he'd realized what a poisonous fucker he was.

"Nothing to say?" Malin asked.

"Fuck. You," Rhyl gasped. Shit, hard to speak.

Malin stepped forward until his face was right up against Rhyl's, his fetid breath hitting Rhyl's parted lips and washing down his throat. "I never wanted you. I only wanted your brother. You're fucking nothing. I don't even remember your name."

Malin nodded to the men holding him, and as they released him, Rhyl found himself falling backward. He expected to hit the cellar floor, but he kept going. *Oh, not good*. While he still could, Rhyl wrapped his hand around the piece of wood and yanked it out of his chest. *Christ that hurt*. His fingers snagged one of the fish and held tight.

"My name...is Rhyl Markov!" he shouted as he fell, the sound echoing off the rock. "Remember it...demon...because I'm going to kill you."

Malin's laughter followed Rhyl as he dropped down a twisting shaft. Collisions with the sides slowed his fall, but when he tumbled into a narrowing side chute, Rhyl slammed to a halt, wedged between the rocks, the little fish caught in a crack beside him. Rhyl had enough room to turn his head, but while one foot rested on stone, the other dangled in midair. *Fuck*.

The scent of his blood was strong, his body battered and bleeding. If he'd not managed to yank out that piece of wood, the fall would have driven it farther into his chest. He'd be dead or dying. Rhyl tried to pull himself up but wasn't strong enough. All his reserves worked to heal the wound near his heart. He needed blood to get the strength to climb out, and where the hell was he going to find that down here?

Maybe the word *hell* was a poor choice. Rhyl had a feeling that was exactly what lay below him. He tried to shift his body up, down, sideways, but apart from being able to move his arms, he was caught fast.

What if he couldn't climb out?

Rhyl sighed. He just needed his chest to heal, to regain some strength, and everything would be fine. He'd expected punishment for what he and his brother had done. Once Malin realized they'd tricked him, he'd almost ripped Rhyl apart, but Rhyl hadn't cared, because Dominic had escaped. The thought of his brother free made Rhyl's heart sing.

So even if he couldn't climb out, Dominic would come back and save him. His twin wouldn't rest until he knew he was safe.

Dominic would come.

He'd come.

* * *

Days drifted to weeks.

My name is Rhyl...

Why hadn't Dominic come? Rhyl didn't want to consider the possibility that Malin had recaptured him, that his brother was dead. Oh fuck. My brother. My twin.

Rhyl's fingers were raw from clawing at the stone, his mind fraying a little more with every day that passed. He talked to the fish, pulled it from the crack in the rock, and stroked it.

He'd already be dead if not for the rats. When he'd heard them squeaking in the darkness, Rhyl accepted he had no choice, not if he wanted to live. He spilled his blood to attract them, struck with the fin of the fish, and afterward let their drained bodies fall into the void. He never heard them land.

He spent his waking hours boiling in anger, raging at Malin, at Dominic, at their parents, at himself. Rhyl kicked and squirmed against the rock that confined him. More than once, he slipped farther down, his wasted muscles reducing his bulk so the stone lost its hold, only to find himself snagged again a few feet below. The little fish fell with him, clutched in his hand.

Rhyl would fucking kill that demon when he got out of here.

* * *

Weeks became months.

My name is...

Way above him, darkness had fallen. His frail body, still governed by vampiric circadian rhythm, did its best to awaken. He opened his eyes, though he already knew he would see nothing. The effort to use even such small muscles cost him energy he could ill afford to waste, and every movement brought pain. But he opened his eyes, because he'd survived another day and he still hoped. His fingers caressed the little fish trapped with him in the stone tomb.

And he dreamed of a different life. One where he loved and was loved. A man to hold him and a sweet woman for them to share. They'd touch him, stroke his skin, kiss him. The beat of their hearts would match his while they fucked their way to oblivion. They were out there somewhere, and one day he'd find them.

Please.

Only first he had to get out of here. He'd do anything to walk again in the world. Lie, cheat, fuck, kill—if only someone would find him.

Please.

* * *

Months turned into years.

My name...

No hope.

No one would come.

No one cared.

No one knew.

Alone.

Except for those he hated.

The rats.

That which he loved.

The fish.

* * *

She felt the soft caress of fingers drifting along her buttocks and squirmed into their touch. Hands cupped her breasts, thumbs stroked her nipples, while a finger paused over her anus. A hot tongue speared her mouth as lips feathered down the column of her neck.

Two men playing with her, kissing her, teasing her.

A finger rimmed the tight muscle of her anus, and she held her breath as it pressed and eased its way inside. The other man thrust two fingers into her wet pussy, and both men groaned in unison as each felt the other through the thin tissue. Her control slipped further and further.

Two men with no faces, no names.

Loving her.

4 Barbara Elsborg

An alarm clock beeped. She fumbled to find it as the noise grew louder, then resorted to a hard slap to shut it up. A moment's peace snuggling in the warm bed, remembering the dream, until fear pounced like a big cat and mauled her awake. Eyes open and blinking, a breathy gasp escaped her tightly pressed lips.

Where the hell am I?

Who the hell am I?

She sat bolt upright, her attention drawn to a large sheet of paper taped to the wall facing the bed. On it, in big letters, was written—

Your name is Piper Kennedy. You suffer from a type of amnesia that makes you forget almost everything once you fall asleep. You write all you need to remember in a notebook. You take photos of people to recall their faces. Your notebook and phone are on the table at your side.

She turned her head and saw a blue book and slim black mobile lying next to the alarm clock. This was crazy. She knew she was in a bedroom, knew all the words to describe the things around her. She could read.

The date? No.

Place? No.

Planet. Yep, Earth. She gave a little laugh.

The dream. Oh yeah, I can remember that.

She struggled to remember something real—anything—and came up with nothing. Her gaze drifted back to the paper pinned in front of her.

Your name is Piper Kennedy.

Can I speak? "Piper Kennedy."

Nothing stirred in her mind except confusion. *How can I not know my own name?*

She reached for the book, opened it, and began to read.

You can still remember how to DO things like cook, draw, drive, read—well, duh. You work as a tattoo artist. She raised her eyebrows and kicked back the sheets to the bottom of the bed. She slept naked. No tattoos that she could see. Tattooist...felt right, though. An image flashed into her head of gloves, equipment, inking pictures.

Read this entire book before you get out of bed. Your current notebook is in the kitchen. The old ones are in the closet.

She rolled out of bed, walked across the carpet to the closet, and opened the door. Another note pinned inside. *You never fucking listen*. She laughed, and then her smile faded when she saw shelf after shelf lined with notebooks similar to the one by the bed. She pulled out one on the far left.

My name is Piper Kennedy. I'm fourteen years old. I go to Lodstone School in Lincoln. My parents are dead.

She gulped and pushed it back in place.

"Piper," she said.

Maybe if she kept saying it, it would sound right.

"Piper," she said with more assurance. "Piper, Piper, Piper."

Okay, so she needed to read the book by the bed, but first she had to look at her face. Two doors. She found the bathroom. The mirror beckoned, but her feet dragged.

Two steps and a deep breath before Piper lifted her chin. A pale face stared back. Dark green eyes. Short and spiky snow-white hair. Dyed or her own? Maybe less spiky if she combed it. She smoothed it with her palm, and it sprang up again. She looked freaked-out. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed. Piper tried a smile and thought there might be someone pretty in there, but not at the moment.

The bathroom was full of stuff she'd expect to see—soap, shampoo, toothbrush, birth control pills with a piece of paper that read *take one and tick the box. Oooh.* She knew what everything was, but didn't remember buying any of it. Fear trickled down her spine like a skeletal finger, and she shivered. Is this really what happened every day of her life?

Piper tried the other door. Kitchen and living room combined. Nothing looked familiar, but neither did anything alarm her. Another sheet of paper was taped to a wooden door on the far side.

Don't leave the flat without reading the notebook by the bed. Don't freak out. It's okay.

Several photos were pinned to the wall in the kitchen. Piper studied them and the writing beneath. Hendrick, her boss at the tattoo parlor. Next to his photo was one of his girlfriend, and then pictures of four women with *ex-girlfriend* written beneath. Photos below those of two women who worked with her. Below that a shot of her neighbor and three guys who ran the shop at the end of the street. Piper's heart beat harder. At the bottom was another note.

You can do this. You have for eleven years. Read the notebook.

"Eleven years?"

She went back to bed. Turning to the first page of the notebook, she began to read.

"My name is Piper Kennedy."

* * *

"Keir! Keir! Keir! Keir!"

As Keir walked naked down the corridor, the chants grew louder. The raucous voices were supposed to inspire him; instead they made him want to throw up. On the opposite side of the building, another man walked down an identical corridor and presumably could hear his own name being yelled by his supporters.

Then again, maybe not. This was Keir's home territory after all. Perhaps the sounds of "Keir, Keir" drowned out everything else. Didn't matter. Only one of them would live to hear their name proclaimed victor.

At the doors, Keir paused. His two vampire escorts, Jardine and Frick, moved in front of him.

Frick put his mouth to Keir's ear. "I hope he rips your fucking head off. We could use a new football."

Keir said nothing. Only his death would make Frick happy, so why bother to respond?

Jardine curled his fingers over Keir's shoulder. "I made an appointment for you to get an addition to your *marque* tomorrow night at the tattoo parlor."

Keir wished he were as sure that he'd win.

"Good luck." Jardine let him go.

Keir made sure his face showed nothing, but the twist of fear in his gut, something he always carried into the ring, had a pythonlike stranglehold on his colon. Jardine opened the doors, and the roar of the crowd doubled. At this point, Keir always thought about running. Well, he thought about running all the time, particularly when he actually went running and was tempted to keep going, but never more than when he came face-to-face with the ring and the possibility of his death. But there was no point wasting energy considering flight when it was impossible. He had to fight.

He stepped up to the man waiting for him at the edge of the ring and sniffed. Wolf.

"Say good-bye to *your* head this time," the man whispered.

The *invigiles*, who checked each fighter before they went into the ring, weren't supposed to talk. Keir pressed his lips together. Pointless reacting to this gibe either. As if he needed reminding that the last time he'd fought, he'd ripped off a vampire's head. Even the vamps in his *familia* looked at him differently after that. Except Jardine, who only ever had lust in his eyes.

In full view of the screaming crowd, Keir spread his legs, raised his arms, and kept his gaze fixed on nothing. Rough, cold hands patted every inch of his skin, checked under his feet, between his toes, lifted his scrotum. Keir was surprised his balls were still there, that they hadn't found a place to hide behind his ribs. But then, where in his body was safe?

The werewolf invigile checking for hidden blades, vials of poison, or possibly weapons of mass destruction stuffed up Keir's ass worked for the opposition. On the far side of the ring, where Keir was not going to look until he had to, Patrick would be doing the same checks on the other fighter. Thoroughly, Keir hoped.

Inspection over, pieces of black leather were shoved into Keir's hands. The invigile watched as Keir wrapped a thin twist of the material low on his hips and tied it over his belly. He tugged the wider section of leather under the length he'd tied and let it hang in front of his tackle. The much thinner strip ran up the crease of his butt and fastened on the belt. Keir's cock and balls filled most of the bag that held them. The leather loincloth wasn't much protection, and when he shifted, he'd

lose the covering anyway, but the bout would be over in a couple of seconds if either fighter got his balls ripped off. It happened sometimes.

Keir still hadn't looked across the ring. He didn't want to see the man he was going to kill, didn't want to imagine him as a guy who smiled, a guy who had a loving family, or a guy who had no choice just like him. No point making this more difficult than it needed to be. Keir had to kill him. No option. Not if Keir wanted to live, and he *did* want to live.

He stiffened when a hand stroked his hip. Keir turned toward Cuba, controller of the game, mistress of the night, and a fucking bitch. Keir flinched as nails lightly raked his backside.

Cuba smiled. "It's the wolf's seventeenth bout. He's a little on the large side."

Seventeenth? Keir had killed seven. He'd always thought seven was his lucky number. Now he hoped it was eight.

"I have every faith in your success," Cuba said.

Keir's gaze never shifted from her face. Cuba's eyes were silver. It was like staring into frozen puddles. No warmth there at all, yet she stroked Keir's cock through the leather like a lover. Despite his hatred, Keir felt the tremors of his shaft hardening. For seven days before a fight, Keir wasn't allowed to fuck or—theoretically—to use his hand to jack off, and he needed to fuck as often as he needed to feed. He was disgusted that he reacted to Cuba.

"What would you like when you win?" Cuba asked.

"An addition to my marque."

Her hand fell away, as did her smile. "As you wish."

Keir wondered if she thought he was stupid. Ask for anything but his entitlement and he was done for. His marque was an ongoing tattoo that rose from his ankle and had so far reached his butt. Every win earned him another strand. Once his marque touched his shoulder, Keir's fighting days were done.

The bell rang once, and he stepped into the ring. Keir looked up into the tiered seating of the large hall and saw the glimmer of excited faces in the darkness. Male and female, human and not. Then he looked down at the sawdust-covered ring, the lighter patches where a fresh scattering had been used to cover blood shed in the previous bout. Nothing disguised the smell. He didn't want to know what had happened.

The bell rang twice, and Keir lifted his head and looked across the ring. *Fucking hell*. Cuba hadn't said the wolf was a giant. Keir was six-three, a hundred and ninety pounds of lean muscle. His opponent, named Erik, according to the shouting, was at least seven inches taller and a hundred pounds heavier. He looked like a tank. Keir had the brief hope the guy's extra bulk might make him slower; then again, it might not.

The bell rang three times, and Keir raised his gaze to the man's face. He hoped the vacant look was stupidity and not innate cunning. Whatever the case, seventeen fighters before Keir had fallen to him. Erik began to circle, so Keir did the same. In the opposite direction.

He used the time to watch the way his opponent moved, looking for favored limbs, weaknesses. Keir ducked and dived when Erik swung his fists. The wolf might be slow, but he wasn't weak.

After a few moments of Keir avoiding every blow, Erik let out a loud roar.

"I'm going to rip your head off and stuff it up your ass," the giant snarled.

Keir shook his head. "Won't fit."

A glimmer of doubt furrowed the big guy's brow before he smiled. "I'll make it fit."

Keir felt the advent of the full-on attack, the tingle in his panicking balls that told him to jump, so he did. To the left. He didn't wait for Erik to realize he'd missed him, but wheeled around to spring on the guy's back. Keir curled his arm around Erik's throat, bringing his legs up and around to jam his heels into the shifter's groin. Sharp teeth sank into Keir's forearm, and as blood spurted, he heard the roar of approval from the crowd. Keir wrenched his arm free, losing a chunk of flesh—fuck, that hurt—and then Erik threw him across the ring.

An ability to fall well had saved Keir in the past, and it saved him now. Rolling to rise gracefully, Keir was on his feet and ready when Erik's weight hit him. He absorbed the momentum of the attack, and this time he threw Erik.

About six inches.

Fuck, he's heavy. Keir was on him before Erik had a chance to get to his feet, but the guy snagged Keir's arms, preventing him getting a firm neck hold. So Keir kicked instead, a lightning-fire attack with the sides of his feet into every part of Erik's body until the guy reeled like a drunk.

Keir's advantage didn't last long. Back in Erik's grip, they rolled in an ungainly ball around the ring, Keir doing all he could to keep his body away from the guy's teeth. Each blow that connected jarred Keir's brain. He felt as though he was being hit with a sledgehammer.

Covered in sawdust, dirt, and blood, they finally broke apart, more by accident than design, and circled while they caught their breath. Keir wondered how much time he had to weaken Erik before the bell rang to order them to shift. Erik was a big guy, and he'd make an even bigger wolf, but until they'd fought in their animal forms, neither had complete knowledge of the other's strengths and weaknesses. As a man, Erik was slower mentally and physically than Keir but more powerful. Not a good idea to let Erik catch him.

Keir feinted left, and Erik missed him. Feinted left again and Erik missed once more. He didn't miss the next time, and when Eric landed on top of him like a slab of concrete, all the breath whooshed out of Keir's lungs. Keir's heart wasn't in this. It dimly crossed his mind that it would be easy to bring his miserable existence to an end. All he had to do was let dumbo win.

The bell rang.

Saved by the bell. Maybe next time Keir fought, he'd let it end. But not this time. Erik wasn't worth his life.

Keir morphed very fast. Speed was his advantage now—well, that and his razor-sharp claws and even sharper teeth. Erik changed into a monster of a wolf but stepped back when faced with Keir's snarling puma. His momentary hesitation was all Keir needed. He leaped. Eric looked frozen in shock, but the moment Keir sank his claws into his shoulders and teeth into his neck, the wolf came to his senses. In a frenzy of snarling, snapping, and biting, the pair fought in a maelstrom of fury as the crowd screamed their approval.

No time to think, to acknowledge pain, or to worry about blood loss—all Keir's focus rested on killing the wolf. Erik would have more stamina so Keir had to finish this fast. He bit deeper, clawed harder, and worried one back leg, ripping at muscle, searching for an artery. Erik faltered. Keir sensed the possibility of victory, and the bell rang.

Keir pulled back at once and shifted. His bones cracked and muscles transformed as his human body took control. He was one of the fastest shifters he knew, the change completed in a painless instant as he morphed into the body and mind of his other self. He allowed himself a moment to wonder what the fuck Cuba was playing at. Keir's side had chosen the time to ring for the change, just as Erik's had selected the first. Since Keir had been about to finish the wolf off, he could only presume Cuba wanted to prolong the contest, even at the risk of her fighter's death. Either to please the paying audience, to make more money, or teach Keir a lesson. Probably all three.

Both he and Erik were slick with blood. The vampires in the crowd were screaming, high-pitched yelps of delight alongside the shifters' yips. Keir hoped most of the blood wasn't his, but he had a bad bite in his thigh as well as a hole in his arm. The surges of adrenaline pouring through his veins allowed him to cope with the pain, feed from it. Keir, pissed off, knew he was a mountain of fury, because plenty of people told him so. Erik looked bad—pale and slightly unsteady, his eyes unfocused.

Unless he was pretending.

Keir waited.

Erik threw himself across the ring. *Yep, pretending*. Keir flung himself the other way. Erik tried again to grab him, and Keir slipped through his fingers. The blood helped. Keir continued to dodge and dive out of Erik's grasp.

"Fucking stand still!" Erik yelled.

He had to be kidding. Keir might have weakened him, but the danger had hardly lessened. Keir danced around, launching hard and fast blows with his feet and fists, always keeping out of reach.

"Come here," Erik snapped.

"Ooh, ugly doggy scared of a little cat?" Keir asked.

Keir suspected that sort of taunt would raise a red mist. What he hadn't expected was that Erik would shift again before the bell sounded. Keir wasn't about to fall into the trap of doing the same and snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Almost anything went in the ring, but morphing without permission was an infraction punishable by death. Keir backed away from the wolf, waiting for the bell to end the fight. It didn't come. *Fuck*. Had he missed it? Should he risk letting out his cat?

The wolf leaped and raked its claws over Keir's back as he spun away. Keir was tempted to look for Cuba, but one moment of distraction could be the end of him.

Distraction.

"Here, catch," Keir shouted and threw an imaginary ball.

The idiot looked. Only a glance but long enough for Keir to leap on the wolf's back, throw his arm around the thick neck, and break it. Keir jumped off and stood with his chest heaving as Erik crumpled. Keir was only dimly aware of the whoops and cheers. Erik slowly morphed back to his human form. His eyes flickered as if trying to focus, and then the light in them went out.

Could have been me.

Cuba strode into the ring in her long diaphanous gown and yanked up Keir's arm.

"The winner. Keir Sparks."

"Keir, Keir, Keir, Keir!" screamed the crowd.

Keir pulled his arm free and stumbled out of the ring. He could still hear them calling his name as he limped down the corridor.

Chapter Two

What is my name?

Survival a miracle.

Survival a curse.

Another sunset he couldn't see.

Eyes he could no longer open.

I've gone mad.

But if he knew, didn't that mean he wasn't crazy?

I want to die.

I want to die.

I want to die.

I want to live.

When the silence changed to a growling rumble, he wondered if his mind had broken.

But his grave cracked.

Pressure on his chest lifted, and he grunted. Stones spit at his face as rock shifted, pressed, lifted his body.

Earthquake?

Rescue?

Don't fall.

Don't fall.

Don't fall.

Confusion lessened as his tomb disintegrated.

Not falling but rising.

Hope, long dead, rose like a vengeful phoenix.

But when the dust settled and the noise faded, he and his fish were still trapped.

What is my name?

* * *

Keir took a deep breath when he heard the doors to the ring close behind him. The noise from the spectators fell away as he limped down the corridor, Jardine and Frick on either side of him. Keir left a smeared trail of bloody footprints, but at least he could walk. After the last fight, he'd had a dislocated shoulder and broken ankle. Though with no head, the vampire lying in the sawdust had been somewhat worse off. Keir healed better while in puma form, but his control over his shift depended on the extent of his injuries. Besides, while he was in the compound, he wasn't supposed to shift without permission. Keir healed fast in human form too, and many of his minor cuts had already scabbed over, though he ached.

"You were fucking fantastic," Jardine said. "I'm amazed you didn't shift when he did."

So was Keir.

Frick huffed. "Odds were stacked against you."

"I bet on you winning," Jardine said at the same time Frick muttered, "I bet on you losing."

Frick laughed and added, "Nothing personal."

Jardine loved him, and Frick hated him. Perfect fucking bookends, Keir thought.

"Henry?" Keir asked. He was the only other of Cuba's fighters from familia Mantel to fight that night. All other bouts were between visiting familias. Keir hadn't wanted to think about Henry or know how he'd done before he fought.

"No," Jardine said. "A disappointing two minutes, thirty-three seconds. Cuba wasn't pleased. He was beaten by a vampire from familia Sobel."

Shit. The werewolf had been too cocky. Three wins and Henry thought he knew it all. Eight wins and Keir still knew nothing.

Jardine pushed open the door to the medical room, and Keir went inside. His guards followed. Until Keir's ankle monitor was in place, they weren't supposed to let him out of their sight. His best chance to run lay in those few moments between the ring and this room, except there was more to it than that.

The middle-aged human veterinarian, Bill Clarke, was well paid for his extracurricular work. Since many of those who fought in Mantel's ring were shape-shifters, a vet was probably more useful than a doctor.

Bill smiled when he saw Keir. "On two legs this time. Congratulations. Good to see you."

Keir had no friends, trusted no one, liked no one. It made life easier. Bill was probably glad to see Keir because he was paid for the work he did rather than the hours he worked. Nothing earned for a dead body. With no way of explaining the injuries, losers were incinerated.

He sat on the examination table and lay back with a groan. Keir's injuries might be healing, but he felt like he'd been hit by a bus. Bill started to wipe the hole in his arm, and Jardine caught the vet's hand. "The ankle tether."

Bill clenched his jaw but reattached the monitor. Once the strap had clipped into place, Keir felt the sting of his skin blending with the machine. If he shifted

with it on, it adjusted to fit. If he tried to rip it off, it would instantly inject a silver colloid into his bloodstream. Silver was as poisonous to werepumas as it was to werewolves or any other shape-shifter. Vamps too for that matter.

The vet checked the link back to the computer and tapped at the keyboard as Jardine watched. Keir had wondered on more than one occasion if the tether really was filled with silver or whether it was another of Cuba's fantasies. She said the dose was deadly. Unfortunately, there was only one way to find out. Stray too far from the compound, ignore the warning bleep, and Keir would have his answer. He considered it every so often, but the tether wasn't the only thing keeping him here. While Keir fulfilled his part of the bargain, his brother Reed was safe. And the agreement was that when Keir's marque was complete, he'd be safe too.

"Tag's on. He's secure. Are you coming to watch the finale?" Frick asked Jardine.

"Not yet."

The moment Frick left, Jardine's fingers crept over Keir's. Keir moved his hand. He caught the hurt in the vamp's face, but he wasn't what Jardine was looking for, nor was he what Keir needed. Keir stared at the ceiling as Bill checked him over.

"Probably worth putting a couple of stitches in your arm and leg. Help you heal faster."

Keir knew he'd have healed by tomorrow anyway, but he made no objection when Bill sewed him up, the needle's sting barely registering.

"Okay, you're done," Bill said.

Keir pushed himself upright, grunted his thanks, and swung his legs down. Jardine followed him into the corridor.

"Want to go and watch?" Jardine asked, and his tongue crept over his lips.

Keir guessed the blood coating his body was tempting.

"Cuba has three humans against a wolf," Jardine said. "Street kids she picked up in London."

"Not interested," Keir said and walked toward the entrance to the private quarters, his limp almost gone.

Jardine hurried behind. Keir put his hand against the square gel-plate halfway up the wall and looked into the camera above to allow the iris-recognition software to log his entry.

Jardine slipped in before the door closed. "Want me to...wash you?" He fluttered his tongue.

"No."

"I could give you a massage."

"No"

"We-we could fuck."

"No." But Keir's cock started to say yes. Naked except for blood and sawdust, Jardine only needed to look down to see part of Keir was interested. Keir wanted sex. Not only had he been deprived of it for the last week, it was the only pleasure he had left, but not with someone he knew, not with someone who needed him.

At the entrance to his room, Keir turned to the brown-eyed, fresh-faced vamp. He looked no more than eighteen.

"How old are you?" Keir asked.

He knew Jardine would be surprised at the question. Keir rarely engaged in conversation.

"Fifty-seven."

Jardine leaned against the wall, a tentative smile on his face. Keir considered inviting him in. It would save him having to go out for a fuck, but he knew it wasn't a good idea.

"I won't bite," Jardine whispered. "You know I'm not allowed."

Cuba's rule was clear. Vampires were not allowed to feed on others under her protection.

"I've already drunk two bags of Plasmix," Jardine said.

Keir wouldn't take the chance. He stroked the vampire's face, trailing a finger from his ear, down the line of his chin to his neck. Jardine gulped, his eyes darkened, and his fangs slid out.

"Fuck." Jardine closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he was back under control. "Sorry."

"I'm not the one for you," Keir said, and before Jardine caught sight of his fully erect cock, he shut the door in his face.

He went straight to the shower. His fingers shook as he turned the control until hot water poured down. Keir let his hand drop. How many more fights until his marque was complete? How many more deaths? What if Cuba didn't let him go? Was he a fool to think she would?

Keir squirted gel into his palm and began to wash his battered body, pink water swirling at his feet. His fingers slid around his cock and squeezed. He needed to fuck someone, and when he was clean, he'd go out and find that someone. No point in looking or hoping for anything more than a quick fuck. He could barely look after himself, let alone anyone else. A vision of a guy in his life and a woman they could both share was simply that—a vision. No more than something for his dreams, because his life wasn't his own. Not yet.

It wasn't a bad idea to take the edge off now. Or should he save himself and make it worth the wait? Hot water off and cold on? He decided to jack off to ensure his cock behaved for a while. Keir didn't want to look desperate. He closed his eyes as his hand moved faster.

This would be quick. He could already feel his balls tingling, the pressure in his skull rising. He tipped his face to the flow and used two hands, one above the other, both moving together, squeezing as he pulled up, loosening on the downward glide. Keir began to breathe more heavily. Almost without thought, he changed into a different stroke, sliding first one and then the other fist up from the base of his cock to the tip. The ache in his gut increased, and his heart rate surged.

Another shift to one fist moving up, the other pulling down and Keir bit back his moan. He needed to come fast, to come now. He twisted his hands as he jerked himself to oblivion, and the orgasm shot up his legs, spread over his butt, and ignited his balls. His cock jumped in his hands, and Keir wrapped his palm over his cockhead to catch the spurts of cum. A deep groan escaped his lips.

Physical release but his mind still churned.

* * *

Keir sat on an end bar stool, his back resting against the wall, nursing his second beer, and looked around the bustling room. He'd never been to this pub before. These guys didn't know how lucky they were. Straightforward lives. Nine-to-five jobs. Their own home. Lovers. Their biggest worries were earning enough money and getting enough sex.

Sitting in here, drinking beer, watching the world go by helped Keir forget the tag around his ankle, forget the fact that a few hours ago he'd killed a man. Well, no, it didn't, but it went some way to making him feel normal. He rocked the bottom of the bottle on the bar and stared at the barmaid's bum—a pretty pear-shaped backside accentuated by her short black skirt. Her tight white top had the pub's name printed on the back: *The Rising Sun*. Her curly blonde hair was tied back in a pink scrunchie. She turned, caught his gaze, and smiled. Keir wasn't in the mood for kind smiles.

"Buy you a drink?"

Keir looked around at the sound of a man's voice. He'd registered someone next to him, but now he had to acknowledge the fact. His cock purred even before their eyes meshed. Good-looking, late thirties, brown hair, a little plump with kind eyes. *Ah*. Keir wasn't sure he was in the mood for kind eyes either. No, he *knew* he wasn't.

"Thanks for the offer, but I've not finished this."

"Have one anyway." The guy signaled to the barmaid and turned to smile at Keir. "My name's Neil."

"Keir." The guy's smile got another rise out of Keir's cock.

Keir looked at the guy's hands. No ring. No mark from where a ring might have been removed.

"Not seen you around here before," Neil said. "No way would I have missed you."

What message was this guy giving him? That he was bi? Gay but stuck in the wardrobe? Or maybe he was just being friendly. Keir's people skills were pathetic, let alone his gaydar or bidar.

"Do you like guys or girls?" Neil asked in a quiet voice.

"I'm omnivorous."

Neil laughed. His grin was one of relief. "You're very good-looking. Though you seem...a little battered."

That's what came of fighting a werewolf. Two beers slid onto the bar in front of them. A hand came from nowhere, reached over Keir's shoulder, and lifted one of the bottles.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Neil asked.

Keir turned to look at the owner of the hand and felt a massive jolt in his gut. The fiery surge of lust racing through his veins was so much stronger than the one he'd felt for Neil, Keir almost fell off the bar stool.

"He declined the beer," said the stranger.

"Doesn't mean you can have it," Neil said, edging his butt toward the stool next to Keir.

"That seat is taken." The man's voice was deep and husky. *Australian*? He smiled at Neil, but not with his eyes. Keir thought about getting up and walking off but kept his butt glued to the stool. Something was wrong about this guy, but Keir couldn't figure out what.

"But—" Neil said.

Keir took a deep breath. He was going to do Neil a favor, though the guy wouldn't realize it. He looked straight at him. "Find somewhere else to sit."

Neil's mouth twitched, but he picked up his beer and stalked off. Part of Keir wished it was the guy beside him who had gone away. Keir stood. He opened his mouth to ask what the fuck that had been about, and then closed it again. The guy was taller than he. Just. Broader. Just. Black hair. Black eyes. Big hands. Keir looked. Big feet. *Fuck*.

"Like what you see?" the man asked.

I'm not that easy. "Maybe you should do a stroll down the catwalk and keep going." Keir gestured toward the corridor leading to the rear exit.

The guy laughed. Wide mouth. White teeth. Lips—oh God. Keir's cock pressed against his zipper.

"Sure that's what you want?" he asked.

No, Keir wasn't sure at all, but he didn't respond.

Dark eyes grew darker. "I'm in the mood for some distraction."

Keir swallowed hard. "Why's that?"

"I'm looking for a thief, and he's proving elusive."

"You're a cop?"

The man chuckled. "Of a sort. My name's Oz."

"Australian?" Keir asked.

"From down under, yeah." He laughed.

"I'm Keir."

Oz bent his head and put his mouth to Keir's ear. "You're mine. Men's washroom."

Keir's heart jumped. Nerves had vacuumed the moisture from his mouth, and he took a swallow of beer. Oz walked away, and Keir leaned back against the bar and looked into the press of bodies as he finished his drink. Someone had put money in the jukebox, and a song blared out.

Take my hand

And trust in me

It's the only way

We can be free

Keir trusted no one. It was the only way to stay safe. But a guy who made his pulse jump was as good a way as any to wipe his mind clean. For a while at least.

When the song ended, Keir put down his empty bottle. He looked away from Neil's bitter glare on the other side of the room and walked to the rear of the pub, excitement racing through him.

One foot inside the washroom and he found himself thrust back against the wall with Oz's long, hard body pressed against his. Keir almost came in his pants at the sudden head-to-toe contact.

"What took you so long?" Oz pulled back and slapped his palms against Keir's shoulders, pinning him to the wall.

"I've come to take a piss. I don't jump to your call."

Oz smiled, and Keir's stomach fluttered. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment before their lips crashed together. Keir's mouth opened, and Oz's tongue shoved forward. A taste of beer and Keir's knees sagged. Not much he liked better than the taste of beer on a guy's lips, except perhaps his cum. His cock was in complete agreement. He reached for Oz's tight black T-shirt and felt muscles as firm as his. Keir groaned into the guy's mouth.

Hips rocked, hands squeezed, tongues dueled, and Keir's cock wept for joy. *Make me forget*. But when he reached for Oz's zipper, Keir's hands were seized, dragged above his head, and held to the wall. Aches and injuries forgotten, his head fogged with lust. Oz's tongue thrust and tangled with his as he rubbed his erection against Keir's. Keir was desperate to have the guy's cock in his ass or his mouth. He didn't care which.

That powerful tongue pushed harder between his lips, fucking his mouth until Keir gasped for breath. He yanked his hands free and reached for Oz's belt. The washroom door flew open. Oz's hand swung out and slammed it closed.

"Use the ones downstairs," he shouted.

He slipped home a bolt and then gave Keir a rough shove so his back hit the wall. Keir's fingers crept over Oz's crotch, and they both moaned. *Shit, he's long and hard*. Then long and hard pressed against him, and Keir wondered how much better

it could get, sandwiched between a solid wall of brick and an equally solid wall of muscle. His arms were jerked up again, held over his head by one spread hand. Keir could have pulled free. No matter how strong this guy was, he would be no match for Keir, but Oz was forceful enough to give the illusion of dominance, and Keir let him have control.

The man's hand tightened over his wrists while his other hand held Keir's head right where he wanted it, fingers threaded in his hair. Not a kiss but an invasion, Keir thought as Oz's tongue echoed the thrust of his body. A knee pressed between Keir's thighs to force them apart; then Oz's hips shoved up hard against Keir's cock, rocking into him, their bodies grinding together, the increasing friction winding Keir's balls into a frenzy of need.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Keir's hips matched the rhythm of Oz's thrusts, shunting harder and faster until orgasm brewed in his head. He was not going to come in his pants. He tried to pull his hands free, but when the guy lost his grip and Keir regained control, he also lost the press of Oz's body. Keir groaned and reached for him, but Oz stepped back.

His eyes. Keir blinked. He'd thought they'd changed color. *Not good*. Keir was too far gone to care.

"Got the message?" Oz asked.

Yep. Oz was the one in charge. Keir raised his hands over his head, and Oz smiled. The silent acknowledgment that the submissive action had pleased him made lust bloom in Keir's belly. Oz caught hold of Keir's hips and dragged them forward to meet his. He circled his pelvis, rubbing his cock against Keir's, and a succession of fiery flashes shot up Keir's spine.

"I'm going to fuck you, and you're not going to come," Oz said. "If you do, I'll zip myself up and walk out of here. Understood?"

Keir nodded so hard his head started to ring. In one swift move, Oz peeled Keir's T-shirt over his head and tossed it onto a washbasin. His gaze swept over Keir's body, and Keir waited for the questions about the bruising, grazes, stitches. None came. Oz ran his hands down from Keir's shoulders, pinching his nipples hard, rubbing over the muscular ridges of his abdomen and onto the bulge in Keir's chinos. His fingers spread and squeezed. Keir groaned.

A press and a flick of Oz's fingers and Keir's pants fell open. Oz pulled down the zipper, and Keir's cock found a way out of his boxers into Oz's hand. Keir rocked his hips. He wouldn't beg but... Moments later, his pants and boxers were bunched around his feet.

"You like it rough."

Not a question. Keir looked down. The marks from the fight were worse on his legs. Healing but still visible. He could see what it must look like to this guy. He didn't particularly like it rough, but tonight he wanted to be punished.

"Take off the rest," Oz said.

Keir slipped out of his shoes and peeled off his clothes. Everything off but the ankle monitor. He put his hands back above his head.

Oz stroked his hip with rough fingers, and precum slid from the head of Keir's throbbing cock.

"What did you do to deserve that?" Oz nodded at his ankle.

"Antisocial behavior."

"Such as?"

"Farting in church."

Oz laughed. "Not for fucking in public places?" He trailed a finger up the length of Keir's shaft, and when his thumb swept over the crest to wipe up a pearl of moisture, Keir shuddered.

"Put your hands down, but no touching," Oz said.

Keir dropped his hands to his sides and pressed his palms against the wall. Oz rubbed Keir's cockhead with the flat of his thumb, spreading silky precum as he stared into Keir's eyes.

"Like that?" Oz asked.

Keir's breathing grew choppy. "No."

Oz smiled. "Don't lie. Do you like that?"

Keir nodded.

"Are you close?"

Keir nodded again. His cock jutted out, steel hard, the foreskin peeled back to reveal an angry-looking head, dark with blood. He'd shaved down there, which made him look bigger. A lot of fighters did. The less to get hold of, the better, though Keir was too vain to shave his head.

"Remember what I said. You come and I'll leave."

"Condom," Keir muttered, amazed he had enough sense in his head to remember.

Oz reached over to the machine on his left and yanked open the drawer. *How did he do that*? Keir hadn't seen him put in money.

"Turn around," Oz said.

Keir faced the wall and braced himself, spreading his feet, putting the flat of his hands level with his shoulders.

"Cool tattoo," Oz said and swept his hand over Keir's butt. "You should have your dick done."

No, thanks.

Keir shuddered when Oz's hand wrapped around his cock and gathered precum from the tip to spread it down his length. Keir was desperate to thrust into his grip, only there were two problems with that. He had a feeling Oz would take his hand away if he did, and if by a miracle he didn't, Keir would come within a couple of thrusts, and then Oz would not only take his hand away but his whole

body. So Keir gritted his teeth and kept still. Oz cupped his balls, squeezed a fraction too hard, and Keir hissed.

When Keir felt a finger flicker back and forth on the pucker of his anus, his desire to come reached a critical level. There was no way he wasn't going to shoot once Oz got inside him. He only hoped he could wait until then. Oz's finger circled and rubbed and then disappeared.

He started to turn, and Oz slammed him back in place with a blow between his shoulder blades. "Don't move."

Keir heard a zipper lower and the sound of foil ripping. When the next noise was the squelch of lube, he mentally sighed in relief. He saw pants fall around Oz's ankles, and then a knee widened Keir's stance. One hand tight around his hip, the other fumbled at his backside as Oz slid his cock down the crease of Keir's butt and positioned the head at the entrance to his body.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard," Oz growled.

Keir held his breath and thought the word he wanted to say. *Please*. He tried to loosen his muscles to let Oz in. He could feel the broad wet head of the cock pushing into him as Oz's hold tightened, nudging him forward into the wall. As Oz's cock slipped through the ring of restrictive muscle and surged inside his body, Keir lost the capacity to string two thoughts together.

But the pressure continued, sharper when it should have eased. *Fuck*. How big was this guy? Keir cried out as Oz pushed harder. The cock inside him felt...different. Oz didn't wait to let him adjust; he thrust. Not just thrust. He shunted faster than Keir had ever felt anyone fuck him. A frenzied motion with a red-hot cock that set Keir's asshole on fire. *Fuck*, *fuck*. Panic surged and then faded. What had been discomfort morphed fast to sharp and sweet delight. Keir cried out in short gasps, unable to stop the sounds of pleasure escaping his throat. Oz pressed deeper, his hips slamming so hard into Keir that it knocked him into the door, bruised his cock, and he didn't care. In a way he was grateful if it stopped him coming for a few moments and so earned him a touch of respectability.

Keir's balls seethed. Detonation hovered. Yet dimly, in some dark recess of his mind, Keir knew he shouldn't come until he had permission. Hot breath hit his neck, teeth rasped his skin, and the hands that held his hips gripped him tighter—and felt wrong. Everything felt wrong. Keir wanted and didn't want to look. Oz's cock swelled inside him, latched onto him in a way he recognized, and Keir sagged against the wall. He didn't need to look down now, but he did anyway.

Oz's claws were embedded in Keir's hips, bright lines of blood trickling down his thighs. *Oh shit*. Oz erupted inside him with a howl of pleasure, and Keir had never felt so miserable. But he still came, spewing his seed all over the washroom wall as a flood of thoughts flashed through his mind. None of them good.

Chapter Three

Piper sat at her kitchen table, looking around a room she didn't recognize. Every day must start the same.

A jolting awareness of her inability to remember.

Reading messages she left herself.

Scouring her notebooks, searching for a clue.

Stuck on a Möbius loop, Piper was condemned to keep repeating the same thing day after day. She read until her head ached, read until her heart felt so heavy she couldn't move from the couch, read until she couldn't stand to turn another page without screaming. Piper only got as far as when she was twenty, then skipped to skim the last five books.

What if she did that every day? Started with book one and read to the exact same point. Should she make a note to begin where she left off? But then she wouldn't remember what she'd read anyway. She groaned.

The notebooks were a depressing catalog of her attempts to build some sort of continuity in her life, a record of failure. How could she confide in a friend when the next day she wouldn't remember the details of what was said and done? How could she start a relationship with a guy when falling asleep with him was impossible? That didn't mean she wasn't sexually experienced. Even by the age of twenty, she'd had a number of one-night stands. Though never with two guys at the same time. That seemed to be something confined to her dreams. How come she remembered that? Sometimes she'd told prospective boyfriends the truth about her condition, but whether she did or not, it seemed nothing lasted. Tomorrow she'd read the other half of the notebooks, in reverse order.

Make a note.

By the time she'd eaten lunch, Piper had settled into a degree of acceptance. There would be no miraculous recovery. Doctors couldn't fix what was wrong with her. From what she'd read, she seemed to have consulted plenty of them. They'd never seen amnesia like hers before. Not being able to remember your past was one thing, but not being able to recall anything personal once you'd fallen asleep was totally beyond their experience.

This was her life, and she had to deal with it.

There had been a few surprises. Good ones like the two hundred thousand pounds in her bank account, which seemed a huge amount for someone who currently worked as a tattoo artist and lived in rental accommodation. Where had it come from? Piper had left school at eighteen and gone to art college. Maybe she'd pursued art—something practical—because those things stayed with her. Yet she did remember facts about painters like Michelangelo and Monet and could recall odd details like the statue David looked out of proportion because it had been intended to be viewed from below.

She didn't have many possessions. More importantly, there were no notes about relations or friends she saw regularly. There were lots of telephone numbers—except all but a few had a line drawn through them. The only contact details were for Hendrick, her boss at the tattoo parlor Do Bad Things, where she worked five evenings a week, the number for Taka da Pizza, the source of Piper's four-cheese delight every Friday, and the number of Ben Craddock, a guy who was teaching her to fly.

Thoughts of flying brought a swarm of information into her head until it buzzed with details about aerodynamics, meteorology, and navigation. Piper felt she'd flown a plane, was comfortable about what to do, but didn't remember Ben or where she did the flying. According to her notebook, tomorrow afternoon she'd have her tenth flying lesson at a small airport outside Lincoln. Today, in four hours' time, she was due at work. Piper thought it fit somehow that she'd work at night. It probably took her all day to come to terms with what she woke up to face.

* * *

Mentally armed with the names and faces of the people she worked with, Piper followed her notebook instructions and used an in-car satellite navigation system to get to Do Bad Things. She found driving easy. In fact, driving was a delight. No struggle to remember, just something that came naturally, which probably explained why the notebooks indicated she'd taken up activities like windsurfing, parachuting, climbing, and potholing. And tombstoning—throwing herself off cliffs into freezing water.

Or maybe she had a death wish.

The sidewalk outside the tattoo parlor was covered with an elaborate chalk drawing. A few hours ago, when she'd read that she'd drawn this picture, Piper felt it was true, though she didn't remember. Now that she saw it, she was impressed. From every position but one, it looked a bit of a distorted mess, but stand in the right place and it became a 3-D image of a pool of water complete with tropical fish. Smudged a bit now from people's feet, but it looked good.

The window of the tattoo parlor looked good too, painted with a line of muscular chests, hands ripping apart ribs to reveal something strange inside the torso—a faerie kingdom, a roaring lion, a spider's web. Piper didn't remember painting the window either but was thrilled she had.

She recognized Hendrick from his photo the moment she walked in. In his midforties, good-looking, and bald, he sat with his feet on the desk, reading a tabloid newspaper, his arms smothered in tattoos.

"Hi, Piper."

It was so weird having to act as though she knew someone when she didn't remember them. "Hi," she said in a bright voice. "It's cold outside."

"Need me to hug you warm?"

"Not sure Elva would like that." Piper unbuttoned her coat.

According to her notebook, Hendrick's Goth girlfriend of three weeks usually sat at the reception desk and spent her time painting her nails black, reading books about vampires, begrudgingly answering the phone, and pestering Piper about how she got her hair so white.

"She dumped me." Hendrick stood up. "Turns out she only went out with me because she wanted a tattoo removed for free. I rather liked it, but I guess a cute dolphin on your butt isn't Goth enough. So I'm available again, you lucky girl. Fancy a fuck after work?"

"Er, no. Thanks for asking."

She didn't normally say yes, did she? Piper's fingers crept to her pocket and touched her notebook.

"You're welcome," Hendrick said with a grin. "One day you'll slip up and say yes."

Piper mentally sighed with relief. She didn't fancy Hendrick.

"I'm still waiting to see your tattoo," he said. "I've shown you mine. It's only fair."

Do I have one? It had to be on her butt or her back.

"Go on, show me," Hendrick wheedled.

"In your dreams."

He laughed. "I can wait. Keep an eye on things, will you, while I give my mum a call? I've got a few minutes before my first appointment. No one's due upstairs. Leah's going to be tied up for the next couple of hours with the removal of a whole sleeve of multicolored flowers. Quite a challenge."

Do Bad Things had three treatment rooms. Two downstairs for tattoo work and one upstairs for tattoo removal. The other room was just for storage. Leah job-shared with her girlfriend, Sal, using lasers to remove images like the ones Piper and Hendrick spent hours creating. According to her notes, Hendrick made more money from tattoo removal than any other aspect of his business. But usually Leah's appointments lasted minutes, not hours.

Piper was halfway through reading Hendrick's newspaper when the doorbell jangled. A large leather-clad, heavily pierced biker walked in. He looked as though he'd fallen into a box of nails. She didn't think he was Hendrick's client. The appointment book said a couple was due. Piper had no idea whether she knew this guy. A smile worked either way.

"Hi," she said.

"Hendrick in?"

"On the phone. Anything I can do?"

"I want a teddy bear with a little pink bow. And I want it right here."

Piper swallowed the laugh surging up her throat and forced herself to look at where the guy had positioned his finger. On his spectacularly hairy butt cheek. It was the first thing to amuse her all day.

"Got it?" he asked.

"Mmm."

He yanked up his pants and turned to face her. "When can you fit me in?"

Never? Piper grabbed the appointment diary. "Twentieth of next month?" That should give him time to see sense.

He glared and Piper gulped.

"Kibble! How's it hanging?"

Hendrick came bouncing out of his room. He and Biker Boy did a complex handshake involving fingers, knuckles, and fists. For a moment Piper thought they were about to clash heads before her boss thought better of it.

"Found some spare flesh for another piercing?" Hendrick asked.

"He wants a tattoo on his bum," Piper said. "Teddy bear with a pink bow."

Hendrick winced. "Pink?"

Piper shot him a look. He was okay with the bear, but not the color of the bow?

"You don't think that will look good?" Kibble asked.

"I'd think about it some more," Hendrick said. "Tats are like pets, man. They're for life."

Piper didn't correct her boss, but according to the appointment book, Leah and Sal were booked solid for weeks. Maybe the place would be better called *Undo* Bad Things.

Kibble nodded. "Yeah. Okay." He glared at Piper as though the whole thing had been her suggestion and walked out.

As the door closed behind him, Hendrick rolled his eyes and went back to his room. After six months working there, Piper apparently still had no idea what to make of him. She'd come to the conclusion that Hendrick morphed to suit the needs of each customer. Bully boy, sycophant, straight, gay, bi—he gave each person who walked into Do Bad Things exactly what they needed. Piper was far less accommodating. What they saw was what they got. She was confused enough as it was.

And what everyone got was a quirky twenty-five-year-old who was too tall, too thin, and too pale and had distinctive snow-white spiky hair. As Hendrick so thoughtfully put it when he met her—she'd written down his exact words—Piper looked as though someone had jumped out of nowhere and scared her to death. A bit of her wondered if he'd got something right there. Had this inability to remember been caused by some devastating event when she was fourteen? A hysterical fugue? There had been no clue in the notebooks, and she couldn't remember anything prior to that. Piper gave a heavy sigh.

* * *

Over the next few hours, Piper drew a complex outline of a phoenix on a man's back, completed a rose on a woman's ankle, and continued work on an intricate dragon on a woman's thigh. Hendrick came in to look at the dragon. He'd already done the faerie queen on the client's back.

"Hi, Gemma. Hey, that's bloody good, Piper."

"Yeah, I'm not bad at cats."

"What?" Gemma shrieked.

Hendrick laughed. "Lie still. Your dragon is brilliant. Better than I could do."

Piper felt a surge of pride.

"Would you mind locking up for me, Piper? My mum needs me to unblock her sink. Christ knows what she's shoved down it this time."

"Okay."

"See you tomorrow."

"Bve."

As the door closed, Gemma turned to face her. "I'm coping okay; could you do a bit more? Unless you've got to rush home or something."

"No, if you want me to carry on, I can."

Gemma chattered away as Piper moved the machine over her skin, injecting dye through thousands of passes of the needle. When Gemma began to fidget, Piper stopped. "That's enough for tonight," she said.

She carefully wiped Gemma's tattoo, meticulous about hygiene, both for the client's sake and hers.

"Okay, you're done." Piper threw her gloves in the trash.

"Thanks, Piper. See you same time next week?"

"Fine."

Piper carried on cleaning as Gemma left but looked up at the sound of a male voice.

"Hello, beautiful. Leaving so soon?"

Piper came to the door of her room. A blond-haired guy stood in the main entrance. Three times he stepped in the same direction as Gemma as they tried to get past each other.

Gemma laughed. "You better come in." She moved aside.

"Thank you, sweetheart."

As he walked in, two more men moved forward to block the exit.

Gemma huffed. "Fine, fine, you come in too, or I'll be dancing all night. Though maybe I wouldn't mind going dancing with you." She reached to touch the first guy's arm, but her hand dropped before it made contact. Gemma rushed off before Piper could yell at her not to leave.

The door closed, and Piper grasped the side of the desk as she stood facing three tall men. One blond. Two dark haired. All good-looking but the older dark-haired guy had a face that made Piper's stomach do tumble turns. Dark green eyes, the trace of stubble on his square chin, and sharp cheekbones. She glanced at the appointment book even though she was sure nothing was written there.

"Sorry, we're closed," she said.

"Not yet," said the one who'd come in first. "Where's Hendrick?"

"Gone." *Shit*. Why had she blabbed that? Still, there would have been no point pretending he was there when they could easily find out he wasn't.

"We have an appointment," the same man said.

"There's nothing in the book."

"Hendrick doesn't put it in the book."

Something was wrong, though Piper didn't know quite what. When her whole life was wrong, how could she identify the strange feeling in her gut? She didn't think she knew these men. They weren't in her current notebook, but her method was nowhere near foolproof.

"He had an emergency. His mother," Piper muttered, trying not to look at Mr. Gorgeous.

"Can you tattoo?" asked the blond guy.

She turned to face him. His eyes were really strange, sort of platinum gray. When he took a step toward her, Piper had to steel herself not to back away.

"Yes." Damn, I should have said no. "But you have to make an appointment."

He frowned and stared straight at her. "I did. I require you to do the tattoo now."

Piper glared. Trying to intimidate her into doing what he wanted wouldn't work.

He put his hands on the desk and leaned forward. "Do it now," he repeated.

"Fuck off."

Piper thought it would be hard to say who was more shocked. Did she usually swear at strangers, even if they were men who'd come in just as she was about to go home for supper? Blondie stared at her as if he'd never heard a woman use such language. *Oh shit. Maybe he's religious*. Piper opened her mouth to apologize and then pressed her lips together. Then changed her mind.

"Sorry for swearing."

The guy she fancied laughed.

"Let me try, Frick." The younger dark-haired one stepped forward and stared into Piper's eyes. "You will do a tattoo as we request."

No, I bloody well won't.

"Are you listening to me? You will do this tattoo," he said.

Or what? "Are you drunk? We don't do tattoos on people who've been drinking. They ask for things they don't want, go home and get yelled at by their wives or girlfriends, and then they come back here and make trouble."

Frick walked around the desk so he stood next to her. Piper's hand slid over the mobile phone in her pocket, reassured by the feel of it even though she knew by the time she'd pulled it out and tried to press 999, it would probably be in his hand or in pieces on the floor.

"Two of us have been drinking, love, but we're not drunk," Frick said. He held up a small vial. "The ink you're required to use. A small tattoo. It won't take long."

"You still have to make an appointment." Was she usually this awkward?

His hand moved so fast, Piper had no time to avoid it. He clasped her jaw and brought his head down so their noses almost touched. She stared into his steely eyes and tried not to shudder.

"Do the tattoo now," he said.

Piper was scared, but the part of her that was annoyed sat on the fear and flattened it. "No."

"It could wait until Hendrick's here," said the young guy.

"Shut up, Jardine. She'll do it now." Frick's grip on her jaw tightened to the point of pain. "You come and ask her again."

He let her go, and Piper lifted her hand to rub her chin. She wasn't sure why she was being so difficult.

Jardine had incredibly smooth skin, very pale, almost translucent. He slid behind Piper and bent his head to her ear. "Your name?" he asked.

"Piper."

"Do the tattoo now, Piper, or I'll break your neck."

Piper gulped, but the lump in her throat didn't move. "Fine. You win. I'll try not to slip with the needle. I'd hate to prick your prick, you prick."

Mr. Gorgeous burst out laughing. He had a lovely smile. The other two looked gobsmacked. Then angry. *Not good*.

"What do you want, and where do you want it?" Piper asked Jardine. "Somewhere painful, I hope."

"It's for Keir. Pain is not a problem," Frick said and ran his tongue over his teeth. They looked...sharp?

Keir. Piper rolled the name around in her head. So she got to do the tattoo on the guy she fancied. *Please not his cock*. Piper didn't need to remember what she'd read that morning to know she really didn't like tattooing guys there. She walked into the treatment room and turned to find all three had come with her.

Jardine held out the vial. "Use this ink."

Piper knew better than to do that. Who the hell knew what it was? Except... Keir stripped off with his back toward her, and her thought processes unraveled. A tag on his ankle? What had he done wrong? What was a felon doing out at this time of night? Those things came with a strict curfew. And what were those scratches on his hips? A woman's fingernails?

His tat ran from his ankle, all the way up his leg, and ended on his butt. No need to take off his sweater and shirt, but Piper was glad he had. Only what to look at first? The tattoo was brilliant. A series of linked designs, a mixture of vines and Celtic runes interspersed with small animal heads, every line crystal clear. Whoever had done the work was talented. Hendrick was good, but not that good. Piper bent to take a closer look. How had the edges retained that sharpness and clarity? The snake below the back of Keir's knee almost looked alive. Her fingers itched to touch it.

"She's more interested in your marque than your cock," Frick said.

Piper reared up and stepped back. Keir turned to look straight at her, and Piper's mouth lost all moisture. He is so gorgeous. Please don't let me have to tattoo his cock.

Frick laughed. "Have you ever tattooed a cock?"

She started. How did he know that's what she was thinking? "Yes."

"What did you tattoo on it?" Jardine asked.

"A snake. It took ages because I had to do the outline when he was erect, and every time I pricked him with the needle he went floppy."

Keir shuddered and Piper smiled. Her gaze dropped to his cock, and she gulped. No hair and he looked big. Getting bigger. *Oh shit*. Her face went hot.

"Lie down, Keir." Jardine put the vial in Piper's hand. "This ink matches. Another strand of exactly the same size."

Piper gave up. The sooner these guys were out of here, the better. She was supposed to explain the single-use and sterilization processes, but she didn't. They could see that she was opening new packets.

She set up her equipment and donned her gloves. Keir lay facedown on the treatment table on top of sterile towels, his head resting on his arms as he looked at her. Piper couldn't help but admire his body. Not an ounce of fat. All muscle. Maybe a little battered and bruised, but that somehow made him more appealing, except the marks on his hips really looked like they'd been done by someone with sharp nails. She didn't want him to have a girlfriend.

Piper pulled over her stool using her foot and sat down. She wiped a sterile cloth on his butt above the last tattoo. It didn't look as though it needed shaving, but she did it anyway and wiped the patch of skin once more before she began to draw. She sensed the other two watching, but Piper concentrated on the design, interweaving hers with the one below.

When she'd finished the outline, she stood up and took a step back to check what she'd done. Her gaze lingered on the guy's gorgeous backside, and a gush of warmth wet her panties. *Damn*.

Frick laughed. "She likes you."

Piper's heart hopped. *How does he know? He doesn't. He's teasing me.* Jardine bent his head and sniffed her neck.

"Leave her alone," Keir said.

Her heart skipped. His first words were in protection of her. He had a deep voice, no accent. He wasn't from around here. Frick moved behind her and sniffed the other side of her neck.

"Leave her the fuck alone," Keir snapped.

Her heart jumped.

Keir added, "I don't want to find I have *insert coins in slot* tattooed on my butt."

The two men laughed and moved aside. Piper felt the tension fall away. The air in the room lightened, but she didn't understand the dynamics here. Was Keir someone famous and these two his bodyguards? Not with an ankle tag. So were they policemen? But why would they bring him for a tattoo? Not friends. That didn't feel right.

Piper switched on the machine and loaded the ink. Using a single-tip needle and starting at the base of the design, she created a permanent mark over the outline she'd drawn, wiping away the excess ink as she worked. Although her concentration was absolute, Piper was aware that the two guys watched her every move. Keir had his eyes closed.

She washed the design with soap and water and dried the skin. Once she'd changed the needle, Piper started work on the shading. The ink didn't bleed into the skin in the way she'd expected. It was like drawing on fine quality paper. Was that down to the dye or the guy's skin? Maybe Hendrick *had* tattooed him, something about the ink that enhanced his work. Unable to resist the temptation to produce something special, Piper carefully completed the cat she'd drawn and then added to it. If she got this right, the highlights and shadows would make it look as if the animal was about to jump off his butt. Get it wrong and it wouldn't look much different to what he already had.

Once the machine was off, Piper pushed the pedal under the table. When she removed the trickles of blood and put the stained wipes in the bin, Jardine and Frick sighed in unison. Keir hadn't made a sound or flinched. After she'd wiped over the tattoo with a new sterile cloth, Piper couldn't see where the blood had come from. Weird. The tattoo looked great, but it also looked as though it had been done ages ago. Usually she applied a bandage, but there didn't seem much point.

Keir swung his legs off the table and stood up. He had a massive erection. *Oh God*. Piper looked the other way.

"There's a mirror over there," she said.

Keir walked to it and peered over his shoulder.

Jardine followed. "A cat." He laughed. "It's amazing. She's created a three-dimensional image." He stroked Keir's butt, his fingers drifting to the scratches on his hips. Keir flinched away, and Jardine scowled.

"The pavement is your work. And the window," Keir said, turning to her.

"Yes."

"You're very good."

"Thank you."

"Why did you choose to draw a puma on me?" he asked as he dressed.

Piper had no idea. "It seemed right."

"The addition to my margue is perfect. Thank you."

Mark?

Jardine held out his hand to Piper. "The ink?"

She passed him the vial and set about cleaning up again. Maybe he'd forget she had a small amount of the ink in a little dish.

"You won't remember that we came here," Frick said.

Piper froze for a moment. How the hell did he know that? She sighed and wiped down the treatment table. When she looked up again, they'd gone. A pile of ten-pound notes sat on a chair next to the sink. She tucked them in a drawer, went to lock the door of the salon, and returned to her room. Two things to do before she went home. Write down everything that had happened since she arrived at work. Maybe by the time she'd done that, there would be no chance those three might still be hanging around.

No point lusting after Keir, though Piper intended to make the most of remembering him when she got into bed. She'd try giving his face to one of the two guys in her dream. Her nipples tightened at the thought, and she smiled.

Chapter Four

Cuba sat at the head of the long oak dining table in Lam Hall, her gaze shifting from guest to guest, though she avoided looking at one of them. The favorite food and drink of each person sat on the table in front of them, or in the case of the two vampires, on their laps: a brown-haired AB-positive male and a black-haired Onegative female with gorgeous cocoa-colored skin. Cuba was almost jealous.

"Please begin. Don't let your dinner go cold," she said. Or get up and run away.

Cuba repressed a snigger. Though the two meals she'd chosen for the vampires were members of VAL, Vampires Anonymous of Lincoln, and had been only too keen to come tonight, the vampires who currently held them wouldn't allow them to run or to remember a thing at the end of the evening. Pity, really—the one true experience these mortals would have in their pathetic little lives and they couldn't confess it at their weekly meeting.

Cuba smiled as she watched the vamps play with their food. They had such fun compared to the shifters, who ate with a rigid intensity as if they expected the food to be taken away from them at any moment. The female vamp had her hand in the man's pants as she sucked his neck. The sound of his rising orgasmic delight echoed around the room. The vamps had almost as much pleasure as Cuba when they ate, but she never consumed in public.

"This snake is delicious," the shifter said at her side.

"I'm pleased you think so." Cuba couldn't think of much she'd less like to eat than snake, except perhaps peanut butter. She forced herself not to vomit.

The choice of this property had been a good one. An old baronial hall recently renovated, it had been easy to adapt for her specific needs. Set up as a smart hotel, catering exclusively for management conferences, any visitor straying onto the premises would find it welcoming but always fully booked. There were secure, lightproof rooms for those who needed them and space for the fight club compound to be erected on the grounds. It had taken months to build, but Cuba intended to reside here for a long time. There would be no more slipups in security that forced relocation.

The girl on the vampire's lap began to orgasm, her increasingly loud cries echoing around the room. Cuba found her heart beating faster, and she swallowed the moisture in her mouth. When she felt the dampness between her legs, she laughed. Straight from her mouth to her pussy.

Everyone seemed to freeze as the girl reached a crescendo, and then as her wail died away, eating recommenced. All but one of the six guests dining this evening had provided fighters for last night's entertainment. The club netted large profits for every one of them, and not just monetary. The fights settled disputes between clans and between species. They were a source of entertainment for those with unusual tastes, and most importantly, with Cuba in control, the club established her as a force to be reckoned with. A stepping-stone to the power she really wanted.

Usually she occupied herself with ensuring the wishes and desires of each of her guests were met. Tonight she found herself distracted.

Guest Number Six hadn't attended last night's festivities, and he was neither welcome nor wanted this evening. She forced herself to throw a warm smile in his direction but doubted it fooled him. Still, Cuba derived some small pleasure from having seated him between the two vampires. She hoped their slurping put him off his extra-hot Madras curry. He looked straight at her and grinned. *Damn*. She'd merely fed his lust.

Cuba rose to her feet and moved around the table, speaking a few words to each guest as she passed. Knowledge of their dirty little secrets swirled into her head when she touched them, though she couldn't steal from them unless they slept with her. She had no desire for the energy of most of them. Cuba suppressed a shudder.

"Such a pleasure to welcome you to familia Mantel," she said. "How delighted we are to enjoy your presence. Thank you so much for coming."

She used the same phrases on rotation and absentmindedly put her hand on the shoulder of the unwelcome guest.

"Get off me, bitch."

Cuba barely kept her smile in place. "How lovely to have you here," she said. *The fucking bastard*. Why had he come? What did he want with her? She'd had no choice but to allow him inside her premises when he turned up last night. His rank far exceeded hers. Cuba was sticking to the terms of her banishment and keeping a low profile. Well, lowish profile. What the fuck had dragged Ozmodeus out of hell?

"Cut the crap, Cuba," he snapped.

"What do you want?" she hissed under her breath.

"I'm looking for a thief."

Panic fluttered in her chest. What had she stolen that would interest him? "Not you," Oz said, and she breathed out. "Why would you think it was?" And her lungs froze again.

* * *

"Unusual female," Frick said as they walked away from Do Bad Things. Keir's stomach slumped. He'd hoped they'd forget her. "I liked her hair," Jardine said. "Her natural color, no scent of bleach."

Frick laughed. "You liked her hair? Not her breasts or the smell of her cunt? Oh no, I forgot. It's not that kind of pussy you like."

Keir felt Frick's gaze come to rest on him as they headed toward the car. Better to say nothing and wait to see where this was going.

"She was in heat for you, Keir. Her little pussy creaming for a bigger pussy," Frick said with a snigger.

The scent of her arousal had been plain to Keir, but also her fear. Three guys bursting in at this time of night, why wouldn't she be scared?

"Perhaps too much work for me," Frick said. "Though I'm tempted to test what I'd have to do to bring her under on my first command."

Keir wasn't sure why he was so agitated by that. But if he showed any interest in Piper, he suspected Frick would pursue her if only to piss him off.

"I wonder why she was slow to go under," Jardine said.

"Her foul temper." Frick laughed. "I've noticed mortals who exhibit strong emotions are harder to break. She was pissed off with us. Probably desperate to get home to fuck her boyfriend. Maybe I *should* pay her another visit. I do love a challenge."

Supernaturals weren't supposed to associate with mortals who lived in the vicinity, unless instructed to do so by Cuba, but that didn't mean it didn't happen. Since Keir had been indentured, Cuba had been forced to move to Lincoln after her freak show came close to being exposed through careless actions and words. Vamps had been blamed for not keeping their fangs under control, but the culprit or culprits hadn't been identified.

Flouting of the no-fraternization rule was the only thing that kept Keir sane. He fucked who he liked, where he liked, when he liked—except in the seven prefight days when he was confined to the compound. After being forced to share another familia's premises for two months, Cuba had relocated everyone to Lincoln several weeks ago, and Keir liked the city, liked the people who lived there, and liked fucking *the* people who lived there. What more could Cuba do to him? He was already tied body and soul.

The three of them reached the car, and Keir stepped back. "I'm going to the pub."

Frick frowned. "Cuba wants you present this evening."

"I'll be there later."

"Well, perhaps I'll stay in town for a while too." Jardine smiled.

Shit

"There's no requirement to follow me," Keir snapped. "I'm hardly likely to exceed the boundaries of my restrictions. Let me have room to breathe."

"Go where you will," Frick said. "Do you think I care if you kill yourself?"

No, but Cuba would. Keir wished that was because he made money for her as a fighter, but there was more to it than that.

Keir told himself not to go near the Rising Sun. Plenty of other pubs to choose from. His brain kept repeating the instruction, but neither his feet nor his cock listened, though he *was* tempted to go after the woman instead. He'd expected Hendrick's hands on him tonight, and she'd been a pleasant surprise. Piper had made him laugh, and she'd stood up to Frick. Although the vamps hadn't initially been able to control her, she'd done the tattoo in the end and would have forgotten they'd ever been there by the time they walked out of the parlor. But Keir had seen a sweet vulnerability in Piper's face, something that made him want to seek her out and gently stroke her to completion. Not his usual reaction to the opposite sex.

Women were harder work than men. They expected more than Keir could give, more than he wanted to give. He might dream of a threesome, him and a guy sharing a woman, but that was never going to be more than a dream. Nothing with a woman was straightforward, whereas men wanted to fuck and walk away. No strings. No worries. Keir always knew where he stood with guys. Even so, he rarely fucked the same person twice, man or woman. His cardinal rule, so he found it hard to understand why he was hoping to find Oz again. Particularly knowing he was trouble.

The moment Keir had spurted all over the door last night, Oz pulled up his pants and walked out. With Keir's clothes lying in a heap on the floor, he couldn't follow. He'd dressed as quickly as he could, yanking his chinos over bleeding hips. Keir searched both the pub and the surrounding streets and found no trace of Oz. He couldn't even scent him, and though his animal form would have, Keir could hardly risk stalking the streets of Lincoln as a puma.

In any case, Oz wasn't exactly a guy; the claw marks on Keir's hips told him that. Only apart from knowing he wasn't human, Keir wasn't sure what Oz was. Not a shifter, because Keir's slow-to-heal scratches were still there a day later, and that was strange. He should have realized Oz wasn't human the moment he saw him. Had lust swamped all his other senses? If that was true, he hoped he never lusted for any guy he fought or the end would come fast.

Had Oz come to find his thief among those watching the fight? It drew in supernaturals from all over the United Kingdom. He might still be around, still looking. Several familia leaders were at Lam Hall, gorging on Cuba's largesse. Keir knew wanting to see Oz again was courting disaster. No point in forming attachments to anyone. It only set him up for disappointment. So what the fuck was he doing, wandering in circles through the dark back streets of town, trying to lose his drooling vamp tail, yet heading inexorably for the Rising Sun? For all Keir knew, Cuba had told Jardine to watch him. Jardine's flirting could all be pretense. Cuba wanted Keir under control. Her control. Keir had to fight for her, but he wasn't her toy. Once Keir's marque reached his neck, he'd be free.

He *had* to believe that. It was the only thing that kept him sane.

Keir opened the door of the pub and walked in. No sign of Oz but Neil was there, the guy who'd tried to pick him up before Oz laid a claim. Keir stayed at the other end of the bar and caught the attention of the barmaid. Her name tag said *Mary*.

"Corona," he said.

"Please."

Keir laughed. "Sorry. Corona, please, Mary."

Same black skirt, same tight top. Her hair looked silky smooth, something he'd like to feel wrapped around his cock, which wasted no time perking up at the thought. Easier to fuck this woman than Piper, because the appeal was surface deep and went no further than scratching an itch. Something about Piper intrigued him. Should he go back to the tattoo place?

Maybe he'd just sit here and see if Oz turned up, and if he didn't, try his luck with Mary. Miss Perky was waggling her backside right in front of him. If that failed, Plan C—Neil, because Keir needed to fuck or be fucked. He needed to forget the sound of the wolf's neck breaking and remember *he* was still alive.

"Thanks," Keir said as she put the bottle in front of him.

"See, that wasn't hard, was it?" Mary winked at him.

Keir fumbled for a witty comeback, aware of his cock pressing against his zipper, and instead closed his mouth. By the time he thought of something, she'd have forgotten who he was.

Jardine perched on a stool a few feet away, and Keir sighed. He might as well have come straight here and not bothered trying to lose him.

"How's your hand?" Mary asked the vamp. "Wow, no bandage? You healed overnight?"

"It looked worse than it was," Jardine said. "How's your finger?"

The barmaid sighed. "Fine. I'm always cutting myself, but you're the first customer to crush a glass in his hand. What can I get you, Muscles?"

"Bloody Mary."

She laughed and moved away. Keir wondered if he'd been the cause of Jardine's fit of temper. He spotted Neil heading his way and sighed. Was this going to cause another eruption from the vamp?

"Buy you a drink?" Neil asked.

"Haven't finished this yet."

"Have one anyway."

Keir gave in. "Okay, thanks."

"Are you expecting your friend? If so, have the drink on me, but I'll leave now. I know I'm no competition. I was jealous last night, but not jealous enough to risk losing my head." He laughed, and Keir tried to do the same.

"So, you on your own?" Neil asked.

Jardine edged closer, and Keir turned his back on him and looked at Neil. There was something in his eyes that Keir recognized—loneliness.

"Yes." Yet he knew if Oz turned up right now and beckoned, he'd follow. That worried him.

Neil smiled and perched on the stool at Keir's side. "What do you do for a living?"

It had been several months since Keir had actually earned a living. "Personal trainer at Lam Hall."

"I sell luxury cars." Neil paused. "You happen to be looking for a new car?"

"No, sorry." Keir could run faster with a car, but he had no place to go.

"I'd probably do better selling little city runarounds, but I fell in love with the sleek lines of the Jaguar when I was a boy. I nicked a hood ornament off one once. Still got it. Still worry the police will come knocking, and I was nine when I took it."

Keir laughed.

Neil bent his head to Keir's ear. "I've got a Jaguar outside."

While Keir had a puma inside. He choked back his laugh.

Neil raised his head, looked straight at Keir, and whispered, "I'd love to suck your cock."

Like a self-erecting tent, Keir's cock rose to stand proud in his pants. Keir shifted on the stool but remained uncomfortable. Why suffer when that was easily fixed?

He stood up and felt Jardine's glare burning into his back. "Like to show me this car of yours?"

Outside in the car park, Keir admired the smooth, sleek lines of the silver Jaguar and walked around to open the passenger door.

"Is there somewhere we can go?" he asked when Neil sat beside him.

The man's face creased with disappointment. "I thought you might have somewhere. I share—"

"I live with someone." Keir knew Neil would misunderstand, but it was the easiest excuse. "What about your car showroom?"

"Security cameras. But there's an abandoned trading estate close by."

Keir's mouth tightened. He wasn't worth a hotel bed? "Fine. How far?"

Neil smiled and turned on the engine. "You're keen."

"I need to know how many miles from here. Exactly."

Keir ignored the puzzled look Neil threw his way. He could hardly explain he'd die if he strayed too far from Lam Hall. A twenty-mile radius was his limit. He'd had to plead for that so he had space to roam as a puma.

"No more than five," Neil said. "I don't make a habit of this. It's just... Well, you know how it is, how it feels."

Neil carried on talking, and Keir only half listened. He didn't care what Neil was looking for, only that—tonight—Neil wanted him, but Keir wished he'd shut the fuck up. He didn't need to hear details of his job and his life. He didn't want to hear excuses.

Maybe there was a way to shut him up.

Keir flipped open the button on his pants and unzipped himself. He heard Neil gulp. Keir slid his hand under the waistband of his shorts and massaged his erection, letting soft skin slip over the hard core. When Keir pulled his boxers below his balls and his cock stuck out, Neil glanced across and moaned. "Oh fuck." The wheels squealed in protest when he took a left-hand turn too fast. "How am I supposed to concentrate on driving?"

"Better not get stopped by the police. Though I could always say I had an itch." Neil let out a choked laugh.

Keir wanted and didn't want this. He knew how cheap it made him, cruising for a fuck, letting a guy in a pub pick him up. Of course, in an ideal world, there'd be a home to go to with him and a guy sharing a double-jointed woman who had kids with both of them, but that was as likely as him finding the world was indeed flat after all, or surviving long enough to have his marque completed. Life would never be what Keir wanted. He was a slut. His father was right. He got what he deserved.

Neil pulled up at the rear of a large dilapidated warehouse and switched off the engine. The moon shed enough light for Keir to see the hunger in Neil's face.

"We could go inside, but it's a bit cold. Or stay in the car. A button at the side puts the seat back." Neil's voice was hoarse.

Keir clicked off his seat belt and pulled his sweater over his head. He hit two buttons, and the seat both slid back and reclined. Keir heard the hum of Neil's seat retracting and then the *click* of his seat belt releasing. A moment later, Neil yanked off his sweater, knelt on the seat, and leaned over the console to stare down at him.

"Oh God, oh God," Neil whispered.

He unfastened the buttons on Keir's linen shirt with shaking fingers and spread it open.

"Oh fuck. Do you spend your life at the gym?" Neil trailed his fingers over the lines and planes of Keir's chest. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone more...perfect."

"Perfect body, sick mind." How many times had he been told that by someone who was supposed to love him?

Keir lifted his hips and slid his pants and boxers to his calves. When he unfastened Neil's pants, the guy shuddered. One shove sent chinos and knit shorts to bunch around Neil's thighs.

"I thought I was reasonably well hung, but Christ, you're big," Neil whispered.

Keir looked at Neil's cock, rising tall and straight out of a loose wreath of light brown curls. Neil had nothing to be ashamed of.

"I have to take my shirt off," Neil muttered. "In case... If my... Oh shit."

He undid the top buttons and pulled it over his head. The sight of Neil's slightly flabby stomach wrenched at Keir's heart. Neil wanted to be happy, to feel good. If Keir could make that happen, was doing this so bad? His gaze followed the tapering hair below Neil's navel to the dark head of his cock, glistening with arousal. His balls matched Keir's, swollen hard, cupping the base of his erection as if trying to climb it.

"If you look at me..." Neil choked the words out.

Keir raised his hand and threaded his fingers through the hair at the back of Neil's neck to pull his head down. A soft brush of tongues and Neil jerked back, trembling.

"Oh God, oh God," he muttered. "I've never kissed... I'm gonna come."

"Then come."

Keir lightly scraped a thumbnail across the tip of Neil's dick and watched the slit widen and wink to shed a tear like a tiny eye. He lifted Neil over the console until he rested with his knees spread on either side of Keir's hips.

"Fuck, you're strong." Neil put his hands on Keir's shoulders.

You have no idea. "You really going to come without me touching you?" Keir asked.

"It's been so long since I've fancied anyone so much. I'm sorry; I'm sorry."

Keir clutched Neil's backside, stroking his hips with his thumbs. "Hey, don't be sorry. Just come."

He blew a long breath down toward Neil's cock and followed that with short pulses of air.

"Oh Christ Almighty," Neil gasped.

He stiffened, sighed, and a long, ropy thread of cum hit Keir's chest. The second burst reached Keir's mouth, and he licked the drops from his lips, the salty musk fueling the fire in his groin. Neil shook in his grasp as he emptied himself, exhaling in a noisy, drawn-out sigh as the last spasm died away.

He raised his head to look at Keir's splattered chest and then stared into his eyes. "I've never done that before," Neil said with a gulp.

It was a first for Keir, a guy coming just because he blew on his dick. It gave a whole new meaning to the term *blowjob*. He swiped a finger through the cooling cum and raised it to Neil's lips. "You going to clean me up?"

He sighed when Neil's hot tongue lapped the dribble from his chin, and then Keir relaxed into the luxury of being licked and licked and licked. He closed his eyes as Neil moved down his body, his nipples tightening as a luscious wet tongue circled and teased. Keir's cock began to rev.

Neil lifted his head. "Are you purring?"

Probably. "Just enjoying the rasp of your tongue."

Keir could hear the rumbling purr in his head but hadn't realized he'd let it escape. With little room to maneuver, Keir edged backward while Neil shifted until

his butt was wedged against the dashboard. His face hovered over Keir's groin. Warm breath washed over Keir's cock, and he grew another inch. Keir wrapped his hand around the base of his dick, and pushing his erection forward, he painted Neil's lips with precum.

"Mmm, mmmm." Neil looked straight into Keir's eyes, opened his mouth, and trailed the tip of his tongue down the entire length of the shaft until he was licking Keir's fingers wrapped around the root. As he sucked and nipped his way back to the crest, Keir tightened the pressure on his balls.

A moment later, his cock was vacuumed into hot, wet heaven. Keir's back arched on the leather seat, his hips thrusting as Neil sucked until his cheeks hollowed out. The sensation of tongue, teeth, and lips all working their individual magic sent fountains of fire shooting from Keir's groin to toes and fingertips.

Neil let him loose and nuzzled his cock with his cheek and nose. "Can we change over so I'm lying down? I want you to fuck my mouth."

Keir shuddered as need romped through him. Not easy to swap positions in such a confined space and with pants caught around ankles, but they managed. Neil slithered down on the seat, tipping his neck over the headrest, and Keir crawled over him until his hips hovered above Neil's chest, his shirt hanging like a screen on either side of the guy's head. Keir supported his weight with one hand pressed against the backseat and kept the other around the base of his cock, trying to avoid the temptation of shoving too much into Neil's mouth. But palms on his backside shunted him harder, urged him deeper. His cock collided with the back of Neil's throat, and Keir grunted at the pressure on his cockhead. His breathing grew choppy as he felt his orgasm build, the slow creep of pleasurable sensation rising up his legs, the tingling moving down his spine.

As his balls ignited and cum flew from his cock, Keir realized it was a bit late to wonder if Neil wanted him to come in his mouth. As Neil sucked and swallowed, Keir looked into the large brown eyes staring up at him and wished he could feel more for this guy than mere lust. Neil kept working him until Keir was spent.

They untangled in silence, both breathing heavily. Keir flopped onto the driver's seat.

"Was that... Was that good?" Neil asked.

Keir reached over to stroke his face. "Never better," he lied.

They got back into their clothes, swapped seats, and fastened their safety belts. Keir knew Neil felt awkward. The guy couldn't look at him now. It was what Keir was used to. He didn't want to care, but he did.

"Somewhere I can drop you?" Neil asked.

"Back at the pub's fine."

Every time Keir sensed Neil about to ask the question he didn't want to hear, he interrupted. But when Keir stepped out of the car, back outside the Rising Sun, Neil caught his arm. "I really like you."

Keir's mouth twitched. That was part of his problem. Everyone liked him, though not for the right reasons. Well, everyone liked him except Frick.

"Can we do this again?" Neil asked. "I could get a room."

"Not a good idea."

Neil frowned. "Why not?"

"You need someone who gives a damn."

"But—"

"Go home."

The engine of the Jaguar roared as Neil accelerated away. Keir moved toward the door of the pub and froze when he heard the squeal of brakes. He spun around, saw the woman from the tattoo parlor caught in the glare of Neil's headlights, and knew whatever he did, he'd be too late.

Chapter Five

In the blinding glare of the headlights, Piper saw the car coming and knew it would hit her. It was only when she collided with a parked vehicle and rolled over the hood to land safely on her feet that she realized the car hadn't touched her. How far had she jumped? *Wow!*

The Jaguar that nearly hit her screeched to a halt several yards ahead. When the driver flung open his door and barreled toward her, Piper backed up, worried he was going to shout at her.

"Are you okay?" a voice called behind her.

Piper turned to see Keir, the guy she'd tattooed. Her gaze snapped past him. To her relief, he was alone.

"Are you hurt?" Keir asked.

"I'm fine." Much to her amazement, it was true. Her heart beat fast from the adrenaline rush, but that was all.

"Oh my God," the driver gasped as he reached her side.

Keir turned to him. "She's okay, Neil."

These two knew each other?

"Fuck. I'm so sorry." The driver dragged shaking fingers through his hair.

"I should have checked the road was clear," Piper said.

Neil's face was white under the streetlamp. "No, I should have been more careful. Thank God I didn't hit you. Are you certain you're not injured?"

"Arms and legs still attached. Thick coat. I bounced."

"Christ. Don't joke." He let out a shuddering breath.

"It really is okay. No harm's been done," Piper said.

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that. Can I give you a lift somewhere?" Neil asked.

"My car's here, thanks."

Keir put his hand on Neil's shoulder and squeezed. "She's not hurt. Go home. Drive safely."

Piper watched the guy drive away, all too aware of Keir standing at her side. She turned to look at him and swallowed hard. Warmth surged through her veins as if she'd walked out of a cold room into the sunlight.

"That was some leap, grasshopper," he said.

Piper laughed and glanced across the road. How the hell had she managed to jump that far? Or do it so fast? Maybe she was remembering wrong and hadn't had to move more than a couple of feet, only it looked like more, and Keir seemed to think it was impressive.

"Sure you're okay?"

Actually she wasn't. Her heart still pounded, and she was breathing very fast. Was this a panic attack? A belated supplementary hormonal surge? Her chest felt tight enough to burst, as though something inside was trying to get out, her ribs the only things stopping it. Her vision wavered, and then Piper did panic. If she passed out, she wouldn't remember a thing.

Keir caught her arm, and Piper groaned.

"You're not all right at all," he said.

Yes, she was. The groan was his fault. The adrenaline racing around her body hadn't been triggered by fear but lust. *Damn it*. He put his arm around her, and Piper felt her vision wobble again. *Don't pass out*.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

Address is in my notebook. She patted her pocket and felt nothing. OhGodohGodohGod. Don't faint. Don't faint. Piper pinched her thigh hard in the hope it would distract her.

"My book," she gasped. "I've dropped it."

She pulled out of Keir's grasp and, to her relief, saw the blue notebook lying in the road behind him. He picked it up and handed it to her. When she had it back in her pocket, the weight lifted from her chest and Piper felt better.

"I think you're in shock. Can I drive you home?"

Piper looked into his face and saw concern in his eyes, but something else too, something that dampened her panties for the second time that night. His call for those two guys with him to leave her alone hadn't just been chivalry. He liked her, wanted her. His arm moved back around her shoulders, and he drew her close. Piper's breath caught in her throat.

"Where do you live?" he whispered into her hair.

She muttered her address.

"Car keys?"

Piper handed them over.

"Which car?"

"The blue Ford."

He opened the door and put her inside. When he fastened her seat belt, his soft hair brushed her cheek, and Piper's nipples tightened. She watched him walk around the front of the car, and when he sat in the driver's seat and smiled at her, she knew she was lost at sea with no hope of finding land. *Dangerdangerdanger* echoed in her head, and Piper didn't care. The need to be naked and in his arms flooded every brain cell.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Home is programmed into the sat nav." She pressed a few buttons, and the automated voice began to speak.

"Proceed to the highlighted route, angel face."

Oh no. Having a sexy guy as the voice of her in-car navigation system must have seemed a good idea at the time. It had made her laugh that morning, and now it made her squirm.

Keir chuckled.

Piper settled into her seat. The incident with the car had been a stark reminder of her vulnerability. Maybe she should tattoo her name and address on her arm. Without her notebooks, she was nothing. Without the notebook in her pocket, it took one moment of unconsciousness to lose everything. She didn't really want to tattoo her arm, but she ought to have something fastened to her to remind her where she lived. Maybe a tag around her wrist?

Talking of tags, what the hell was she doing? He could be a dangerous criminal. Only one way to find out.

"What did you do to get that monitor on your ankle?"

He glanced at her. "You remember me?"

Piper's eyes opened wide. *What*? She'd tattooed his backside not much more than an hour ago. "You're joking. How could I forget you and your companions? Dick Dastardly and his sidekick, Mutley, or your fabulous—tattoo?" The word *butt* hovered on her lips, and she swallowed it.

"You weren't supposed to remember. Frick will be pissed." He laughed.

She opened her mouth to ask what he meant, and he spoke again. "How long have you been tattooing?"

"Four years."

"Always at Do Bad Things?"

"I've only worked there for a few months." According to her books, she'd worked at three different tattoo parlors since she'd started.

"How did you get into it?"

"I needed a job after art college."

Hardly an answer but he didn't press. Piper wondered where this might lead, where she could let it lead, where she wanted it to lead. He had no way of getting back into town from her flat. Well, he could catch a late-night bus or call a cab. Maybe walk. It wasn't that far. *Damn, plenty of ways back*. Or she could ask him to stay even though she knew what would happen tomorrow—assuming he stayed that long. Piper took a deep gulp and allowed herself a moment of self-pity. Just one, otherwise she suspected she'd end up as a puddle on the floor.

"You have reached your destination, sweetie," said the sat nav.

"Park anywhere along this road. I live"—she glanced around until her gaze settled on the building she'd left earlier that day—"over there."

Live? Did she live? The word choked her. Had she never had someone to come home to? Not according to her notebooks. If she found the right guy, would he understand? Could the man sitting next to her be the one? Piper tried to put herself in his position. Would he want a woman who started the day wondering who the hell he was? A woman who'd forget everything he'd said and everything she'd said once she'd gone to sleep? A woman who wouldn't even remember what he liked to do in or out of bed?

Relationships were impossible, though moments of happiness weren't, even if they didn't last beyond a day. Piper didn't want to carry on like this. Forget the fact that she *had* for all these years; this couldn't be all there was to look forward to, reliving the horror of her situation every morning when she woke, having to write down everything so she didn't look like an idiot, never having anyone she'd remember holding her close, touching or kissing her.

When they stood on the pavement, he locked the car and gave her the keys.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome. By the way, the ankle tag is because I'm an alien. My right to residence is under consideration."

"You sound English. Where are you from?"

"America."

"Oh, I'd love to go there." Except she couldn't go anywhere. *Say it, say it.* "Would you like to come in?"

He smiled.

It took a moment to register he'd agreed, and then Piper smiled back. She led the way through the outer entrance to climb the stairs, Keir behind her. She opened the door to her apartment and felt him at her shoulder, so close his breath warmed her neck above the collar of her coat. Piper had one moment of panic—one rational thought of this is a stranger so what the fuck am I doing? then a more irrational one of maybe he only wants a coffee—before he kicked the door shut and peeled off his sweater.

Piper backed away. Keir was so large he made her living space seem tiny. He followed as she shuffled backward in a circle until she ended up at the door with nowhere to go. It was as if he was stalking her, only she liked it, liked to be wanted. Keir stopped inches away, put his palms on the door on either side of her head, and smiled. The sexy scent of him enveloped her like a hug. Piper thought he was the best-looking guy she'd ever seen. Then the stupidity of that forced a choked laugh from her throat.

He narrowed his eyes. "What's funny?"

"I was just thinking you were the best-looking guy I'd seen today."

"Today? Excellent."

When he laughed, Piper melted. He didn't understand, but that was okay. Keir lowered his head and floated his lips over hers, such a light touch it might not have happened except for the fact that her knees shook and her heart hammered. His tongue traced the line of her mouth and the shape of her lips before he licked them. When she gulped air, he took advantage, his tongue invading to slide along hers, teasing, tasting, and tangling until her head spun like a centrifuge, flinging aside any specks of common sense.

Piper longed to put her arms around him yet hesitated, fearing she'd feel nothing but a figment of her imagination. The taste, scent, and sight of him were almost too much for her frazzled nerves to stand. If she touched him with anything but her mouth, she might implode. If he touched her with anything but his mouth, she'd definitely implode.

He kissed hard, he kissed soft, he kissed somewhere in between, and Piper met every touch of his lips and tongue with a message from hers. *Don't stop; don't stop; don't stop; don't stop*. When his knee pushed through the gap in her coat and rocked between her legs, Piper unraveled. As though a flame had caught light in her belly and set the fuse running, fire rushed down her veins and she fizzled from head to foot. No point trying to hide what was happening; her breathy gasps into his mouth and sagging body gave her away.

"My little firecracker." Keir breathed the words into her mouth. "I'm going to enjoy making you come."

Her muscles tightened in response. Piper's wet panties grew wetter. Keir sniffed and she gulped. *Does he know how wet I am?*

His fingers fumbled with the buttons on her hip-length woolen coat, peeling it open and then pushing it from her shoulders to fall on the floor. He didn't stop kissing her as he undid the tiny buttons on her cardigan. But when he pulled it off to find a closed-buttoned shirt beneath, Keir laughed into her mouth and stepped back to look at her.

"Unwrapping you is like playing Pass the Parcel, except I don't want to pass you on, because I want the treat inside," he said. "How many more layers?"

His loud sigh when her shirt was off and he found only a thin strappy T-shirt beneath made Piper's heart beat so hard she heard the sound echoing in her head. She wore no bra; her nipples were sharp points against the soft material of her top. He stared into her eyes and slid his hands under the scalloped hem and onto her belly. Her skin fluttered under his touch, and her breath hitched. When Keir's thumbs traced the lower curve of her breasts and then inched higher to tease her nipples, Piper's mouth went dry. It wasn't fair that she wouldn't be able to remember every moment of this.

She reached for the buttons on his shirt and pressed them open. Keir's chest was magnificent. Tanned and smooth and ridged in the right places. Except hadn't he had a fresh scar over his left pec? And hadn't there been a—Piper mentally shook her head. She wasn't thinking straight, not a surprise. She toed off her shoes and kicked them aside. His joined hers. Probably moving too fast but Piper didn't care.

She had to make the most of the time she had. His shirt hit the floor. Piper saw the line of hair arrowing down his body and didn't blink. Then his pants came off and so did hers, and all that was left was underwear. Her gaze dropped. Tented boxers. And that bloody ankle tag.

He yanked the boxers down and stepped out of them.

Had her mouth felt dry before? Now it rivaled the Gobi Desert. Thanks to her notebooks, she knew it had been a long time since she'd felt a cock inside her. Somehow Piper didn't think she'd ever felt one like Keir's. Perfectly proportioned, long, thick, and hard, the rounded uncut head shiny with precum, and balls hanging heavy at the base. *Oh Christ*.

"You look good enough to eat," Keir whispered. "And I think I will."

He tugged at her top, and Piper raised her arms. Keir didn't take it all the way off but bunched it around her wrists and held them over her head. Piper watched his Adam's apple rise and fall as he stared at her breasts.

"Glad you haven't spoiled these with a tattoo," he whispered. "Though you must have one somewhere. On your butt? I can hardly wait to find out."

Keir slid a finger into her mouth, circled it over and under her tongue, then trailed it down her neck and on until he reached a nipple. What was already hard went harder. Piper yanked her hands free and slipped her index finger into his mouth, wet it, and copied what he'd done. His nipple tightened when she touched it.

"Snap," she said.

He laughed. "You're gorgeous."

Piper fought hard not to cry, but tears gathered in her eyes, and she was glad it was gloomy. He stared at her as he eased her black panties over her hips. She heard the hitch in his breath, and when her panties reached her lower thighs, she matched it with a gulp of her own. Piper shimmied, and the last item of her clothing dropped to the floor. One flick of her toe and the lacy strip flew to land on the back of a kitchen chair.

Keir chuckled. "I should have had you do a striptease." His gaze dropped down her body and lingered on her crotch. Piper had no hair between her legs. Another odd thing about her in the list she'd read. Hair grew nowhere on her body but her head.

"Look how well matched we are," Keir said.

He took her cheeks in his hands and kissed her again. This time Piper's fingers caressed his hips as their bodies slid together. She could feel the scratches she'd seen before and had a moment's worry before the sensation of his long, hard cock sandwiched between their bellies sent tremors racing up and down her spine. The soft, swollen head wet her as they rocked into each other. Keir edged her backward into the room until her butt hit the kitchen table. In one smooth movement, he lifted her up and laid her on her back.

Keir lifted her foot to his mouth. "I'm going to lick you all over."

Piper shuddered. One pass across the sole of her foot with his hot tongue and her spine arched. Oh God, I've died and gone to heaven. Except Piper had a feeling this didn't happen in heaven. But it should. If heaven was about what you liked, this would do fine. His long, slightly rough tongue swept over her skin to set fire where it touched and leave goose bumps in its chilled wake. Piper's fingers curled around the edge of the table, her nails digging into the wood as Keir's lips pulled and played at the place his tongue had wet. He found every ticklish spot, every sensitive point. The more she writhed, the more he teased.

When he'd licked every bit of her legs, he moved to her hands and sucked each finger into his mouth. Piper panted, her chest heaving. Another orgasm simmered inside her. She could hear Keir making a purring sound in his throat, could feel the vibration run from his mouth through her body. The fact that he seemed to enjoy doing this to her as much as she enjoyed having it done dragged a long groan from deep inside her.

He spread her thighs and leaned between her legs to kiss her breasts, then used his teeth on one, fingers on the other to draw rhythmically on her nipples until the muscles of her pussy began to dance in step. Keir held her legs open and kissed and licked his way down her body. Piper lost her capacity to think in straight lines.

One long, slow pull of his incredible tongue over her wet folds and he raised his head to look at her, his chin glistening with her cream.

"You taste delicious."

Piper had an immediate desire to see if he did too. She tried to get up, and he pushed her down.

"Keep still, cutie. Straight on at the roundabout. No speed cameras on this stretch, angel face. I'm going to make you come until you scream."

"Promise?" Piper asked.

Keir laughed. He lifted her legs and planted her heels on the table, then licked her again, from her navel to her asshole.

"Oh God," Piper gasped.

She held tighter on to the edge of the table as he nuzzled between her legs. The sensation of his hot breath, wet tongue, and hard teeth sent lightning shooting all over her body, and another spurt of cream pulsed from her pussy. He lapped and lapped like a cat drinking milk. *Wow, what a tongue*.

And those fingers. He had a hand on her breast, the other between her legs, fingers and tongue working together. His mouth settled around her clit as he plunged two fingers inside her and at the same time pressed against her anus with his thumb. Piper gave up. She gave up thinking, gave up breathing, gave up her last pretense of control and let sensation bowl her along wherever it wanted.

Nerve endings zapped, contracting muscles shifted into a higher gear, and her heart hopped, skipped, and jumped for joy. Impossible to keep still, her hands alternately gripped the table, clutched his shoulders, or pulled his hair. She trembled, shook, and quivered as the pressure inside her grew. Piper felt like a rumbling volcano, waiting and waiting until the pressure to come became too great to contain.

He sucked hard at her clit, and she blew. Piper heard the loud cry leap from her throat as she exploded with a force off the Richter scale. Bright lights flashed behind her closed eyes, and she was transported on waves of pure delight.

OhGodohGodohGod. Don't let me forget.

Even as the pulses faded to a whisper, Piper wished for more.

After the last tremor died, she hadn't a solid bone in her body. If he'd taken out a knife and fork and really eaten her, she wasn't sure there was much she could have done.

He kissed her stomach and raised his head. "Do you always come like that? So tight and hard and sweet?"

"Only on Tuesdays." It was Wednesday.

He laughed, scooped up his pants from the floor, and took out his wallet.

Condom.

Thank goodness he had some sense. Piper had left hers outside the door. In truth, somewhere inside Do Bad Things the moment she'd clapped eyes on him.

"Fast and furious or slow and steady?" Keir asked. "Think before you answer."

"Fast and furious."

He grinned. "Good girl."

The condom was on and Keir was in before Piper took another breath. One long, hard surge of his thick cock, of which she felt every inch, until his balls smacked against her backside. Keir groaned and trembled. He lifted her legs onto his shoulders and ran his hands down her thighs to clutch her hips.

"A really good girl," he whispered. "Now I need you to be a bad girl."

Piper tried to anchor herself as Keir thrust into her, tried to push back against him so he didn't shove her off the end of the table and they finished up on the floor. Keir exchanged his hold on her hips for one on her legs, clasping her ankles as he powered harder and faster into her. The kitchen was filled with the noise of them fucking, their breathy moans and gasps, the slap of wet flesh, and Piper's body responded to the friction, her muscles clamping harder, fire igniting in her belly, her chest tightening. She tipped her head back and gave a deep groan.

Keir suddenly pulled out, twisted her around, and joined her on the table, turning her so his chest pressed up against her back. He lifted her upper leg in the air and slid back inside her. One arm protected her from the hard surface; the other hand held her leg as he nibbled her ear. The change of angle flipped Piper to another level, and a torrent of heat swept over her.

"Fuck, fuck," Keir gasped as he thrust into her.

How could he move so fast? Piper felt herself coming again, and as she fell over the brink, Keir fell with her, his cock swelling to jerk inside her. Shit, I want to keep doing this over and over. I'll never sleep again.

He wrapped her in his arms and pressed his face to her neck, his breathing short and choppy. "I've wanted to do that from the moment you breathed on my butt."

Chapter Six

They only made it as far as the couch before they were on each other again. Piper wasn't sure how Keir managed another erection so soon, but she wasn't complaining. His kisses made her want to cry and gasp for joy at the same time. She knew deep down that this was just sex, but the tender way he touched and stroked her, the feel of his skin rubbing against hers let her pretend it was something special.

Well, it was. Tomorrow she'd have no memory of Keir or what they'd done, and he probably wouldn't care anyway, because a guy like him could have any woman he wanted. Even those who sank their sharp nails into his hips.

"You look like a little ghost," he said and nipped her ear as they lay face-to-face wrapped in each other's arms, hips nestling together, cradling his cock. "Has your hair always been white?"

"Yes." She had no idea.

"It's cute. You're cute."

He thinks I'm cute! I could tell him.

Piper opened her mouth and closed it again. If they got as far as the bedroom, she'd tell him. She'd have to explain the sheet of paper pinned to the wall. He hadn't noticed the photos in the kitchen, but then they didn't look out of the ordinary.

I could tell him.

If he asked to see her again, she'd tell him. Because if he was interested enough to want to meet her another day, surely he'd understand. She could make a joke of it and tell him each time they made love it would be like the first time for her. Only maybe he wouldn't see that as an advantage. *Shit*.

Another condom retrieved from his wallet and he pinned her on her knees on the couch facing away from him. Keir nuzzled her ear, his arms lying along hers as he rubbed his chest against her back. He slid his rigid cock back and forth down the crease of her butt and then brought one hand down to position his erection at the entrance to her body to slip into her with a long groan. He rubbed her clit with his fingers as he surged in and out, and Piper moaned through closed lips.

Write in my book—I like sex. No change that. Write—I love sex.

"That feels so good," she gasped.

Every thrust was deep. Every thrust pushed air from her lungs. He circled her clit, rubbed it, and Piper came so hard she thought her pounding heart would burst

out of her chest. Keir's hips jerked as his cock swelled inside her, and then he was panting as he spurted into her. Even through the condom she could feel the warmth of his seed. His child would be—Piper's pleasure evaporated. Racing well ahead of herself. How could she ever have a child?

Keir trembled against her back, his chin rough on her shoulder, his breath washing her neck in moist warmth, and then he pulled out of her and enveloped her in his arms as they fell sideways onto the couch. Piper had no idea what he'd done with the condom, but she could feel his naked cock nestled between her thighs, still semihard. To be held like this filled her with happiness. The worst thing about not being able to remember was the feeling of isolation.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she snapped them open. No falling asleep.

What if she didn't go to sleep? What if she kept herself awake all night? She'd remember one day at least, and this was certainly a day to remember.

Piper made the wish she guessed she made every night.

When I wake tomorrow, please let me remember today.

Just in case, she was definitely going to stay awake tonight.

Keir stroked Piper's cheek with his finger. She didn't stir. She looked like a wayward angel with her tousled white hair, flawless skin, kiss-swollen lips, and that body made for sex. The only thing not angelic was the intricate tattoo at the base of her spine. He'd not had a chance to get a good look at it, though he thought it looked similar to his, some sort of entangled vine. She was sleeping on her back now, and he didn't want to disturb her. Piper clung to one of his fingers with her fist, and even in her sleep, she tightened her hold when he tried to pull free. Keir imagined wings sprouting from her back and her wrapping them around him, protecting him.

"I feel safe with you," he whispered.

He didn't know why, but it was true. The scent of her, the taste of her was intoxicating and comforting, like nothing he'd experienced before. The feel of her skin under his fingers sent arrows of fire to his groin. He wanted to dive inside Piper and stay there.

Mate.

He almost laughed when the word popped into his head. No way was that true. He'd just gone too long without a cute, uncomplicated, pretty woman. Only he could never see her again. It was his rule, though Keir wasn't above breaking it. For a few sweet moments, his head filled with the vision of them doing normal things like going to the cinema, out for a meal, taking a walk on a beach.

None of it could happen.

If he wanted to keep her safe, he should leave now. Keir pulled a throw from the chair and draped it over her. He could have carried her to bed but was afraid he might not be able to resist staying in there with her if he did. Keir finally eased his finger out of her grip, gathered his clothes, and dressed in silence. Shit, I ought to put her to bed. She'd be uncomfortable spending the night on the couch.

He swept her into his arms and carried her across the room, nudged open the door with his back, and laid her on the bed. She didn't wake. Before temptation got the better of him, Keir pulled the duvet over her. As he turned to leave, he caught sight of a large sheet of paper pinned to the wall.

Your name is Piper Kennedy. You suffer from a type of amnesia that makes you forget almost everything once you fall asleep. You write all you need to remember in a notebook. You take photos of people to recall their faces. Your notebook and phone are on the table at your side.

Keir blinked and read it again. She wasn't going to remember this? He started to read for a third time and stopped. Reading it over and over wouldn't change anything. Fucking hell, how weird is that? He should have felt relief; instead disappointment swamped him. Was this condition the reason she'd been immune to the vamps? Well, their failure hardly mattered. Tomorrow she wouldn't remember what had happened in the tattoo parlor. Nor would she remember him. And if she woke up now, she'd really freak to find a stranger in her flat. Keir went back to the other room and checked her pockets. He found the notebook she'd dropped and he'd picked up, and her phone.

He flicked through the book and turned to the last pages.

Shit. She'd written about him and the vamps coming into the tattoo parlor: their names, their strangeness, his tattoo, his lovely butt. Keir grinned, and then the smile slipped away. He ought to rip out the page, but she had other stuff written in there about people she'd tattooed, things she needed to buy. He was tempted to take a photo of his face with her phone, but unless he added a note to her diary, she'd have no idea who he was. Christ, this is beyond strange. How could she not remember being so thoroughly fucked?

Keir slipped out of the flat, pulling the door closed behind him. He checked the apartment number and then the name of the street. What was that cardinal rule again? He didn't sleep with the same person twice? Well, if Piper didn't remember him, how could that apply? He could keep seducing her and would just have to make sure no one found out.

He took out his mobile and called a cab.

* * *

Cuba looked around at her guests, whose attention was fixed on the pair writhing in the middle of the room. She spotted Sobel tapping his fingers in impatience. He was a vamp and a pain in the neck. He constantly challenged her decisions and undermined her authority. She heard him chat to the shifter next to him, questioning why they were being made to wait, and Cuba clenched her teeth so hard she heard one crack.

Two in the morning and no sign of her star attraction. Familia Mantel was the only member of the fight club with a werepuma, and she'd promised Keir would

make an appearance. She was going to fucking strangle the shifter when he turned up. Except she couldn't. Nor did she want to, not yet anyway, until she'd sucked him dry. Keir's cocky attitude drove her insane.

Nothing to stop Cuba strangling Frick and Jardine, though. They'd taken Keir to the tattoo parlor to have the addition to his marque and should have been back before midnight. If Cuba could only persuade Keir to be more cooperative, life would be much easier. Her hold was only strong enough to stop him running. She sighed.

Jardine slipped through the door and signaled to her. Cuba left her guests watching a sapphic display between a vampire from her familia and an unfortunate mortal from Grantham. The vamp did tend to get carried away. Cuba hoped the blood didn't splash her Persian carpet. Oz hadn't said a word. Something else to worry about. What did he want? Why wasn't he out looking for that thief? Cuba closed the door and turned to Jardine and Frick.

"Where is he?"

"Don't know," Jardine and Frick said together.

"You two must be the most pathetic—"

"Looking for me?" Keir asked.

She spun around, annoyed she'd not heard the cat slink up. "Where have you been?"

"Out."

Cuba glared. "You reek of sex."

"And you don't." Keir smiled.

Jardine sniggered, and Cuba slowly turned her head to look at him. "Go to my room and wait for me."

Frick made the mistake of snorting. Cuba glared. "You can join him later."

"But—"

"You weren't thinking of arguing?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Jardine, go and wait. Frick and Keir, get in here. I have guests who wish to see a werepuma." She wrapped her fingers around the door handle.

"I'm not a performing monkey," Keir snapped.

"If I request it, you'll cover yourself in cream and let the guests lick it off."

"The agreement was—"

"Shut up." Cuba clamped down on the rage boiling inside her like acid. "Perhaps I've made a mistake. Perhaps I haven't made it clear enough that until your marque is complete, I own you body and soul. Perhaps I should have chosen Reed to fight for me."

Keir's jaw twitched.

"Of course I doubt he'd have survived his first bout, but if you don't do as I say, I'll send for him and make him my special little pet. When he becomes tiresome, he can go to the ring."

Keir pushed past Cuba, stepped into the drawing room, and slammed to a halt. Vaseels were cleaning up a mess in the center of the room. He saw a blood-smeared figure leaving through another door and winced. Cuba's guests lounged on and in front of couches arranged around three sides of the square room. One guest sat alone.

Oz. Fuck.

Cuba clapped her hands for attention. "I'd like to introduce Keir Sparks, my werepuma. I'm sure those who saw him fight last night will agree he was a worthy victor."

Unless they'd bet against me or headed the familia that owned my opponent. Keir's gaze flickered over the faces. The scowl on the face of a vampire opposite suggested the wolf had been his. Keir tried not to look at Oz.

"Strip," Cuba snapped.

Keir turned toward her and raised his eyebrows. "What, no music?"

A ripple of laughter ran around the room. So I can be funny sometimes. Before Cuba made her point by ordering music and making him dance, Keir yanked his sweater over his head and dropped it. He unfastened the buttons on his shirt as fast as he could, toed off his shoes, and unzipped his pants. He didn't think about what he was doing or who was watching, even when he stood naked. He only imagined ripping off Cuba's head. The thought brought him great comfort.

"You have to tag him?" a man asked. "I don't need to tag my fighters."

Keir's nostrils flared as he turned toward the voice. Vampire. The one who'd owned Erik.

"He likes running, Sobel," Cuba said. "And I like to let him, but I rather fear he'd not stop if I didn't set boundaries. Cats do like doing their own thing. Come here, Keir."

He went to stand in front of her like a good little pet.

"His healing powers are better than almost all other shifters," she said. "Look at his skin. Hardly a mark."

Keir saw the scowl when she saw the lines on his hips. Oz laughed.

"His power and speed are remarkable," she continued. "His attitude...unfortunate. He's bloody minded as well as bloodthirsty."

"Belligerence is hardly a disadvantage to a fighter," Sobel said. "Like to sell him, if you can't handle him?" The vampire's fangs shot out, and he flicked his tongue back and forth.

Keir stiffened.

"Oh I can handle him, and I'll never sell him." Cuba walked around Keir, trailing her fingers down his back. Her fingers suddenly stopped and pressed into his butt. "Who did this?"

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"The tattoo parlor where you have the arrangement. Do Bad Things," Keir said, praying he'd get away with that.

"The quality is extraordinary," Cuba said and looked toward the edge of the room. "Frick?"

The vampire stood up straight from where he slouched against the wall. "A woman called Piper did it. Hendrick wasn't there."

"It's beautiful," said one of the guests. "Looks like the animal is real."

"Did you ask for a cat?" Cuba whispered.

"Yes." Keir hoped he didn't get caught in the lie. Better that Cuba have no interest in Piper.

All those who'd been sitting, apart from Oz, came to stare at his backside. The expression on Oz's face was one of contempt. Keir didn't know who it was aimed at. If at him, well, Oz had no idea of the fucking mess Keir was in. The line he walked was thinner than a cotton thread.

"Shift," Cuba whispered.

So he did. Right in the middle of the huddling guests. Fast and smooth from two legs to four, from skin to fur, from pissed-off human to even more pissed-off snarling puma. All but Oz had seen him shift before, but he heard the swirl of gasps and comments sweeping around the room.

"Magnificent."

"Truly outstanding."

"You're very fortunate."

A babble of voices until Keir heard one he recognized. "Where did you find him?" Oz asked.

"Wyoming."

Cuba was lying, but for once Keir was glad. The less people knew of his origins, the better. His family—what was left of it—had moved from Florida to Scotland, a landscape large and wild enough for them to split their lives between the Highlands and cities. Keir hadn't wanted to leave America. What attraction was there in moving to a cold, wet place where skies were uniformly gray? But he'd grown to love the Scottish Highlands and wide, open hillsides. He still didn't like snow.

Fingers trailed along his flank, and Keir stood motionless while he was petted like a domestic cat, glad that no one he respected witnessed this humiliation.

"Jump," Cuba ordered.

Keir leaped thirty feet across the room. He could have gone farther, but he'd have hit the wall. A jump back and one blow from his paw would break her neck. Though Keir wasn't sure that would kill her, and of course he'd hardly live long enough to take another breath. Sometimes he thought killing her would be worth it.

"Have you ever fucked him in that form?" Oz asked.

Keir bristled.

Cuba laughed.

Not ever going to happen.

Keir shifted back without waiting for permission. "We haven't fucked at all," he said and waited for steam to shoot from Cuba's ears.

Her mouth tightened. "I'm making him wait. Sex is the reward he'll receive for pleasing me. At the moment, he doesn't please me."

"In that case, you won't mind if I have him tonight," Oz said.

Keir damned his cock for the twitch of agreement. Cuba's gaze dropped to his groin, and he knew she'd seen.

"Not at all." Cuba smiled, looking anything but pleased. A hungry great white shark came to Keir's mind. "Once I've finished with him here, by all means. Assuming he cooperates." She stared at Keir, daring him to be rebellious. "Claws."

Four retractable claws shot out from his hands, with a fifth dewclaw emerging at his wrists. Four razor-sharp talons emerged from his feet, and he deliberately snagged a thread on her precious rug. Keir's jaw tightened as a couple of the guests stepped back. How much damage could he do before he was stopped? Not much that was permanent with an audience of shifters and vampires.

"Claws away. Change your head," Cuba ordered.

Keir did as he was told. At least this wasn't fighting or fucking. His ability to morph individual parts of his body was exceptional, he knew that, but he also knew Cuba would make him pay for blurting out that they hadn't fucked.

"Roar," she said.

He was right. Keir couldn't roar. No puma could.

"Oh no, I forgot. You can't," she said.

When he shifted, Keir's larynx morphed to one where he could only vocalize low-pitched hisses and purrs. His growl, such as it was, sounded so pathetic he rarely used it. He could growl better as a guy. What he could do as a cat was scream loud enough to scare a banshee, but he kept his mouth closed.

"Head away. Tail out," she snapped.

Keir let his tail emerge from the bottom of his spine and ignored the laughter. He maintained an expression of complete boredom and focused on nothing. His long, thick tail looked fine when he was a puma, but ridiculous on a man.

"Puma body, human head," Cuba ordered.

"That's enough," Oz said.

Interesting.

Keir changed to full human and waited. Oz could tell Cuba what to do? Keir's gaze shifted between the two of them until Cuba gave a faint nod.

Yes!

Oz beckoned Keir. "Come with me."

Keir scooped up his clothes.

"Keir, a word," Cuba said.

He walked over to her, his back toward Oz.

"He seeks a thief," she whispered, her mouth hidden by Keir's body. "Find out what the thief stole. An addition to your marque if you bring me the truth."

So get his head torn off in the ring or get his head torn off by Oz for spying. It was a lose-lose situation.

Keir stepped out of the room behind Oz and closed the door. A blow to Keir's face sent him sprawling on the floor.

"Are you a cat or a mouse?" Oz snapped.

Keir wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and looked at the smear of blood.

Oz kicked him hard in the ribs. "Get up."

Irritated rather than hurt, Keir pushed himself to his feet. He didn't like the gleam in Oz's eyes.

"I know you like to be hurt. I didn't know you like to be humiliated," Oz said.

Keir opened his mouth and closed it without speaking. He liked neither, but what was the point in saying anything?

"Walk," Oz said and pointed to the stairs. "Top floor."

Keir faltered.

"I've been exploring," Oz said and shoved Keir forward.

Oz dogged his heels as Keir headed up the stairs.

"She's right. The tattoo is exceptional. I'll try not to damage it."

Keir shuddered. He didn't have to go with this—whatever he was. He stopped and turned around.

"Don't even think about it," Oz said.

Keir swallowed and carried on up the stairs.

"What did she ask you to do?" Oz asked.

"Find out who and what you're looking for."

Oz laughed. "She probably fears I've come for her."

He's some sort of demon? That made sense. Keir wasn't sure he wanted to know any more than that.

Oz moved ahead and opened the door to the attic room.

Keir stepped inside. He made a conscious effort to straighten his shoulders when he heard the bolts snap shut behind him. Dark walls and there were no windows. Light came from recesses in the wooden ceiling, only dim illumination, but enough to see chains, restraints, and a large complicated-looking contraption with straps and hooks and iron bars. The room smelled of blood, fear, and lust.

Oz took a deep breath and sighed. The tilt to his lips looked like a smile, and Keir's stomach rolled over.

"Stand there," Oz said. "Face the wall. Arms in the air."

Keir's gaze settled on a pair of black leather cuffs attached to chains that hung from the ceiling. He hesitated. Did he have a choice? He thought he could heal whatever injury Oz inflicted, but that didn't mean it wouldn't hurt. Keir might have a taste for occasional rough sex, but he didn't like pain. He'd made it part of his life because he deserved it. Maybe he deserved this too. He faced the wall and raised his arms.

Oz secured the cuffs. They felt surprisingly soft around his wrists, and Oz's touch was gentle. Keir's cock thickened. *Stupid fucker*.

"Why do I find you so appealing?" Oz whispered.

"My animal magnetism?"

Oz chuckled in his ear. "I'd never had a werepuma before. To my surprise, I find one taste wasn't enough."

Keir's breathing quickened as his hands were placed on the chains. He slid his fingertips through the links. Oz wrapped his hands around Keir's to tighten his grip.

"Keep hold of the chains."

Oz's warm breath washed over Keir's neck, and shivers of fear skittered down his spine as every muscle in his body snapped tight.

"Safe word?" Keir whispered.

"No. I'll decide when you've had enough."

Oh fuck.

Oz pressed himself against Keir, the hard ridge of his erection nudging Keir's backside. Keir's cock struggled to push through the wall. *God*. His head swirled in confusion. He couldn't think straight. Nothing new there. He was so fucked-up he had no idea who he was. Had he ever been normal? Ever been faithful, loyal, someone who gave a damn?

What did he want out of life?

Keir wished he knew. His little dream of a threesome, a man he loved, a woman to share that they both loved, kids to play with was so pathetic he hardly even dared think it.

Oz spun him around and stared at his face. Keir hid everything. He'd learned that trick long ago. Not that it had ever saved him from his father's anger, his pack's disgust, or his stepmother's lust. Oz continued to stare. His hand slid down

Keir's chest, and as soon as strong fingers stroked Keir's cock to rigid attention like the good little soldier he was, Oz smiled and walked away.

The lump in Keir's throat grew larger. He wanted and didn't want. Oz strolled around the room, running his fingers over wood and metal. For one brief moment, Keir wished he was dead, but he wished even more that Cuba were dead. What happened if he lived long enough for his marque to be completed? She might let him go, but he had no home.

When the whip cracked next to Keir's head, he started. He hadn't even seen Oz pick the thing up. The sound was so loud Keir heard the echo long after Oz dropped the whip on the floor. It lay there like a coiled snake.

"Too short," Oz said, and Keir shuddered.

Oz wielded the next whip from halfway across the room. It hit the wall next to Keir's ear, and flecks of paint flew to hit his cheek. Another loud crack and air raced over Keir's chest in the wake of the whip's close passage. He should have been relieved Oz knew what he was doing, but he wasn't.

Oz walked forward and pressed his mouth close to Keir's ear. "She's watching." Keir wasn't surprised.

"Rather have me or her?" Oz stroked Keir's cock with the handle of the whip, pressing the head into his balls until Keir grunted in pain.

"You."

Oz laughed. "Are you used to the whip?"

"Yes."

Keir had been twelve years old the day he first felt it. The day his father had found him in bed with his horny bitch of a stepmother.

Oz turned him to face the wall, and Keir tightened his hold on the chains. He tensed. Couldn't help it. The sound of the whip came before the line of fire racing down his back, but the moment he felt it, Keir bucked into the wall. He pressed his lips together, determined not to cry out, and the whip fell again, slicing into him like a knife.

He could hear Oz laughing as he brought the whip down time after time. Keir tried to think himself out of reality. It was Piper who filled his mind. Her sweet face. Her soft hands. Her vulnerability triggered his need to protect, but she wouldn't even remember who he was. Then the lash came down again, blood flowed, and Keir didn't remember who he was either. Only that he would not cry out, would not give in, would not care.

Dimly aware that Oz had stopped whipping him, Keir felt himself released from the restraints and dragged across the room to be fastened into some sort of webbing. He hung facedown, arms and legs extended. Then Oz was lying on top of his raw back, his chest rubbing against the cuts as he thrust his cock into him. And despite everything, Keir wanted it all—the pain, the sex, and the humiliation.

Chapter Seven

Piper sat at the controls of the Cessna waiting for her instructor. Her fingers crept over the pocket of her jeans and patted the notebook. If she lost it, she was fucked. It told her where she lived, where she worked, her car license number, times she had to be places, the bank she used and her PIN—and yes, she did know it wasn't a good idea to have the two together, but what the hell was she supposed to do?—and a whole lot of other stuff besides.

After freaking out when she woke up, she'd read the message she'd left herself, followed the instructions, and felt like crying. She ached as though she'd been doing something physical, and where she ached made her wonder if she'd had vigorous sex, but her notes had stopped after she'd left work. When she checked out the other entries, she found that a little suspicious. Usually, she wrote *going to sleep now* as her final comment. Last night she hadn't. No point wasting time wondering what she'd been up to. She'd never know.

Piper had spent the morning poring over a pile of her previous notebooks, guessing this was what she did every day. The doctors she'd been to see—only a month ago—didn't recognize her type of amnesia, and because they couldn't give it a name, they were convinced she was making it up. Piper had written a type of retrograde hysterical fugue combined with a variation of prosopagnosia—an inability to recognize faces. She didn't know if that was her guess or theirs.

It was a partial relief to know she could remember how to do stuff like climb mountains, throw herself off mountains, tunnel into mountains, and apparently fly over mountains, though she didn't remember when, not unless she searched her notebooks. It made her life tricky. More than tricky. Bloody awful.

No boyfriend. What a surprise. She had to take pictures of guys who asked her out so she could remember them the next time they met. Well, that was the advice of the notebook. After a date, before she went to sleep, she wrote down everything they'd said. So if there had been a guy with her last night, she must have fallen asleep before she had the chance to make any notes.

Not a good idea to have a guy sleep over, not unless she stayed awake all night. She didn't often spend the night anyplace other than her flat. The times when she did were when she had gone on courses to do things like mountaineering. Easier not to go out with anyone, not to have friends, except Piper couldn't help but wonder if she had a family somewhere and she'd lost them. She wished she had someone who understood her.

Maybe it was time to read the notebooks from start to finish. Except wouldn't she have done that already? They looked well read, the corners of the pages thin and grubby. She thought about buying a laptop, but fear of losing her history in a sizzle of electronic death stopped her. Probably as it had every other time the thought had occurred to her.

When Piper had seen the notation about her tenth flying lesson, she'd smiled. Just as with the detail that she was a tattoo artist, it felt right. Once she'd walked toward the plane, everything fell into place. She'd completed the flight checks and now waited for Ben, the instructor. No photo, though Piper didn't think that mattered. She'd done what her notebook had told her, reported to the office and found the right plane, so all she had to do was sit here.

Piper wondered how many more hours she'd need to log before she could fly solo. Though she had a feeling once she'd gone up on her own, she'd lose interest as she apparently had with everything else she'd taken up. No hint in the notebooks of hobbies or sporting activities done on a regular basis. She seemed to learn a skill or sport and then stop. Piper suspected she might be looking for something to trigger her memory.

The passenger door opened, and a round-faced, brown-haired guy climbed in carrying a small black bag.

"Hi, Ben," Piper said.

The guy frowned. "Chock."

"Done." They could hardly take off with the chocks in place.

Ben gave her a strange look and then shrugged. "Okay, let's get out of here."

"Don't you want to go through the checks?"

He fastened his safety harness. "Haven't you done them already?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then don't waste time and money. Take off."

"Which direction?"

"Northwest."

"The weather?" Piper asked.

Ben looked out of the window. "Fine." Then put the headphones on.

She needed more than that. Visibility? Wind speed? Was this a test? Torn between pleasure that he trusted her to do the checks properly and concern that she might have missed something, Piper ensured the area around them was clear, put on her headphones, and went through the procedures to start the plane. She turned on the radio and spoke into the microphone. "Lincoln Tower, this is Cessna Eight-Seven-Lima, ready to taxi."

"Cessna Eight-Seven-Lima, this is Lincoln Tower. Clear to taxi," said a woman.

Piper took the plane to the end of the runway, obtained permission to take off, and advanced to full throttle.

As the plane accelerated, Piper kept expecting Ben to say something, but he continued to stare out of the window, his fingers clasping the edge of the seat. Had she done something wrong? The fact that he wasn't even watching the instruments unnerved her a little, but once she reached the correct speed, Piper pulled back on the stick, the nose came up, and they were in the air. She maintained her velocity until she'd finished climbing and then leveled the plane out. No doubt about it, Piper thought as she looked through the window, flying was fun, fun, fun.

"We heading somewhere in particular?" she asked as she turned northwest.

"North Lincolnshire. Village called Arthington."

Arthington? Her hands jerked on the controls, and the Cessna wobbled.

"Hey, take it easy. I get travel sick."

A flight instructor who got travel sick? That was weird. Had he told her that before? Still, since she didn't remember what he looked like—rather cute—nor his name, why would she remember that detail?

Ben stayed quiet. Maybe he was testing her. Was the comment about getting travel sick a joke? Why did the name of that village ring a bell? *Concentrate on what you're doing*. Piper sighed. She really hated being fucked-up like this. There were always hundreds of questions swirling in her head and very few answers.

He continued to say nothing as they flew, but seemed to be paying a lot of attention to the ground, which began to freak her out. She'd paid for a lesson. Shouldn't he be teaching her?

"Over there. That's it." Ben pointed out of the window. "See that pile of rubble in the clearing in those woods?"

"Yes." It looked like a house had been demolished.

"Fly over it a few times."

Piper headed in that direction and circled.

"Lower and closer," Ben said.

As she reduced height and turned in a tighter circle, her pulse began to race and her heart pounded. Was this place somewhere she'd been before?

"Go lower." He peered out of the window.

"Lower?" Piper thought the ground looked plenty close enough. Was that why she felt weird?

He pulled a camera out of his bag.

"You want to take pictures?" she asked.

"Well, duh!" He glanced at her and smiled. "I need a photograph for the article. That's the whole point of the charter."

Charter? Piper's stomach landed on her feet and set off to look for a parachute. "You're not Ben, my flight instructor?"

He laughed. When he saw her face, the laugh died. "Oh Jesus Christ, you're serious."

Piper nodded.

"Why the hell did you take off? I told you my name was Jock."

"I thought you said *chock*." She tried not to whine. "I thought you were my instructor."

"I'm a journalist." His eyes opened wider. "How many lessons have you had? God, don't answer that. If you can't recognize your instructor, I don't want to know. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm fucked." His fingers curled around the edges of the seat. "Head out to sea. Water's softer."

"Don't worry. It's fine. I was due to fly solo next week," she lied. "Take your pictures, and we'll go back. No problem."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely." Piper made herself beam.

"You know how to land?"

"That came at the end of the first lesson. Just make sure you stay inside the plane until we're down."

Piper waited.

And waited.

"Joke," she said.

"Right." He snapped more pictures of the ground.

"So what's the interest in a pile of stones?" she asked.

"Big mystery. The house collapsed in on itself the night before last. No one knows why. No one lived there, though the place was in good repair. It just fell down. Oh Christ. Like we're going to fall down. Any parachutes on board?"

"No, and we're not going to crash."

Think of something to distract him. Except Piper was the one distracted. Had she been here before? Been in the house before it was reduced to rubble?

"Not a gas explosion?" she asked.

"No gas supply."

"And no one was inside?"

"They used a helicopter with heat-seeking equipment, and the police had search dogs roaming the remains in case some squatter had taken up residence, but they didn't find anything."

"That's good."

"Interestingly, it wasn't the only large house that came down. There was another near London. Only that one seemed to disappear into the ground. Some sort of sinkhole they think, so this might not be connected."

"Terrorists?" Piper asked.

"Targeting an empty house in the middle of nowhere?"

"Who did it belong to?"

Jock sighed. "That's the strange part. I'm having difficulty finding out. Records missing and people being awkward."

"Cessna Eight-Seven-Lima, this is Lincoln Tower," said the same woman as before, but her voice was louder, more strident. "You're flying without an authorized instructor. Reverse course and return immediately."

Oops. Piper had been about to call them.

"Lincoln Tower, Cessna Eight-Seven-Lima receives and is reversing course. Position approximately twenty miles northwest of airport."

Piper set the course. She was too low and needed to climb in order to descend and land. On her own. No Ben beside her with an expert just-in-case hand. *Oh bloody hell*.

"Roger, Eight-Seven-Lima. Fly heading zero-nine-zero. Report airport in sight," said the woman.

"What if we meet another plane?" Jock's voice cracked.

"We'll be warned on the radio, but we should still keep a lookout. Good practice."

Piper felt sick. She'd done all this before but had always had the instructor next to her to take over if she was going to fuck up. Flying was easy, landing and taking off trickier. No second chance at this—well, not beyond the point of final commitment. She began her descent, banking to start her approach. *Configure for landing*.

"I can see the runway," Jock croaked.

So could Piper. She lowered the landing gear. Correct altitude, correct speed. She could do this.

"You're going too fast," he gasped. "Oh Christ, I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I'm going to die."

Yes, you are, because if you don't shut up, I'm going to kill you.

"Lincoln ground, Eight-Seven-Lima on approach," she said, hoping her voice sounded calmer than she felt.

"Eight-Seven-Lima, taxi straight to the hangars after landing. If you have to go around again, turn southeast and hold for further instruction. A commercial jet is due to land after you."

Good grief. "How long after me?" Piper asked.

"Don't look behind you," said a man's deep voice, and Piper yelped.

"OhmyGodohmyGod," Jock yelled. "Now you're going too slow."

No, she wasn't.

"It's fine, Jock. Don't worry. Piece of cake. Easy as pie." Please let it be.

Wheels touched, and the plane stayed level and straight as Piper slowed. A perfect landing. Her organs put themselves back in the right places, and she taxied to the left.

"Hhhhhh," Jock gasped.

"Breathe," she snapped.

He inhaled sharply and then sighed. "Thank God."

Piper pulled into the space she'd vacated and switched off the engine. She guessed the guy storming across the tarmac toward them was Ben. Damn, if she'd taken a photo, all this could have been avoided. Jock stumbled from his seat, got out of the plane, and she heard him throwing up. Piper climbed out and locked her shaking knees.

"Of all the fool-headed, imbecilic, idiotic things to do," Ben shouted. "I'm really disappointed in you. You had the makings of a good pilot."

Piper opened her mouth to explain and then closed it.

"What the hell were you thinking? Well, you weren't thinking. Taking your boyfriend for a joyride? Taking a plane without permission? You weren't insured, you're not qualified, and you recklessly endangered your lives and others on the ground. You're finished here. No more lessons. No refund. You'll never fly again."

She sighed. So that was that.

Jock came around from the other side of the plane, wiping his mouth. "I'm not her boyfriend. I chartered a plane and got in the wrong one. Neither of us realized until we were in the air." He lifted his camera and took a snap of a wide-eyed Piper.

Ben turned to Piper in bewilderment. "What? I don't understand. I've taken you up on the last nine occasions. Why the hell would you think I wouldn't be your instructor this time? I was late. That was all."

Piper pressed her lips together. Silence was better.

"Explain." Ben narrowed his eyes. "Make it good."

Piper went for a half-truth. "I have a condition called prosopagnosia. It means I can't easily recognize people." Though she knew it wasn't quite that. She'd looked it up, and the description wasn't right.

"You were supposed to tell me if you had any visual defects," Ben said, gritting his teeth.

"It isn't a vision defect. I have twenty-twenty vision. It's a brain thing. It's just that I can't fit faces to names."

"Christ." Ben pulled his cap off his head and dragged his fingers through his shaggy hair.

"What's your full name?" Jock asked, holding a pen over a notebook.

"I don't want you to write a story about this," Piper said.

"Neither do I," Ben added.

"Too bad," said Jock.

Oz left the motorbike he'd borrowed hidden behind the wall of a field and walked through woods to get to Arthington Manor—well, what remained of it. He stared at the pile of stones, felt...nothing, and sighed. Oz jumped up onto the rocks and looked around. Not quite true that he felt nothing. The remnants of power lingered, invisible threads snaking through the rubble. Oz shot out his tongue and tasted the air. He had a sense of something—some unusual force—but not what he was looking for.

Had he fucked up somehow? Missed what he'd come to find? Had it never been here? Or maybe it had moved now the house was down. Oz should have come straight here two nights ago after he'd arrived in Lincoln, but the idea of a cold beer tempted, and he'd let the sexy cat distract him. He adjusted his cock, the mere thought of the feline shifter enough to make him hard. How much had those moments of pleasure cost him? Lack of willpower lurked in his genes and probably explained his dislike of apples. *Bloody Adam*.

Even last night he'd been sidetracked again by Keir. Cuba was up to something with the werepuma, but Oz wasn't sure what. In any case, he wasn't here to mess around in her problems, not unless they impacted on his. He walked again over the fallen building. This was his second visit to Arthington Manor, and if he sensed nothing now, then he had to admit to himself and perhaps to the boss that he'd failed. Oz winced.

The police and emergency services had long gone, the yellow tape fluttering in the breeze a legacy of their interest, but no bodies had been retrieved, no owner of the property traced. At least the demon that once lived here had done something right. Oz stepped over the stones using every one of his seven senses. Power gone or never there? Or power here and hidden too deep for him to find?

He froze at the sound of an approaching plane. Too late to move out of sight, he crouched on the rocks. The plane circled, and Oz didn't move. The pounding in his heart confused him for a moment, and then he sighed. There *was* something here. He could feel it now. The power made his pulse jump and brought a smile to his face. Though he didn't understand why he hadn't sensed it fully before.

The plane came lower, and Oz spread his fingers over the rock on which he crouched. *Hiding*? He was the best at retrieving a demon's power. There was no hiding place he could not find. He closed his eyes and concentrated on locating the source. It would be carefully secreted, but he could feel it now, faint but there. The plane moved away, and Oz felt success slipping from his grasp. What was there had gone.

He stood and glared. What the fuck happened?

Chapter Eight

Piper pulled up at the crossroads. Left took her back to Lincoln. She turned right. In an ideal world, Piper could drive to Arthington tomorrow and wouldn't be trying to fit in a visit before she went to work. But it seemed somehow imperative that she go now and not risk forgetting or maybe misunderstanding what she'd end up writing in her notebook.

When she'd flown over that pile of stones, it was as if something had grabbed her by the throat and shaken her. It had nothing to do with flying solo. She was upset that she'd made such a stupid mistake over her trainer, but what was done was done. But whatever it was that had clutched her wouldn't let go. Piper felt wrong, and although part of her was scared, part of her loved it because she couldn't help but wonder if at last something in her life was changing. Had she once lived in the village? Did she know people there? Had that house been her home?

Forty-five minutes later she passed a stone sign displaying the village name and the information that it was twinned with some unpronounceable town in Poland. Arthington looked pretty, a small sleepy place with smart houses swathed in red-leaved Virginia creeper. The trees lining the streets hovered on the brink of a seasonal change, the multihued leaves turning the scene into an impressionist painting.

Piper parked on the main road and walked down the short row of shops. Butcher, baker, and candlestick maker. She smiled. Well, an antique shop selling candlesticks. Nothing looked familiar. She was disappointed but not surprised.

Her mobile phone vibrated in her pocket. Piper checked the caller display, though she had a feeling no one but her boss ever phoned her.

"Hi, Hendrick."

"Hi, Piper. Just letting you know that you don't need to come to work tonight. I've canceled all the appointments. The street's been cordoned off."

"Why? What's happened?"

He sighed. "A barmaid from the Rising Sun's been found dead in the alley at the back of Do Bad Things."

Piper gasped.

"Looks like she was murdered."

"Oh my God."

"You left just after me last night, didn't you?"

"More or less."

There was a long pause before he spoke. "What does that mean?"

Piper repeated what she'd written in her notebook. "I had to stay and do a tattoo. You forgot to put an appointment in the book."

"I did?" Hendrick asked in a quiet voice. "Who was it?"

"Three men barged in as Gemma was leaving. Frick, Jardine, and Keir. Frick and Jardine got a bit hostile when I didn't want to do the tattoo, and they made me use ink they'd brought to tattoo Keir. I know I shouldn't have, but they were really insistent."

Silence at the other end of the phone.

"Hendrick?"

"Did-did they hurt you? Do anything to you?"

"No. They were really strange, though." She swallowed hard.

There was a long expiration of air at the other end of the phone.

"I fucked up," Hendrick said. "They've been in a few times. I forgot they were coming. Shit. I'll talk to you about this when I see you. The police want to ask if you saw anything so expect a call. Er, Piper? I think it'd be better if you didn't mention those guys. To be honest, I'm surprised you remember them. So keep quiet, okay? I'll explain when I see you."

Piper's heart thumped. "Okay." Why was he surprised she remembered them? He didn't know about her problem.

"We should be okay to open tomorrow, but I'll let you know if not."

"Right."

"Oh, and Piper?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful. I freaked out when I heard a woman had been murdered. I thought it was you. I'm really glad it wasn't."

"Thanks." She smiled.

"You're the best tattooist I've ever had. I don't want to lose you. Don't you dare go and get murdered or work for anyone else."

Piper rolled her eyes and switched off her phone. She'd written the word weird with three exclamation marks next to the names of the three guys who'd come in. She couldn't remember why she'd thought that now. Their clothes? What they said? Damn. But if she wrote down every solitary thing, she'd have no time to do anything else. Piper didn't like the idea of keeping something from the police. What if those men had murdered the woman? Piper had never been in the Rising Sun. Correction. She didn't think she had. Pubs were a problem because she might be expected to recognize people. She couldn't take photos of everyone.

At the end of the main street, Piper found the library—a cinder-block rectangle sandwiched between the village hall and a grocery store. Story time was in progress

for a group of wide-eyed preschoolers, and she tiptoed past. At the rear of the long, narrow room she located the local history books and carried a pile to a table.

Piper slid onto a chair. First thing she did was write in her book about the incident with the plane and then shuddered to think what might have happened. She copied in the details from the reporter's card and threw it in the bin. Then she scribbled down what Hendrick had told her. Except should she write down that he'd said to keep quiet? That might get him into trouble. Piper chewed the end of her pencil. What was she supposed to do about the names of the three? If the police saw her notebook, they'd know she'd lied. But then why would they ask to see it? More importantly, why did Hendrick not want her to tell the police about them?

She decided to write everything down. Too complicated to lie.

Piper opened the first library book. It didn't take long to find what she was looking for—a photograph of Arthington Manor. She hadn't known what to expect. Piper supposed she'd hoped it would trigger some massive flashback and all her life would neatly unravel in her head, but nothing happened. Not a flicker of recognition though the churning in her stomach hadn't diminished. Arthington Manor was—had been—an unattractive country house built in the middle of the nineteenth century of silver-gray Ancaster stone for a local landowner, William Knightly. The name meant nothing to her.

Piper kept reading.

The manor had been continuously occupied until fifty years ago. Since then, there had been a succession of owners, some doing more work on it than others, but the place hadn't been allowed to fall into disrepair. So the reporter had been right; that hadn't been the reason for its collapse. Piper kept an eye out for her surname, Kennedy, but didn't spot it. Nor did anything appear to have happened at or to the house eleven years ago when she was fourteen. Maybe this was a wild-goose chase. She checked every other book just in case and found nothing of interest.

Piper didn't intend to leave without seeing the ruins. When she walked out of the library, the sun was falling to kiss the horizon and the chill of the autumn evening made her shiver. Piper entered the destination into the sat nav and drove out of the village.

When she spotted yellow police tape stretched across metal gates, it wasn't hard to guess she'd found the right place. With trees all around, it was certainly isolated. Piper pulled off the road fifty yards past the gates and parked in the entrance to a forestry trail. Judging by the torn-up ground, she wasn't the first to use the spot. She buttoned her coat and walked back. Slipping under the tape, she edged through a narrow gap in the gates. There was a new padlock hanging from one of the curlicues, but the metal loop had been snapped.

As Piper made her way along the drive, she tried not to hype herself up in case she mistook excitement for something more significant. The sun had set, leaving a red glow in the sky, but there was still plenty of light. Enough to see the hunched figure ahead and Piper froze. She sagged a moment later when she registered it wasn't moving. A few more steps and she saw it stood in the middle of a circular water fountain.

The centerpiece looked like a devil, half man and half goat, complete with horns, hooves, and a forked tail. Except the head had been neatly severed and lay in the dried-out base at the statue's feet. Maybe it had happened when the house fell down. Piper stared at the pile of stones beyond. It looked like wrecking balls had had a party. Nothing was left standing.

She edged closer. The steps had been...but there were no steps.

I've been here before. Oh my God.

That was a memory, wasn't it? Piper's breathing quickened. She knew there had been steps? Then her shoulders slumped. She'd just been looking at a picture of the place in the library. *Idiot*.

Piper scrambled onto the stones, and as she picked her way toward the center of the devastation, she saw wind begin to swirl around her and yet not touch her. What the fuck? How could she see air? Not like there were leaves or anything floating in it. Her head felt leaden, and Piper staggered, arms flailing as she tried to stay balanced. What was going on? Torn between running away as fast as she could or staying to see what the hell was happening, Piper shifted her feet and saw the ground rushing up to meet her. She threw out her arms as she tumbled headlong. Her knees hit rock, then her hand, wrist, and arm slid into a crack between two pieces of stone, bunching up her coat on the outside.

Her shoulder slammed into the ground, and Piper groaned. No burst of pain to tell her she'd broken bones, so she tried to pull free. Her arm didn't move. Piper took a deep breath. One moment to collect herself and she'd try again. Then something brushed her forearm. Piper whimpered and jerked, but her arm was caught fast. *Shit*. What had touched her? A rat? A figment of her imagination? As Piper struggled, something clamped around her wrist and squeezed. Fear swamped her.

"Oh God." Her whisper morphed into a scream. Something sharp dug into her wrist, cutting her. *Biting*? She tried again to get free, but she was wedged tight in the rock.

"Please," she pleaded as if whatever had caught her could hear. Probably a loop of electrical wire she'd somehow slipped into and it had tightened when she'd pulled, like one of those Mexican finger traps. Struggling would make matters worse, but how the hell was she going to get free? And it hurt, pain radiating up her arm to her neck. Kept hurting.

She could smell blood, and there was a horrible noise that sounded like slurping. *Oh shit*. Piper's dizziness worsened, her heart beat faster, and she shivered. The pain disappeared, but her arm felt heavy. She might not be able to see it happening, but she knew she was bleeding. Much as she wanted it to be wire wrapped around her wrist, she didn't think it was. It felt like something was sucking.

OhGodohGodohGodohGod.

"Please stop, please."

Her head was full of mist. If she passed out, she wouldn't be able to recall what had happened, though somehow Piper thought she might not want to. But if this didn't stop, maybe she wouldn't be alive to remember anything.

Then she did remember her phone. She fumbled left-handed to pull it from her pocket, desperate not to drop it.

"Police, ambulance, fire brigade," she gasped out when the operator spoke. "My name is Piper Kennedy. I'm trapped in the ruins of Arthington Manor, and I'm bleeding. Please hurry."

The operator kept talking to her, asking questions, but Piper's breathing grew choppier, and her heart stuttered. She heard the hitch in the beat and gasped. If she didn't get free now, she was going to die. She tried to put her phone down somewhere safe, but it tumbled over rocks to lie out of reach. One chance to pull her arm free, because she'd have to use every ounce of strength she had.

She twisted to brace her knees against the rock, and in a lightbulb moment, instead of trying to pull out, she shoved forward as far as she could before yanking back. A gurgled cry filled her head.

Did I make that weird sound?

Her arm shot out of the hole, and Piper flew backward. Her head collided with rock, she yelped in pain, and her eyes closed.

Do not pass out!

Piper gasped when she saw her hand. Her fingers were sticky with blood, her wrist a mess of jagged flesh.

What's that sound? Not me.

She clamped her palm over the wound and pressed her hand to her chest, higher than her heart. She needed something to use as a tourniquet, but she had no belt. Maybe a sock would work, but she might bleed to death trying to take it off.

Crawling to her phone should have been simple, but it wasn't. Nothing worked. Her legs didn't cooperate, and Piper grew increasingly unable to concentrate. Her head was full of strange noises, groans, and wails, and not all of them were coming from her. She could feel her notebook in her pocket and drew some reassurance from that, even though she hadn't the strength to write in it. When she didn't remember any of this tomorrow, at least she'd know who she was.

Except...she was so tired... If she just closed her eyes for a minute...Her hand fell away from her wrist, and she groaned. Blood soaked her coat. Maybe the ambulance wouldn't get here in time. Maybe there was no need to worry about remembering.

* * *

More. More. More.

No, come back.

He groaned.

Not enough.

Wanted more.

Needed more.

Cells plumped as veins filled.

This was the most he'd drunk in... He didn't remember.

* * *

"Wake up," Cuba snapped.

Keir ignored her.

"Get up now." She slapped his face. Hard.

He opened his eyes to see her glaring down at him. She was dressed head to foot in black leather with the zipper of her jacket pulled down to reveal as much cleavage as possible. Another inch and her breasts would fall out. Keir hated her.

"What did you do after you went to get the addition to your marque?" she demanded.

Got a blowjob from a guy, had great sex with a pretty woman, got whipped and fucked by something not human. Keir blinked but said nothing.

"I have the police sitting in the house drinking coffee. A woman you've been seen with has been found dead in the town center. What have you done?"

What? Keir's heart pounded. "I've done nothing."

"Shower and come to the library."

Once the door closed, Keir sat up and put his head in his hands. What woman? Piper? She'd been fine when he left her. He hadn't hurt her. He'd remember if he had. Even if he'd shifted. *Oh God*.

Piper? Keir staggered to the shower and turned it on. His back ached, but he doubted much remained to show what Oz had done. His memories of that part of last night were hazy. But not of what he and Piper had done. He hadn't killed her, but if he found out who had, Keir would rip their head off.

By the time he'd dressed and walked over to the main house, Keir felt sick with anxiety and grief. Someone was trying to set him up. Who? Wasn't he dying quick enough to please his father? Someone in the familia? A relative of an opponent he'd killed?

Two plump men in their forties stood as Keir walked into the library. Cuba reclined on her chaise longue in front of a roaring fire.

"Detectives Frost and Jackson, this is Keir Sparks."

"Thank you, Ms Mantel. If we could have a word with Mr. Sparks privately?" the shorter of the guys asked.

Cuba smiled and rose to her feet. Keir knew she'd listen in, and he decided he wasn't going to let that happen. As the door closed, he tried to think what he could do.

"I'm Detective Frost," said the guy who'd spoken. "We'd—"

"I'd rather answer questions at the police station," Keir whispered close to Frost's ear. "Make me go with you."

The detectives glanced at one another. Keir could guess what they were thinking, that he had something to confess.

"I think it might be better if you accompanied us to the station," said the other guy in a loud voice.

Keir nodded. "Fine."

Frick and Jardine lurked in the hall as they came out of the library.

"Are you arresting him?" Frick asked.

Try not to look so fucking happy about it.

"No. He's coming down to the station to answer a few questions," said Jackson.

"You need a lawyer," Jardine said. "I—"

"I don't need a lawyer. I haven't done anything," Keir said.

"Keir?" Cuba emerged from another room.

"He's just accompanying us to the station," said Frost.

"Detectives, I'm sure there's no need to take Keir to Lincoln. Jardine and Frick have already told you he was with them last night," Cuba said.

"Just checking times, ticking boxes, Ms. Mantel," said Frost.

Keir knew Cuba had no choice but to let him go, though she wasn't happy. *Good*.

* * *

Keir didn't speak until they were in an interview room at the Lincoln police station. He spent the journey staring out of the window thinking about Piper, how sweet she was, how fucking cute, how he'd wanted to see her again. He couldn't believe she was dead. He'd put her in bed and left. Someone must have gone in afterward.

They read him his rights, and Keir's heart pounded. He needed to be careful what he said.

"Where were you last night?" asked Frost.

There was his first problem. Had Frick and Jardine told the police they'd taken him to Do Bad Things? Keir had no choice but to tell the absolute truth—well, most of it.

"I went with Jardine and Frick to get a tattoo at Do Bad Things at around ten. After that I took a drive with a friend."

Shit. He really didn't want to give them Neil's name.

"Neil Harmon," said Frost.

Keir glanced up from the table.

"We already have a statement from Mr. Harmon. He came forward this morning when he heard about the murder. He said he met you in the Rising Sun. You'd spoken to each other the night before. He drove you from the pub to a derelict warehouse in the Ottersbrook district, where you engaged in a sexual act in his car. He then returned you to the pub just after eleven fifteen. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Keir said. Make me sound like a fucking rent boy, why don't you, Neil?

"Then what happened?" Jackson asked.

"Neil drove off and almost collided with a pedestrian. I ran over and recognized the woman from Do Bad Things who'd given me a tattoo earlier. She wasn't hurt. Once he was sure she was okay, Neil drove away."

"Piper Kennedy," said Frost.

"Yes. What happened to her?" Keir blurted. He wanted to ask if it had been quick, if she'd suffered.

"Has something happened to her?" Frost exchanged a look with his colleague.

It took a moment to sink in. "Not Piper," he said with a deep sigh and dropped his head into his hands.

"What are you talking about?" Jackson asked.

"Cuba told me a woman had been killed. I thought it was Piper."

Thank fuck, thank fuck, thank fuck.

"No, it was a barmaid from the Rising Sun. We understand you had words with her."

Keir felt limp with relief, then swamped with guilt for the thought. "No, not words. I asked for a beer, and she teased me for not saying please. Nothing more."

"What did you do after Mr. Harmon had driven off?" Frost asked.

"I went with Piper to her flat. Two-B Robin Hood Close. She was shaky, so I drove her car. I left around two thirty in the morning. I called a cab, and it took me back to Lam Hall, where I...was introduced to Cuba's dinner guests. I was there until you turned up."

"How long have you known Ms. Kennedy?" Frost asked.

Oh shit, this looks bad. "I met her for the first time last night."

"Did you fuck her as well?" Jackson asked.

Keir bristled. "I didn't fuck Neil."

"I didn't ask you that."

"We... Yes."

"We'll be speaking to Miss Kennedy," Frost said.

"It might not do you much good. She has some sort of weird amnesia that makes her forget everything after she falls asleep."

The two policemen exchanged looks of incredulity.

"So no one can verify your whereabouts between eleven fifteen on Tuesday night and two thirty this morning," Frost said.

Keir's stomach churned. "No. But my prints will be on the steering wheel of her car and in the apartment. I can describe it."

"Hardly an alibi," said Frost.

"Did you kill Mary Wollard?" Jackson asked.

"No."

"Are you paid for sex?" Frost asked.

"No." Not at the current time.

"You appear to have a voracious sexual appetite. Sex with a man and a woman within a couple of hours."

"I like sex," Keir mumbled, thinking how inane that sounded.

"Did you approach Mary and she said no?"

"No." Thank fuck he'd left her alone.

"Did you try to make her change her mind? Hit her?" Jackson asked.

"No."

Frost leaned on the table. "What goes on at Lam Hall?"

Now Keir had to lie. "It's an exclusive hotel."

"What do you do there?"

"Personal trainer."

"You look a pretty fit guy," Jackson said.

"I am "

"Wouldn't be difficult for you to do this." Frost put a photograph in front of Keir.

"Oh God," Keir whispered.

The face of the woman remained untouched, though her expression showed the horror of her death. Her head was barely attached to her body, and her bloody clothing hung in tatters along with her flesh.

"Handy with a knife?" Frost asked.

"No." Keir didn't need one. Nor did the person who'd done this. Claws or fangs were quite sufficient.

76

Chapter Nine

She opened her eyes and blinked.

"Back with us, Piper?"

She turned her head toward the gentle voice. *Uniform. A nurse.* She tried to move and groaned.

"Lie still. You're attached to an IV."

She looked up to see a bag of fluid hanging above her.

"What happened?" she croaked.

"You hurt your arm. You lost a lot of blood."

A thick bandage lay around her wrist. The nurse lifted her other arm and attached a blood pressure monitor.

"You nearly died," the red-haired woman whispered. Her name tag said Sylvie.

"I had an accident?"

Sylvie gave her a puzzled look. "You called an ambulance on your mobile."

She called me Piper. Is that my name? She didn't want to say that she couldn't remember. She wanted to go home. Only where was home?

"Your blood pressure is fine now." The nurse removed the monitor. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused. Thirsty."

"Well, I can help one of those." Sylvie lifted her up so she could take a swallow of water. "The doctor will be along shortly."

"Where are my things?"

"In the locker next to you."

"What did I have with me?"

"Your mobile phone—you're not allowed to use it in here—a diary, and car keys. And your purse. The police used your car keys to get that. Is there someone I can call for you? A relative or friend? Ask them to bring you some clean clothes?"

She shook her head.

"Well, if you need anything, use the buzzer."

"My diary?" Maybe it would give her a clue as to what was going on.

Sylvie took a blue notebook from the locker and handed it to her.

She opened it and began to read. My name is Piper Kennedy. I live alone at flat 2B Robin Hood Close, Lincoln. My car is a blue Ford Focus. License number...

Her heart surged. Why can't I remember?

"Good, you're awake." A brown-skinned guy with very white teeth closed the curtains around the bed. "I'm Dr. Chakrabati. How are you feeling?"

"Okay."

"I stitched your wrist last night. Can you tell me what happened?"

She looked at the bandage. "I can't remember."

He nodded. "We know you have problems with your memory. We got your name and address from your notebook and then checked your medical records. You've consulted several doctors over the past few years."

Had she? Piper swallowed hard. That didn't sound good.

The doctor cleared his throat. "But your wound was very unusual. I couldn't quite figure out what had caused it."

Piper wondered why he was staring at her so intently. "Where was I found?"

"A village called Arthington. You were lying in the ruins of a collapsed house."

"It collapsed with me in it?"

The doctor frowned. "No. You'd gone there later. It's possible that you fell. You have a small bump on your head, but the paramedics didn't see anything that could have caused the injury to your wrist." He dropped his voice. "The marks looked...like teeth marks. Were you trying to harm yourself?"

Teeth marks? Suicide? Aware her mouth had fallen open, she clamped her jaw closed.

"Piper? If things are so bad, you need to talk to someone."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"Just because we can find no physical reason for your memory loss doesn't mean we don't recognize it's a problem for you."

He thinks I'm crazy. Oh shit. Maybe I am.

"You think I'm making it up that I can't remember," she said, her voice dull.

"Not consciously, but accepting that the problem lies within you is a step forward. Harming yourself—"

"I'm sure I wasn't trying to kill myself." Chewing her wrist? *Yuck*. She ran her tongue over her teeth. Were they sharp enough? "Why would I call an ambulance if I wanted to die? Maybe I was bitten by a dog."

"Were you?"

She swallowed hard. "I don't know."

"You could have chewed open veins in your wrist and then changed your mind."

She winced. "I might not remember what happened, but I really, really don't think I wanted to hurt myself. I mean, there have to be easier ways to die than that. Tablets or something."

He looked at her over his glasses for a long moment. "So what do you want to do now?"

"Please, I don't want to die, I just want to go home. If I'd wanted to kill myself, I think I'd have managed to do it. This wasn't my fault."

He nodded. "I'm inclined to believe you."

A weight lifted from her chest.

"There was no blood around your mouth or neck, and I'd have expected to see some if you'd... Well, when the IV has finished, you'll be fine to leave."

He pulled back the curtains, moved on to the next patient, and Piper sighed with relief. She opened the blue book again and began to read.

By the time the IV had finished, so had Piper. She clutched the notebook in her hand. Not easy to take in, but it sort of made sense. *God, my life is a mess*. Maybe she *had* been trying to kill herself.

"Someone here to see you," the nurse said as she disconnected Piper's IV line. "Two police officers."

Piper looked up.

"Piper Kennedy?" asked the shorter guy.

"Yes."

"I'm Detective Constable Frost. This is D.C. Jackson. We need to ask you a few questions."

The curtains were drawn around her bed again.

"What happened to your arm?" Frost asked.

"I don't remember."

He frowned. "You said in your call to the emergency services that you were trapped and bleeding. Were you attacked?"

"I don't know."

Jackson moved closer and lowered his voice. "Don't be afraid to tell us the truth. We can protect you."

"Who from?" Piper asked.

The two men exchanged glances.

"What were you doing at Arthington Manor?" Frost asked.

Thanks to her journal, that was something she could answer. "I flew over it earlier in the day and was curious to see it close up. I presume I fell down in the ruins, but I don't recall what happened. I'm sorry."

"It's private property. There were warning signs, police tape," said Jackson.

"Sorry."

"Where were you the night before last?"

Ah. This was about the woman who was killed, not about her. Piper thought back to what she'd written. "I finished work about eleven at Do Bad Things and went home."

"Alone?" Jackson asked.

Piper had made a note about the way she ached yesterday morning, the possibility that she'd taken a guy back to her flat.

"I'm not certain. I should explain I have a condition that stops me from remembering anything personal once I fall asleep."

The two men exchanged glances. She'd expected them to be surprised, but they weren't. *Why not*? Doctors weren't supposed to reveal private stuff.

"Do you know a man called Keir Sparks?"

Damn, what I am supposed to say? Hendrick had told her not to mention the three men, but lying was too complicated.

"Yes. I tattooed him."

"Did he come back to your flat afterward?" Frost asked.

Had he? Her heart hammered. "I don't know."

Both police officers sighed in unison.

"Do you know a man by the name of Neil Harmon?" Jackson asked.

"No. Well, I don't think so."

Frost raised his eyebrows. "You don't remember him almost knocking you down with his car?"

Piper gaped at him. "What? When?"

"Night before last. How come you remember some things and not others? Have you ever been in the Rising Sun? Do you know Mary Wollard?" Jackson sounded annoyed, and Piper cringed.

"I don't think so."

Frost cocked his head on one side. "How do you remember things?"

Piper's hand slid over her notebook lying on the bed. "I write them down."

"Can we see?" Frost asked.

She wasn't happy but held out the book. Jackson read over Frost's shoulder.

"I think your instincts were right about those three men who came to the tattoo parlor," Jackson said. "I'd advise you to have nothing to do with them. Even if one of them does have a cute butt."

Piper suspected her face went as red as the cover on the bed.

After the two officers left, the nurse let Piper use the ward phone to ask Hendrick to come and collect her, but Piper only pretended to make the call. She had no idea what Hendrick looked like. But more to the point, she didn't want to go home. Not yet.

Piper's coat had been sealed in a black plastic bag. One whiff of the blood-soaked garment and she fastened it up again. She'd not be taking that with her. Surely she had another. The cuffs of a blue sweater and shirt were crusty with dried blood, but the nurse had to cut them off so Piper could get her bandaged arm through the sleeve. Her jeans only had a few dark speckles.

Once she was dressed, Piper slotted her notebook in the pocket of her pants, clutched her purse, and waited. She picked a moment when lots of people were coming and going and the nursing staff was busy. Piper waved at the closing door of the ward and got to her feet.

"My boss is here. He won't come in. He's scared stiff of needles."

"Men!" said Sylvie. "Make sure he gives you a few days off."

"Bye. Thank you."

Piper could scarcely believe it had been that easy. She made her way to the exit and looked for the taxi rank.

Forty minutes later, she stood by her car watching the cab turn around to go back to Lincoln. Piper shivered. She'd hoped she might find another coat in her car but didn't. There was a blanket on the backseat, so she wrapped that around her shoulders and set off down the road toward a set of iron gates. Strips of yellow police tape fluttered in the breeze, but nothing looked familiar. She saw signs warning her to keep out and ignored them. Piper froze when she saw a figure in the distance and then laughed when she realized it was a decapitated statue.

Pan.

How did she know that? Piper's heart beat faster.

The moment she climbed onto the stones, her head swam. Was this what had happened yesterday? She sat before she fell and watched in amazement as the air shimmied around her. In the distance, not a tree moved, no leaves fell. The air was as flat as a pancake except in her vicinity. It swirled faster and faster until her head ached and Piper could hardly breathe.

Run or stay?

The choice became academic when Piper tried to get up and instead sank back onto the rocks, her limbs useless. She lay on her back, her breathing shallow as the air crackled and roared around her. The dull ache in her head grew worse while her heart raced faster and faster. She'd been cold, and now she felt warm. Piper had no idea what was happening. Common sense told her she should be frightened, and she was, but fear wasn't the overriding emotion. Instead she tingled with excitement.

The heavy feeling in her body lifted. She stretched out her arms and legs and closed her eyes. Every vein and artery flowed with liquid fire. Her heart swelled in her chest until she thought it would explode. Her senses were stripped raw. She couldn't see, hear, or feel what was around her, but it enveloped her, filled her, made her...smile.

When Piper opened her eyes, she remembered everything. Well, everything that had happened that morning, so she knew she hadn't passed out. She sat up. No swirling air. No difficulty breathing. No headache. She felt...nothing and was a bit disappointed. What had that all been about then? Some disturbing flashback to do with her accident? Maybe she'd been abused in this house or seen something horrific in there, and her brain had come up with a novel way of dealing with it—a never-ending memory wipe. Piper realized then that she should have looked up old newspapers from eleven years ago. Her notes taken from local history books weren't modern enough.

But if something horrible had happened to her here, then why did she feel...right? Maybe her memory had come back. Tomorrow could be the start of a new life. Piper pushed herself up, pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, and picked her way over the stones.

It didn't take long to find the place where she'd been injured. The rock was stained dark with her blood. She bent and stared at a gap between the rocks. Had she trapped her arm? Despite the strong temptation to poke a finger into the darkness, she wasn't stupid. Piper found a sturdy stick and slowly pushed it into the crack, moving it back and forth.

Stick against rock. Stick against rock. Stick against... Well, that wasn't rock. Something softer. Nothing grabbed the twig. It hadn't got caught up in anything. She tossed it aside. Piper bent over the widest part of the gap and cupped her hands around her face. If she waited a moment for her eyes to adjust, she might be able to see.

Nothing.

Damn.

Piper didn't like leaving this mystery unsolved. Her life was one big conundrum, and this was at least something she could try to sort out. She made her way back to the car. Didn't seem much point in not bringing it back up the drive, so she pushed the gates fully open and drove to the edge of the rubble. Piper grabbed the jack out of the trunk and made her way back to the bloodstained rock.

No strange feelings this time. No swirling wind, no fast-pumping heart. Though Piper did notice something that hadn't registered before. Not all the stones and rocks looked as though they were the result of a house collapse. Some were too big and flat. There must have been plenty of wood in the manor, things like doors and floorboards, but there was nothing here other than rock and stone. Not even glass from windows.

Piper chewed her lip as she went around collecting smaller blocks of stone to wedge under the slab once she had it jacked up. She couldn't think of any reason why the rubble looked wrong, but her concern about that faded under her amazing stone-shifting ability. Not only did her bandaged wrist not ache when she picked up the rocks, the big ones seemed nowhere near as heavy as she'd expected.

It was a slow process, cranking up the stone inch by inch, supporting it with larger and larger rocks, moving the jack, and starting again until the crack was wide enough to see into. Piper bent her head and peered into the gloom.

"Anybody there?" she whispered, more to hear the sound of her own voice than in expectation of an answer.

None came. Thank God.

Her eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, though all she saw were shadows. Piper took a deep breath and slid her hand into the space. What she touched was not rock, cool but not cold, firm but not hard. She shifted closer, pushed her hand in deeper, and froze. Her lungs stopped working, her heart faltered, and her previously warm body chilled in an instant.

Fingers.

Piper yanked her arm back and took a gulp of air. Thoughts tumbled and collided like amateur acrobats.

Couldn't be fingers.

Definitely fingers.

A body?

Just a hand?

Had whoever owned it been trapped when the house fell?

Alive yesterday and dead today?

Oh Christ. Had they clung desperately to her wrist until she'd yanked it back? If she'd been able to remember what happened, maybe she could have saved their life. Piper sagged onto her knees.

Of course, this could all be her imagination. She was going to look pretty stupid if she called the emergency services and there was nothing in there but an old glove. Piper stared at the slab she'd raised up, supported by several stone towers. Too heavy to lift, but could she slide it back over the supports she'd shoved underneath? They would probably collapse as she pushed, but it might leave a big enough gap for her to get a better look.

To her intense astonishment, it took one firm push by her shoulder, and the large slab covering the hole began to move. Once Piper had started, she had no choice but to keep shoving. As rocks cracked in the teetering towers, the gap opened up with a horrible grating sound, and the large stone fell back. Piper looked into the void and bit back her scream.

Oh my God. She took a long blink, but it made no difference. Fingers black with grime were attached to a large, dirty hand attached to an equally filthy arm. Then suddenly the arm wasn't there anymore. It had been pulled back into the shadows.

"Oh fuck," Piper blurted. Whoever this was, they were alive. "Hang on," she called. "I'm going to get you out of there."

Enough room now for her to crawl partway into the gap, so Piper went through headfirst. A naked guy lay curled up as far from her as he could get. Piper didn't think she'd ever seen anyone filthier.

"Are you okay?" she asked and then rolled her eyes. First prize for the most idiotic question ever. "Sorry. Obviously you're not. Have you broken any bones? Are you bleeding?"

His eyes flickered open, and Piper sucked in a breath. The whites of his eyes were the only part of his body that looked clean. But silver irises? His lids closed again.

"I'll get help," Piper said.

She began to wriggle backward, and a hand clamped around her bandaged wrist. Piper braced herself for the explosion of pain, but it didn't come.

"You don't want me to go? Okay, I understand. Want me to help you get out?"

She wrapped her other hand around the arm that held her, and tugged. She could tell the guy was trying, but he seemed to be hovering on the edge of consciousness. Piper was all too aware that the rock overhead could crash down at any time, trapping them both and crushing her legs.

"Come on," she coaxed. "It's not far. My car is only a few yards away. I can take you to the hospital. Well, unless you've hurt your back, in which case I really ought to get proper help so I don't make things worse. If you let me go, I—"

His hold on her tightened. As Piper edged backward, he began to move forward, though with inexorable slowness. She gave a mental sigh of relief when her body was finally out in the fresh air, except the guy had stopped moving, and all but his hand still lay under the rock. She tugged at his fingers.

"Nearly there," she said. "You're doing so well."

Piper sniffed. *Burning*? A wisp of smoke curled in front of her face. Where was *that* coming from? *His hand*?

"Oh shit," she gasped.

He jerked his fingers under cover, and the smoke disappeared. What the fuck? He hadn't let her go. Piper could see his skin in the shadows. The back of his hand had blistered, dirt crisping over his skin. Allergic to light? He clung to her.

"You can't go out in the sun?" she asked.

He squeezed harder.

Nor talk it seemed. "I won't leave you," she said. "The sun's going down."

Piper's mind slipped into overdrive. He'd been trapped in the house when it fell. Maybe he'd lived there as a recluse. Or had he been a prisoner for a long time and lost his mind and the ability to speak? Could be he'd been in the dark so long his skin was ultrasensitive to light. Or maybe he was a creature from the middle of the earth. Piper sighed. *Who* was losing their mind?

Yet the one thing she couldn't get away from was the fact that it was more than likely he'd been responsible for her losing a bucketful of blood. Had the doctor been right that the injuries to her wrist were teeth marks? The poor guy had been so desperate for a drink that he'd sucked her blood?

Piper chewed her lip, not sure she liked where her thoughts were leading her.

A guy who drinks blood.

A guy who starts to smoke the moment daylight touches his skin.

A guy undetected by sniffer dogs, which, according to her notebook, had checked this site after the building's collapse.

A guy undetected by a helicopter with heat-seeking equipment.

Well, they wouldn't find someone who wasn't alive.

Oh bloody hell.

Piper had put three and one together and made four, except it was impossible.

Wasn't it?

There had to be a logical explanation. Piper thought about it. Nope, she couldn't find it.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

No response. Piper looked west. The sun was on its way down. If she was right about what she thought he was, she'd find out soon enough. Shortly after that, she'd spout wings and fly to the moon. This didn't make sense. She pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, chilled by her thoughts as much as the falling temperature. Piper held on to his hand and waited.

While she waited, she talked herself out of fantasy and back to reality. Whatever this guy was, he was *not* a vampire. There were no such things. He just *thought* he was a vampire. Maybe Arthington Manor had been a private nursing home for the hopelessly insane, and he'd been forgotten.

Piper had her phone in her pocket. Easy to call the emergency services, yet something stopped her, a feeling that she needed to keep this secret until she figured out exactly what was happening.

He stirred before the sun set.

Not a vampire, then, yet she felt the shift in his body, vibration rippling down his fingers into hers as if some sea change had altered the boundaries of her perception and their relationship.

"It's okay," she whispered. "You're safe now. Everything's going to be—Ouch. Damn it, that hurt."

Sharp teeth sank into the fleshy pad below her thumb at the edge of the bandage, and she could hear him sucking. Piper couldn't believe how calm she felt. A crazy naked guy was slurping her blood, and she wasn't screaming. She figured she could afford to let him have a few mouthfuls now she'd been topped up.

The sun set, and he showed no signs of slowing.

"No more," she said and stroked his head.

The sucking continued.

"Stop," Piper said firmly.

He sucked harder.

She balled her fist and socked him on the jaw.

Chapter Ten

Keir lay on his back in his room with his hand tucked in the front of his pants. Despite stroking, squeezing, and tugging, his cock stayed distressingly limp. He yanked out his fingers and rolled over. Usually at the mere thought of wanking, he managed to put aside his shit life and give himself a few minutes of pleasure. Not this time.

His head swirled. The police might have let him go, but Keir was pretty sure they suspected him of killing that woman. He wanted to run and not stop. No matter what he did, he fucked up everything. No point blaming anyone else when it was his fault. The only reason he was in this situation was because he was weak.

He pressed his face into the pillow. Had he ever been happy? Yes, before his tenth birthday, before *she* touched him. Since then, all the good memories had been battered and overwhelmed by the rest. Keir trembled when he thought about that day, the way his stepmother had waited until his father was away and then told him she had a surprise hidden in her bed. As soon as he realized what she was doing, that it wasn't just playing, he tried to stop her, but she was a strong alpha female, and he was little more than a cub. Keir came in her mouth, and afterward she told him if he didn't let her do what she wanted, when she wanted, how she wanted, she'd use his brother, Reed, to get her pleasure.

Their fucking bitch of a stepmother.

Keir swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. She didn't care that he'd hated her, and Keir knew that she'd hated him. He just didn't know why. It went on for two years before his father caught them. She blamed Keir, and he'd been whipped in front of the whole pack, including his brother. Oh Christ, Reed's face. The memory made Keir shudder. His younger brother had shown his disgust by shifting to his puma and pissing on him along with the rest of the pack. Keir had known that if Reed didn't believe him, then no one would.

The whipping would have been worth it if she'd left him alone—but she didn't. She was just more careful. Every protest he made, she threatened to seduce Reed. When Keir told his father, he was whipped again, this time by her. Keir learned fast that silence was less painful. But then Reed saw the truth for himself; hidden in the wardrobe, he'd watched her force Keir and finally believed him. Keir ran and took his brother with him.

They were hunted down, Keir whipped once more, and told next time Reed would be punished too whether he deserved it or not. So in the end, Keir accepted the rules of his stepmother's game, and as he grew taller and stronger, he added a

few rules of his own. He would do everything she asked, but she could never touch his brother. She agreed.

The lying bitch.

One night Keir had taken one look at Reed's white face and known. She laughed when Keir confronted her. So he killed her.

And if you kill your stepmother, it seems only fair that you should be miserable for the rest of your fucking life.

Keir turned his head on the pillow. Yesterday the police had let him go with a warning not to leave the area. They'd found no blood on his clothes and none of the barmaid's DNA. No one had seen them together. There was nothing to link her to Keir any more than to any other of the guys in the pub that night, though Keir wasn't sure the police believed he had nothing to do with her death.

Cuba didn't believe him, nor did the others in the familia. Even Jardine hadn't tried to reassure him. Keir sighed. They'd already decided he was guilty. The story of his life—no one ever believed him. Made it rather pointless telling the truth. Particularly pointless in this case, because his beautiful and perfect alibi couldn't remember a fucking thing.

Keir ignored the knock on the door. It wouldn't be Oz. He wasn't the type to knock. Nor was Cuba, so he guessed it was Frick or Jardine. When he ignored the second knock, Jardine walked in.

"You okay?" Jardine asked.

"Never better."

"Cuba wants to see you. She's in the library. With Sobel."

Keir rolled over. "I thought everyone left?"

"They have." Jardine sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Keir's open zipper. "All except for familia Sobel."

"Any idea why that is?" Keir had an uneasy feeling in his gut.

"No."

Jardine blinked. Keir knew he was lying, and knew that Jardine wanted him to know he was lying. Keir sighed. He could guess what the vamp hoped for in return for the truth. He zipped up his pants and stood. Jardine leaped facedown into the dent Keir had made in his bedcover and sniffed. He turned and looked up at Keir.

"Why don't you want me? I'll do anything you wish."

"It's not a good idea," Keir said.

Jardine stood. "What does Oz have that I don't? I can whip you, fuck you, hurt you in any way you like. I don't understand why you want him."

"He doesn't care," Keir said.

Jardine frowned. "It's wrong to care?"

"It's wrong to care about me." He wasn't worth it.

"Okay, then. I don't care. Now can we fuck?"

Keir stifled his laugh and walked out, relieved when Jardine didn't follow. But when he reached the outer door of the compound, Jardine slid in from the side, and Keir started. *He's fast*.

"They want you to fight tonight," Jardine whispered. "Sobel has brought in a vampire from Ireland. Twenty-eight fights. They say he's unbeatable." He moved closer to press his mouth against Keir's ear. "I could—I could help you. Make him beatable. Hide something in the sawdust."

Keir pulled away and smiled. "Thanks, but no, thanks."

Twenty-eight fights? Shiiiit.

Usually Keir only had to fight at every other meeting of the familias, and there were not more than one or two meetings a month. The five members took it in rotation to host the event, so it shouldn't even have been Cuba's turn to stage it, let alone Keir's turn to fight. He hated it when people changed the rules.

Keir slammed open the library door and strode inside.

"Ah, Jardine has told you," Cuba said.

"Why do I have to fight tonight?" Keir asked.

Sobel walked in a circle around Keir, while Cuba lounged on the couch drinking red wine. The master vampire was as tall as Keir but not as broad. Keir made sure he didn't flinch when Sobel sniffed his neck, though it was hard not to squirm at the sight of the vamp's quivering nostrils. No vampire had ever drunk Keir's blood, and he wasn't about to let that change.

"Ozmodeus wishes to see you fight," Sobel said. "Cuba asked me to provide an opponent."

Keir showed no reaction, but fury and confusion raged in his head.

"What did Jardine tell you?" Cuba asked.

"The fighter is a vampire from Ireland. He's won twenty-eight times."

"You don't have to fight," Cuba said, twirling her glass against the light from the lamp. "You can choose not to."

Except Keir thought he knew the price of refusal.

Sobel turned to face her. "You'd defy Ozmodeus?"

Keir didn't miss Cuba's slight flinch.

"If Keir defeats Flynn, I'll improve my offer to ten million," Sobel said.

Bloody hell. "I'm not for sale."

When Cuba stayed silent, Keir sensed freedom slipping through his fingers. "I'm not a commodity. I agreed to fight for you until my marque is complete. Once it reaches my neck, I—"

"You agreed?" Sobel laughed. "You're indentured. The arrangement is between Cuba and your father. It has nothing to do with you. You'll fight until you die if your mistress or master wishes it." Icy fingers wrapped around Keir's heart. "My marque," he muttered and stared at Cuba. Why the fuck had he believed her? Had he learned nothing about treacherous women?

She shrugged. "Purely an incentive so that you'd fight to win."

"Apart from the incentive of not getting my head ripped off?"

Cuba sat up and put her glass down. "Your father wants you dead, but he'd lose face if he killed you himself, so he sold you out to me. I daresay he didn't expect you to last more than a couple of bouts, but you're tenacious, powerful, and stubborn. That's why you're still alive."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Keir snapped.

"No, you're not." She smiled. "And you don't disappoint me—mostly."

"I'm making you money," Keir said through clenched teeth.

"Yes, but you know that's not all that I want from you. You've given your body, but not your soul, and I'm getting impatient."

My soul? Did she mean that literally?

"Soul?" Sobel asked.

Cuba's mouth tightened, and she waved her arm dismissively. "Figure of speech. He doesn't fight to please me, but because he wants to please himself."

Keir's jaw twitched. "You want to sell me because I won't fuck you?"

"I'm thinking about selling you because you're attracting the wrong sort of attention," Cuba snarled. "If it turns out you killed that barmaid, I'll have you ripped apart inch by inch."

"If my fighter doesn't do it first." Sobel grinned.

"I didn't kill her." He sounded like a defective CD.

"Where were you? What were you doing?" Cuba asked.

"Fucking someone who doesn't want my soul."

She snarled, and Sobel clapped his hands. "Oh, he is rather special, Cuba. I almost hope he wins tonight."

"I will win," Keir said and turned to Cuba. "And I'll have the addition to my marque, and when it reaches my neck, I'll walk away. And no matter what happens, I will never fuck you."

He slammed out of the room and heard them laughing behind him.

* * *

Piper stared at motionless Dirty Guy and then looked at her clenched fist. She'd knocked him out. *Wow, go Piper*! She tugged the bandage over the two puncture wounds in her hand and then put pressure on it with her fingers. Once she'd stopped bleeding—didn't take long—she hauled him from under the rock. Either that blood transfusion had given her the strength of Hercules, or he was featherlight, because he slid out to lie as limp as a wet leaf at her side.

Sprawled facedown on the stone was over six feet of filthy, naked male. There wasn't one part of him not covered in grime. Cute butt, though. She draped the blanket over his back and, with no thought that she'd actually manage it, bent to lift him. When Piper stood with him looped over her arms, she almost dropped him from shock. Maybe adrenaline had given her superhuman strength. Before it vanished, she picked her way over the stones back to her car. In a tangle of arms and legs, she maneuvered him into the backseat and covered him up.

Everything yelled to take him to the hospital, but Piper set the sat nav to home. She pulled down the drive of Arthington Manor and out onto the main road. Dirty Guy didn't make a murmur all the way back. The only thing to keep her company was the cheeky voice of the navigation system. Piper kept checking the mirror, but the blanket didn't move. Was her passenger asleep, unconscious, or waiting for the chance to...? Well, Piper wasn't going to think too hard about the last.

Common sense kept telling her she was an idiot, that the only place she should be contemplating going was the hospital or a police station. She should have used her mobile and called for help the moment she knew someone was trapped. But her heart urged her to take him home. For selfish reasons too, Piper didn't want to give him up. There was some link between this guy and what had happened to her on the stones. Not just the injury to her wrist, but that strange sensation with the swirling air and the fog in her head. Piper was convinced he held the answer.

"You have reached your destination, sweet cheeks," said the sat nav.

Piper found a place to park and switched off the engine. She unclipped her seat belt and leaned back to lift the blanket. He stared up at her, his eyes not silver but dark gray, confusion all over his face.

"Do you think you can walk?" she asked.

He blinked, but his mouth didn't open.

"Apparently this is where I live. Would you like to come into my flat and have a shower? Get clean and have a—" *Don't offer him a bite to eat*. Piper clamped her lips together.

She wrapped the blanket securely around him and pulled him out of the car and into her arms. As though she'd stepped onto a swiftly rising escalator with no way off, Piper had no choice now but to keep going. She had little hope of explaining what she was doing, but to her relief, there was no one around.

Piper propped him by the door while she used her key and then carried him inside. She shoved him against the wall and felt for the light switch. Because she'd not woken there this morning, nothing was familiar. Once the door was locked, she exhaled. Dirty Guy stood collapsed against the wall, the blanket draped around his shoulders, his gaze fixed on her, one hand clutching a little wooden fish. Where did that come from?

He looked so bewildered Piper wanted to hug him. *Oh damn it, why not*? She put her arms around him, but his remained at his sides, and after a moment Piper released him. Not the cuddling sort then.

"Shower?" she asked.

He could just about stand, but he couldn't walk. Piper had to carry him again. Once she had him in the bathroom, she settled him against the wall and turned on the shower. After a moment's hesitation, she stripped to her T-shirt and panties and put her notebook on a shelf. It would be faster and easier if she got in with him. She might as well take off her bandage.

As Piper unwound it, she noticed the marks on her palm had gone, and frowned. She hadn't imagined that he'd bitten her, so where were the puncture wounds? When she took the last wrap of the dressing from her wrist, her stomach roiled, and she gasped. "Oh my God." Her skin was unmarked. How was that possible?

Vampires heal their bites.

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.

Piper formed a question in her head and then let it slide to the back of her mind. If she didn't ask, then it might not be true. Dirty Guy was staring at her wrist and furrowed his brow as though he was puzzled too. No wonder it hadn't hurt when she shifted the rocks, but she hadn't been in the hospital for nothing. Her wrist had been injured, and now it wasn't. Piper wondered if she'd somehow lost some days so that the injury had healed. But the bandage was clean, and if she hadn't been in the hospital this morning, how could she remember?

Stop thinking.

He allowed her to pull the blanket from his shoulders, but when she reached for the fish, he pulled back his hand.

"Okay, I guess he could do with a wash too," she said.

Piper helped him into the shower. When the water hit his upturned face, he closed his eyes and sighed. *Oh God, he's gorgeous*. He might be dirty and a weirdo, but Piper still fancied him.

"Um, I'm going to wash your hair," she said and squirted coconut shampoo onto her palm.

She rubbed the creamy liquid onto his head and massaged it into his scalp. Black water sluiced over his face and left glistening trails as it ran down his chest. Piper picked up rose-scented shower gel and with painstaking care washed his face, his ears, and his neck. He might have dark shadows under his eyes, but his sharp cheekbones and perfect nose gave him film-star looks. There was no stubble on his chin. His face was as smooth as hers. So how long had he been trapped?

Do vampires need to shave?

Piper tried not to be turned on by touching him, but she couldn't help it. Her heart pounded, and her chest felt tight. She longed for him to touch her, but his

arms hung at his sides. It didn't escape Piper's attention that there was no sign of blisters on either hand.

Vampires heal quickly.

Or did I imagine the whole thing?

Including him biting me?

As Piper cleaned each of his fingers, she could feel him staring. She pried the fish from his fingers and washed that too.

"Ooh stripes," she said.

He snatched it back.

Piper was aware that he'd hardly taken his eyes off her. A quick glance showed her that her nipples were firm peaks under the wet cotton of her T-shirt. She'd probably have looked less sexy in a bra. The gray material clung to her curves, outlining her breasts. When she smoothed her hands over his chest and his nipples tightened to match hers, she bit back a little moan.

Her gaze lingered on a faint star-shaped scar marring his left pec as she swept foam down his ribs. Before she let her gaze drop lower, let alone her hands, Piper turned him to face the tiles. She soaped her way from his neck, over his smooth back, down the bumpy ridge of his spine, and over a vinelike tattoo running across the base of his back. After several spins around his gorgeous butt, she moved onto the backs of his thighs and felt his muscles quiver.

The water swirling at their feet was hardly dirty now. Piper wondered if she had a limitless supply of hot water or if it was suddenly going to turn arctic. She knelt on the floor of the shower and washed his feet. He struggled to steady himself, and Piper's niggling doubt that he could have done this himself vanished.

Except...

He turned around to leave her at eye level with part of his anatomy that seemed to be full of energy. No hair, just a thick cock that grew longer and thicker and taller right in front of her nose. His hands were no longer limp; his fists hung clenched at his sides, just the tip of the fish peeking out.

She wanted... Could she? Yes.

Piper covered her palms in shower gel and washed his tackle, sliding her hands up and down his cock, feeling the swollen veins pulse under her fingers. She washed around his firm ball sac before slipping her hand between his legs and back toward his anus. He flinched, and the breath caught in her throat.

OhGodohGodohGod. What am I doing?

She dragged her fingers away before temptation got the better of her. His quiet moan made her jump.

"All clean now," she whispered and looked up at him.

Piper hoped for a smile, but there was no emotion on his pale face. She reached behind his hip to turn off the water but didn't move from her knees, not at all sure she could stand. His free hand reached for her wet hair and stroked her head. "Real?" he asked, his voice hoarse and croaky.

"My hair?" Piper laughed.

"No. You. Here. Not rock."

Her heart ached in sympathy. "Yes. I'm real. I'm Piper."

"This...is my friend."

He held out the fish, and she wrapped her fingers around it. "I'll put it here, someplace safe," she said and slipped it onto the floor by the side of the shower.

"Sorry for..." He nodded toward his erect cock.

"Are you?"

He stared down at her, his eyes black now, and a smile lifted his lips for a moment. "No." His fingers tightened in her hair, but he neither pushed her away nor pulled her forward. "Dreamed of you," he whispered.

Before too much thinking swallowed her courage, Piper tilted her head, and using the tip of her tongue, she licked from the root of his cock to the crest. His groan was so loud she jerked away.

"No, no. Again, please," he whispered.

He might not be smiling, but there was a quiet joy in his eyes. Piper wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock and licked the rounded head. The sweet and spicy taste of him zapped every nerve in her body to a state of high alert. As she fluttered her tongue up and down his shaft, the muscles in her pussy slid into a pulsing rhythm of contract and release. *Oh God*.

Piper drew her fist up and down, dragging silky skin over solid core, and at the same time lowered her mouth onto his cockhead and sucked. He groaned again, but this time she didn't stop. She worked him with her lips, her tongue, and her hand, taking in more and more of him with each dip of her head.

His trembling legs, the way he stroked her hair, the heat between her thighs, the way her heart pounded all encouraged Piper to keep going. She varied the action of her tongue to swirl, flick, and lick, and swallowed the surges of precum. When she pressed her tongue into the slit at the top of his cock, his gasps grew noisier.

Piper pulled back to take a gulp of air and looked up to see him leaning back against the tiles, his eyes closed, mouth partly open. His engorged cock looked even bigger. Another bead of precum formed as she watched, and Piper swept her tongue over it, scooped it up, and then licked her lips.

"Please," he groaned.

Piper changed her grip so that her thumb and forefinger faced down. When she reached the base of his cock, she tightened her hold and dragged her fist up his length, catching the rim on the upward pull to squeeze the sensitive head with her palm.

"Shit," he gasped.

94 Barbara Elsborg

His balls had drawn up tight to the base of his erection, separating into two distinct halves. Piper knew he was close, and a shiver rippled down her spine. She pumped with her fist and sucked short and fast at the crown. His hands settled on either side of her head, his hips bucked, his cock jerked in her mouth, and he came in an explosion of seed that Piper could barely swallow.

Guess he needed that.

Chapter Eleven

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. How much more can I come? I'm going to choke her.

One last beautiful, wrenching, toe-curling spasm and his overexcited balls were sadly empty. God knows how many brain cells he'd just destroyed, and yet the orgasm seemed to have brought some sense back into his head.

My name is Rhyl. And I...don't remember much of anything else. Shit.

He stared at the angel kneeling at his feet, flecks of cum decorating her lips, her wide dark green eyes staring up at him, a tentative smile on her face, and he wanted to weep with joy. Rhyl pulled Piper to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. Good thing he didn't actually need to breathe, because the lump in his throat wouldn't let him. That blowjob more than anything else finally convinced him he wasn't fantasizing, that this wasn't a trick. He was out of that hellhole and back in the world. Thanks to her.

She felt so soft and warm, and she smelled exquisite. Roses with hints of strawberries and peaches. Or was that him? Ah, both of them. The body wash she'd used. Rhyl smiled into her hair. He could almost taste the fruit he'd last enjoyed as a teenager. In this moment, the thrill of touching her and the warmth of her body made his head swim. As Rhyl spread his hands over her wet panties, her hands gripped his butt, and they pressed their hips together. He wanted to be welded to her, wasn't sure he could ever stand to let her go, because what if reality slipped and he found himself back underground?

Why was I buried like that? Not an accident.

Then their lips brushed, and the thought slipped away. Her whispered moan sank into his mouth and trickled down his throat to spread warmth through his body. Rhyl's optimistic cock perked up, and his balls switched to rapid refill.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for saving me." How pathetic and inadequate that sounded. He owed her his undead life. He'd hovered on the verge of nonexistence, of insanity and—*Oh God, am I mad? Imagining this*? Rhyl didn't care so long as the dream didn't stop.

Piper pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Are you a vampire?"

Rhyl blinked. "Yes."

She nodded. "I thought so."

He waited, but she said nothing more. No scream or hysterics. She just accepted it?

"What were you doing in the ruins of Arthington Manor?" she asked.

His eyes opened wide. "I...I can't remember." *Shit*. He really couldn't. The name didn't ring a bell. Anxiety knotted his gut.

"Did you live there?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"What happened when the house collapsed?"

I admit I'm a vampire, and that's what she asks? His knees sagged, and Piper caught him. She's strong. Good thing, because he felt as weak as a kitten.

"Sorry to pester," she whispered. "I just—Well, you need to lie down. I shouldn't have touched...given...done... I'm really sorry."

"Sorry? You're joking? That was almost the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Piper raised her eyebrows. A cheeky smile filled her face. "Almost?"

He could have sworn his undead heart swelled with delight. "Your wrist yesterday was the best thing."

"My wrist?"

"If it hadn't been for your sweet veins, I'd have died. I'd starved for so long that when you touched me, I thought I was dreaming. I knew I was hurting you, but I couldn't help it. I'm sorry. You wrenched away, and I hadn't healed you with my saliva, so I don't understand why your wrist is unmarked. Maybe I *did* lick you. My mind isn't working properly yet."

He let her pull him out of the shower and prop him against the wall. His legs weren't working properly either. But good to know he could always rely on his cock to rise to the occasion. It uncoiled like a lazy snake to stand erect against his belly. Piper snagged a fluffy blue towel from a rail and dried him. The gentle strokes, the feel of the soft, warm material rubbing against his skin brought a memory. His mother cradling him and... Rhyl sighed. He had enough strength in his arms to dry himself, but he wanted to be touched, needed Piper to keep touching him.

"I was trapped under that house," he said.

"Yes." She glanced into his eyes and nodded. "It just fell down. No one knows why. They searched the ruins, but heat-seeking equipment couldn't have found you."

He was fascinated by the light in her eyes, the changes in her face, her kindness.

"So why did you go there?"

"The honest truth is that I don't know. Something pulled me to the ruins. Not once but twice."

Rhyl crackled with electricity. She was drawn there because of him? Was she his mate? Could he be that lucky? He was too off-kilter to be sure, but she felt...right.

"Do you still need to feed?" she asked.

And she asked the right questions.

"Yes."

Rhyl suspected his need for blood would occur with more frequency and with more violence than it should until he was back to full strength. The idea that he was a danger to her filled him with horror.

Piper rubbed the towel over his hair. "What can you eat? Fish and chips? Pizza? Do you have to have blood? Only I don't think they stock it at the grocery store."

"Plasmix." The word flew into his head. "Artificial blood. That's what I'm supposed to drink."

"Where would I get that?"

"I don't know." He groaned.

She lifted her hand to his face and stroked his cheek. "Your memory will come back. It's probably shock and that thump on the chin I gave you."

Rhyl pushed out a fake growl. "If I wasn't so weak..."

Piper chewed her lip. "I have no idea where my muscles have suddenly come from. I've a feeling once you've regained your strength, you'll be able to whip my butt."

She grinned. His mouth filled with moisture, and his cock began to hum.

"Can you remember your name?"

"Rhyl."

"Rhyl," she repeated. "I like it."

He lifted her wet T-shirt over her head and groaned at the sight of her breasts and the delicate dark pink buds topping the creamy mounds.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he whispered.

"Apart from my wrist."

He barked a laugh, and the sound shocked him. When was the last time something amused him?

"Yes, but it's not an easy choice and requires closer examination," he said and dropped his head. His lips settled on a swollen nipple, and he sucked. Piper moaned. Her fingers dug into his back, and he kept sucking, laving with his tongue, teasing with his teeth, begging his fangs to stay put.

Rhyl slid one hand into her panties, and her hips bucked. His fingers touched hot, damp, and creamy heaven, and he groaned. He might need to feed, but at that moment the need to taste another part of her was stronger. Rhyl kissed his way down her body, rolling his tongue over the drops of water on her skin, sliding her panties over her backside and down her legs, and then he knelt in front of her, his hands on her thighs. She stood bare to him, no hair, only glistening pink folds.

One lick and his knees trembled.

One touch of her clit and so did Piper's.

"Oh God," she gasped, and he felt the tremors run through her body as she unraveled.

She tasted...perfect. Rhyl pulled back to look at her, and she stared down at him, her eyes darkening. "More," she whispered.

He pressed his face against her body and nuzzled his way down her smooth mound. He uncovered the hard nub of her clit and trailed his tongue around it as he drank her cream. How long since he'd done this? With every lick of Piper's clit, his cock throbbed and purred in pleasure. Rhyl's head hummed; he was drunk on the smell, taste, and feel of her. There was still a chance this might be no more than the best dream ever, but he didn't care so long as it never stopped.

Rhyl rose to his feet. "Your bed, love? I don't want to waste energy keeping myself upright."

She took his hand, tugged him out of the bathroom, and flicked on a bedside lamp. He stroked the tattoo at the base of her spine, wondering where he'd seen one like it before, and then lay down and pulled her to lie beside him, their faces inches apart. They'd kissed each other in the most intimate of places and yet not properly on the lips.

She knew what he was and yet accepted him.

She knew what he was and asked no questions of that part of his life. Not that he had many answers.

She lay naked next to him.

He was the luckiest man in the world.

Rhyl stared into her eyes. "I will do anything for you."

"The shopping? Cleaning? Cooking? Taking out the garbage?" Her lips twitched in a smile. "Want to apply for a position as my sex slave?"

"Only one applicant. The job is mine."

He caught the flicker that crossed her face, but dismissed it. Rhyl brushed his lips over her mouth, and every cell in his body burst out in song. *Soft, sweet, and mine*. Rhyl hooked his leg over hers to keep her close and curled his fingers into her wet hair.

"Tell me what you want me to do," he said.

She blushed, her cheeks rosy in the lamplight. "Anything you like."

Rhyl trailed his tongue along the line of her lips, sliding back and forth before he ventured into her mouth. He wanted to be slow and gentle, to explore and savor, but his cock screamed for fast and furious. Her tongue met his, tickled and teased, and when he felt her hand wrap around his length, Rhyl groaned into her mouth.

Next time he'd go for easy and seductive.

He flipped her onto her back, spread her legs with his knee, and even as he told himself to be gentle, he thrust deep inside her. One long, hard drive of ecstasy

until he was buried to the hilt. The walls of her pussy clenched around him, his balls tightened, and he tensed.

I am not going to come that fast.

Piper's hands clutched at his back. He felt her nails dig into his skin as she panted into his mouth.

Rhyl lifted his lips from hers. "Have I hurt you?"

"M-m-move," she gasped.

Rhyl laughed. He clutched her hips and lifted as he shifted to his knees. One thrust at this angle and he felt himself sink deeper.

"Oh God," Piper whispered.

He pulled back until only the very tip of his cock remained inside her, and then thrust again between her soft pink lips. Watching the blood-dark head of his cock pierce her body pulled Rhyl further down the path to orgasm. He shunted his hips, driving into her, the wet slap of his balls hitting her ass encouraging him to push harder, deeper, faster. His fingers tightened on her hips. She felt so wet and tight around his cock, so perfect, Rhyl's balls tingled on the edge of pain. Her breathing quickened, a mix of ragged moans and short, fast gasps. He might not need to breathe, but the same sounds came from his throat.

Rhyl sensed the moment he'd passed the point of control, the point where synapses snapped and the unstoppable chain reaction began. He dragged one hand from her hip and rubbed her swollen clit with his finger. Piper cried out, her hips jerked, and her pussy clenched around him. Her orgasm triggered his, milking his cock in rhythmic spasms, each pulse dragging a gasp from his lips. His muscles tightened, his skin went taut, and white light exploded in Rhyl's brain to obliterate all thoughts but one.

Now.

His balls released their load, and his cock exploded. He felt every jet of his seed flood into her, bathing her pussy and his cock in liquid warmth. He opened his eyes and saw Piper panting, her eyelids flickering until they opened fully.

"Oh wow," she gasped.

Rhyl tried to speak and couldn't. He eased Piper's legs down and lay alongside her, his softening cock still partway inside her, his cum trickling—*Oh fuck*. How could he be so careless? Thoughts tumbled into his empty brain. *Pregnant. Trouble*. *Shit*.

"Sorry. Should have asked. No protection," he mumbled.

Her hand tucked in between them and rested over his heart. "It's okay. On the pill. Said in my book, but remind me to take one."

For a moment he was disappointed. Rhyl's eyes closed. Still night and not time for him to sleep, but a part of him disagreed. Exhaustion overwhelmed vampire rules. He tugged Piper closer and swung a leg over her hip. He'd wake if she moved. Keir stormed along the corridor toward the ring, Frick and Jardine at his sides.

"What's the hurry?" Frick asked.

"I want to get this over with," Keir muttered.

"Don't worry." Frick sniggered. "He dispatched his last opponent in ten seconds, drained him in less than three minutes."

Keir could barely hear his familia chanting his name as he drew near the doors. The cries of "Flynn, Flynn, Flynn" were so loud. Keir slammed the doors open and strode up to the invigile. The werewolf's inspection of his body didn't disturb his concentration. Keir stared unblinking across the ring at the vampire. Black hair cascaded past his shoulders, his dark eyes focused on Keir, his fangs already out. The guy wasn't as big as Erik, but the number of wins told Keir all he needed to know. The vamp won because he was clever and fast rather than strong.

No shifting was allowed when weres fought vamps. Just one fighter's strength, speed, and cunning set against the other's. Keir knew he wasn't expected to survive. He snatched the pieces of leather from the invigile's hand and covered his cock and balls. If he went down, he wanted to die with his tackle still attached. His vampire opponent took his time donning the protective loincloth. Keir sensed Cuba behind him but didn't take his gaze off Flynn.

"I had no choice," she whispered, her breath chilling his neck. "Contrary to what you might believe, I do not wish you to perish."

Only because he hadn't yet given her what she wanted.

"I want the addition to my marque done tonight," Keir snapped. "I will fight at every meeting from now on. If you let me go when my marque is complete, I'll fuck you after I'm freed." He could lie too.

Cuba released a long sigh and whispered, "Stay low." She moved to one side and held up her hands for silence before she spoke to the audience. "One bell. One victor. One heart."

Keir stepped into the ring. His pulse pounded all over his body, and his stomach churned. His intestines had tied themselves in uncomfortable knots, and a red haze filled his head. He would *not* lose. He must live long enough to kill his father.

The bell rang, and the vampire was on him before Keir moved a muscle. Huge hands grasped Keir's shoulders and held him rigid as teeth homed in on his neck. Keir flung his arms up and out and knocked Flynn aside.

The vampire smiled and was on him again in an instant. The audience screamed as Flynn threw Keir across the ring. Keir didn't wait for the follow-up body slam but launched himself horizontally to tip Flynn over. He brought the vampire down but lost his advantage almost at once. In a mixture of martial arts, wrestling moves, and lightning-fast reactions, they fought with a speed and brutal intensity that hardly allowed Keir to register pain. He knew one lapse in concentration could kill him. But the same was true for Flynn.

Keir was determined to avoid the vampire's sharp nails and even sharper teeth, because the moment Flynn scented Keir's blood, he'd switch into a higher gear, from frenzied to insane. Then Keir's fist connected with Flynn's nose, and blood poured over the vamp's mouth. *Shit. Mistake*. They rolled around in the sawdust, each struggling to pin the other, trying to maneuver their opponent into a hold from which they could deliver a killing blow. Keir didn't want to let Flynn go. The guy was too fast. Better to keep him on the ground and in his arms.

Good plan, but Keir was tiring. Flynn looked as fresh as when they'd started. That smile was getting on Keir's nerves. Blow for blow, Keir had given as good as he'd got, but he felt like he'd gone a couple of rounds with a grizzly bear and had only just managed to avoid being eaten. If Keir didn't finish this soon, he *would* be eaten. Cuba's words *stay low* echoed in his head as Flynn broke away, and Keir turned to face him.

With Keir's puma senses on high alert, he sensed the attack coming and dived. He went through the vampire's legs, spun around, leaped to his feet, and knocked Flynn facedown. Keir seized a leg, wrapped his arm under Flynn's foot, and grasped his wrist so that he held the vampire's ankle with his bicep and wrist. It left Keir's other hand free to shove Flynn's foot away from his body.

There were a couple of ways out of the hold, but neither was easy. Flynn tried to flip, but Keir tightened his grip and twisted. The noise of an ankle breaking stunned the audience into silence. Bloody supernatural hearing, Keir thought. The vampire's scream was so loud it made Keir's ears ring. With no hesitation, Keir released Flynn's right leg and grabbed the left. A couple of seconds later, the other ankle was broken.

Keir stood panting. Even though Flynn was currently helpless, he wouldn't necessarily stay that way. Maybe fast healing had been another reason he'd survived so long. Keir had no choice. He dropped onto the vampire's back, wrapped his arm around his throat, and twisted, kept twisting. He heard bones snap, and he still twisted.

The bell rang to signal he'd won, and Keir slumped down with the vampire's head resting in his lap, the angle all wrong. Chins shouldn't touch shoulder blades. Flynn stared at him and blinked. *Oh hell*. Cuba's feet came into view, and Keir looked up.

"Give me his heart," she said.

Keir morphed his right hand into a puma's claw, pushed the vampire over, and slammed his fist straight into Flynn's chest, shattering his ribs. A moment later, a bloody heart sat in Cuba's palm.

Shit, don't let me throw up.

Too late. Keir knelt on all fours and lost the contents of his stomach.

Chapter Twelve

Piper moved into the kitchen to answer her vibrating mobile so she didn't wake Rhyl. She'd had a hard time not falling asleep beside him, but the thought of the consequences kept adrenaline flowing and her eyes open. She was a little surprised that a vampire would sleep at night, but he had to be exhausted.

Hendrick ranted at the other end of the phone. "Don't tell me you can't come in. You have to. I don't care how late you are."

"It's really difficult." She cast a glance at the bedroom door.

"They don't want me; they want you," Hendrick said.

"Who?"

"Those guys who came in the other night. The ones I'd forgotten about. The ones I need to speak to you about. They're coming in later. Please. I don't want to piss them off."

"Okay, okay."

Piper didn't want to leave Rhyl, but he might not even wake before she got back. Just in case, after she'd dressed, Piper left him a note. If he did wake, he'd also notice the sheet of paper pinned to the wall. Maybe he wouldn't be here when she returned.

She slipped on her other coat, checked the line of photographs and committed the faces of her boss and work colleagues to her memory—at least for that night—tapped her pocket to confirm she had her notebook, phone, and keys and left her apartment.

* * *

Piper stepped carefully over the pavement art outside Do Bad Things. It looked real enough to fall into. Hendrick was on the phone when she opened the door. He put a line through a name on the appointment book and put the receiver down.

"Another cancellation. People are worried about coming into town at night while this killer is on the loose. Leah's brother is hanging around upstairs until she's finished. Don't leave on your own, Piper. I'll walk you to your car when we close up. No point taking any risks."

Piper thought about the vampire in her bed and smiled. Her mobile rang in her pocket and made her jump.

"Wow, who's calling you? I don't think I've ever heard your phone ring before."

It could only be Rhyl. She hoped he was okay. "Hi," Piper said.

"Come back," Rhyl said.

"I'm at work."

"I need...you."

"I'll be back around eleven."

"I...need...to feed."

Shit. "I'll bring...something."

"Don't forget me." Rhyl broke the connection.

Oh God. He's read the piece of paper. Maybe my notebooks. Piper felt a surge of anxiety sweep through her body. She needed to talk to him, to explain.

"You hear that?" Hendrick asked, clutching his chest.

Piper shook her head.

"My heart just broke. You finally have a boyfriend. It's about time." Heat flooded her face, and Hendrick grinned. "I need to talk to you. Go into my room, and I'll make us a coffee."

Piper stared at the two doors. Shit. Which was hers? She went right.

"Where are you going?" Hendrick asked. "I said my room. I've something to show you."

"I won't be a minute." Piper hadn't intended to retrieve the ink she'd hidden, but maybe she ought to ask Hendrick about it. The little vial was exactly where she'd read it was. Piper slipped it into her pocket and looked around. The equipment was familiar, the smell familiar, but the room wasn't. She must have to spend the first few minutes after she'd arrived working out where everything was.

She heard the sound of the outer door opening.

"Can I help you?" Hendrick asked.

"I'd like to see Piper."

Anxiety twisted her heart. Not Rhyl, so who was it?

"Piper? Guy here to see you," Hendrick called.

She stepped out to see a round-faced, brown-haired man in his late twenties. Piper had no idea who he was.

"Hi," he said. "Well, what an exciting life you lead. I could fill the newspaper with stories about you."

"Jock," she said as pages from her notebook flashed into her head.

He frowned. "How come you remember me?"

Piper thought about lying and knew she'd be caught out sooner or later. "I don't." She sensed her life about to unravel, and her mouth went dry.

"You're a reporter?" Hendrick asked.

"Jock Jones. *Lincoln Herald*. Has Piper ever done anything newsworthy here? Tattooed the wrong name on a guy's butt? Pierced the wrong body part?"

Hendrick crossed his arms. "No. What the hell do you want?"

Jock took out his notepad. "I just need to ask Piper a few questions." He stared straight at her. "What happened yesterday at Arthington Manor?"

"Nothing," Piper said.

He gave her a sly look. "You were admitted to the hospital for nothing? The receptionist said you injured your wrist."

"Hospital?" Hendrick asked. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why did you try to commit suicide in the ruins of the house?"

Piper forced a laugh from her tightening throat. "What?"

Jock's eyes narrowed. "You chewed open the veins in your wrist."

"Christ Almighty," Hendrick roared and stepped toward him.

Piper slipped in front of her boss, pulled up her sleeves, and showed her unmarked wrists.

"Sssshit," Jock hissed. "She said—Well, what happened there? What's your link with the ruins? Was that why you made the plane wobble when I mentioned Arthington? What did the police want to talk to you about?"

His eyes glowed with fevered excitement, and Piper thought she might throw up.

Hendrick turned to look at her. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I'll pay for your story," Jock said. "Two hundred quid. Did that guy deliberately run you over with his car?"

Her head buzzed.

"Who was the man who helped you afterward? Do the police think he's the killer?"

Piper shot Hendrick a despairing glance, and her boss took action.

"Right. That's enough. You. Out. Now." He grabbed the reporter by the elbow and pushed him toward the door.

"I'm going to write the story anyway!" Jock yelled as Hendrick shoved him outside.

Yep, my life is unraveling.

The door slammed, and Hendrick turned to Piper and glared. "What the fuck was that about?"

Piper opened her mouth and then closed it again.

"Go and sit down," Hendrick said in a softer voice. "I'll make the coffee. I'm beginning to think I don't know you at all."

Piper's tower of cards had begun to tumble. All she could think about was keeping Rhyl safe, but she was such a mess she couldn't even take care of herself. She slumped on her stool.

"Okay?" Hendrick asked from the door.

Piper looked up to see him holding two steaming mugs. He walked over and handed her one.

"Before we start on the exciting life you've kept hidden from me, Miss Double-Oh-Seven, did the police speak to you about the night the barmaid was murdered?"

"Yes."

"Did you keep quiet about the guys who came here?"

"I couldn't."

His shoulders slumped. "Oh fuck."

"I'd written about them in my diary. The police asked to see it. I think they'd already spoken to the men anyway."

"There's something seriously not right about them, Piper."

"All the more reason to tell the police. Anyway, I thought they were why you wanted me here tonight."

Hendrick put his coffee down. "They're not a problem the police can deal with. They're not breaking laws asking for our business. They're some sort of...fantasist fanatics. You have to forget you ever saw them. You shouldn't have remembered. Look, what I'm going to tell you now, you must never repeat. I wouldn't tell you any of it except you need to pretend you don't recognize them when they come in tonight."

"I won't recognize them." She was tired of all this. Better that Hendrick knew the truth. "I won't need to pretend. The only reason I know they came here and I did a tattoo on the one called Keir is because I wrote in my book that it happened. I can't remember things from one day to the next. I only remember how to *do* things like read and drive and tattoo, but I don't remember places; I don't remember faces; I don't remember you."

Hendrick's jaw dropped. "Wha...wha...?" He took a deep breath. "Wha...wha... Christ, I sound like a helicopter. What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I manage my life by taking photographs of everyone I need to remember. I write down the details of conversations in my notebook. The moment I fall asleep, I lose knowledge of almost everything, including my name."

His eyes widened. "Shit."

"Yep.

Hendrick stared at her for a moment. "That explains so much, those times when you didn't know what I was talking about and should have. When you didn't recognize people...and just now when you walked into the wrong room. Bloody hell."

Piper sighed. "Yesterday I thought that reporter was my flying instructor, and I took off. I could have killed us. I'm a liability. So if you want to sack me, go ahead."

"Sack you? I don't want to sack you. I want to smack you upside the head for not telling me before." He took the coffee out of her hand, put it down, and wrapped his arms around her. "You should have told me. I could have helped you." Hendrick held her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You're not even going to remember telling me this, are you, unless you write it down? Or my hug?"

"No."

"So you wouldn't remember if I did something inappropriate?"

Piper frowned. "Don't try it."

He smiled. "And you're not going to remember what I tell you either?"

"No."

"Good, because this secret is killing me. Those guys who came in, the guys who are coming in later, the guys you're not supposed to remember—the fantasists... Maybe that's not quite right." He paused. "I think they're vampires."

Piper's turn for her jaw to drop. Why only *think*? What if they were vampires? Friends of Rhyl? Or enemies? Did it matter? Could they help her find Plasmix?

Hendrick stepped back from her. "Why aren't you freaking out? Did you hear what I said?"

"You think they're vampires."

"You—you believe me?"

Piper nodded.

Hendrick blew out a long breath. "The first time they came in a couple of weeks ago, one of them stared into my eyes and told me to forget them like he was trying to hypnotize me. I have this technique of zoning out when I don't want to listen, useful with boring girl—er...clients, only I heard what they said, what they talked about, and afterward I remembered everything, and I wished I hadn't and wish the fuck I hadn't told you, but I—"

Piper put her finger over his lips. "It's okay. I'm not going to remember."

"I want you to be careful with them. Maybe they were the ones who killed the barmaid."

"Maybe."

He sighed, and his shoulders slumped as if he was relieved he'd told her. "What was all that about you and the hospital?"

"No idea."

Hendrick tipped her head to face him. "If a vamp had gnawed at your wrist, he'd have healed it. Sure there's nothing you're not telling me?"

"If there was, I've forgotten." For once in her life, Piper was glad she had her crap memory as an excuse.

The phone rang, and he went to answer it. A moment later he came back with a glum face.

"Another cancellation. I'm wondering about selling this place and opening up somewhere else. Interested in coming with me?"

"Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"Not because of this murder. More because of those guys. What do you think?"

Piper liked that he asked, but wasn't sure she wanted to move. According to her notebooks, she'd always lived in Lincoln. "Business will pick up again."

He bent his head to her ear. "I have some of that ink they insist on using. It gives such great results I was wondering if I could identify what's in it and replicate it. We could make a fortune."

"I took some too." Piper put her hand in her pocket and pulled out the vial.

Hendrick smiled. "Want to try it on me?"

"Maybe I should be the guinea pig. According to my notebook, you're always stripping off to show customers your tattoos. If it works on you, you'd have to explain why one looks very different, whereas if I don't write it down, I won't remember what you did. Plus, I'm not going to strip at the first opportunity."

"Pity." A smile curved his lips. "You're going to let me tattoo you?"

"I'm as intrigued about that ink as you." She turned on the stool. "Lower back. Just do initials. PRK."

"Piper Kennedy. What's your middle name?"

Piper froze. "I don't know. Why did I say that?"

"Don't ask me. I have no clue what goes on in a woman's head, and I certainly don't know what's going on in yours. I can't just do initials. How will that show us what the ink can do? How about something small and tasteful as well?"

"Very small and very tasteful."

"Skull and crossbones?"

"Er...let me think. No."

Piper lifted up her shirt and pulled down the back of her pants. Hendrick gasped. His fingers stroked the skin of her lower back. "Fucking hell. Your tattoo already looks as though it's been done with this ink. The lines are diamond sharp."

"I have a tattoo?" She was surprised and then laughed.

"Yeah, it says 'I love Hendrick's cock."

Piper sniggered. "Or?"

"It's some sort of Celtic thing. Very intricate twisting design. It's bloody brilliant. Looks like you've done it, except you'd have to be a contortionist. I could add another strand and weave in your initials."

"Okay. Hurry up before I change my mind."

"I'm an artiste. I don't hurry."

She lay down and waited while Hendrick got everything ready. Piper expected it to hurt, but she felt nothing more than a slight vibration as he worked.

"I looked up on the Internet about vampires," Hendrick said above the hum of the machine. "I figured I ought to check to see if there was something I should know."

"Was there?"

"They need to be invited into a place before they can enter. They can't see their reflections."

Piper remembered reading that she'd shown Keir his cat in the mirror. So he wasn't a vampire.

"There's even a local club for people who think they're vamps," Hendrick said.

"Really?" That was interesting.

"VAL. Vampires Anonymous of Lincoln. Probably got half our Goth clients as members."

"Not unless they don't want to be vampires, if it's like Alcoholics Anonymous."
"True."

But maybe they'd know about Plasmix. Piper thought she'd rather ask strangers than the trio coming in tonight.

Hendrick had just finished the tattoo when her phone rang again.

"Piper," Rhyl whispered. "Don't come home. I need to feed. I'm frightened I'll hurt you."

Her heart pounded. "Listen. There's some steak in the freezer. Defrost it in the microwave. You can—" With Hendrick listening, she didn't add *suck it*.

"Okay."

He ended the call.

"He can't wait to eat until you get back?" Hendrick asked.

Piper shrugged.

Hendrick tugged her across the room. "Look in the mirror. What do you think?"

Piper stood in front of the three mirrors, arranged to allow clients to get a good view of their new tattoo, and gasped.

"What's wrong?" Hendrick asked.

"Nothing. It looks great." And very like Rhyl's.

The small but complex vinelike design ran along the top of her butt, dipped into the crack, and curved toward her hips. The initials PRK had been skillfully inserted.

What the hell is my middle name?

Chapter Thirteen

Once the monitor had been placed around Keir's ankle, he slinked back to his room with Jardine on his heels. His stomach churned when his gaze dropped to his bloody hand.

"That was the most awesome thing I ever saw," Jardine said. "No one thought you could beat him. I think you ought to be able to add his total of wins to yours, because you'd have beaten all of his opponents too."

While Jardine replayed every move in graphic detail, Keir stared down at his gory fist, imagining Flynn's heart still in his grasp. He swallowed hard and yanked open the door to his room with his other hand.

"I'll wait here while you shower. I've already called to tell the tattoo parlor we're coming in. I'll drive you. Just me. Frick's in a temper. He lost a lot of money tonight. He can't bring himself to bet that you'll win. Idiot."

"I can't go yet. Oz wants to see me."

"Oh."

Keir might have had his back to the vamp, but he felt Jardine's shoulders slump. Keir had only guessed that Oz wanted to see him. He didn't intend to hang around to find out if he was right. Keir closed his door and leaned against it, his heart hammering, his stomach still roiling.

When Cuba asked for Flynn's heart, the next thing he knew, it was in his claws. Had he even hesitated? Okay, the only way to kill Flynn was to rip off his head or yank out his heart, but Keir hadn't missed the shiver of pleasure that coursed through his puma side as he'd struck. Didn't matter that he'd thrown up afterward.

A hot shower washed away the blood and eased every muscle but one. The ache in Keir's heart remained constant.

He should have known Cuba would never let him go.

He should have known his father didn't want him back in one piece.

Keir had just wanted to believe he had a future beyond this shit, wanted to believe he was making a difference to Reed's life.

He stepped out of the shower and dried himself. The truth Keir didn't want to accept was that there never would be an end to this. He'd fight until he died, fight until Cuba got what she wanted, or fight until she tired of waiting and gave him to someone else, someone like Oz, or sold him to Sobel. And Keir's self-destructive side

didn't give a flying fuck. But the other side of him still dreamed of lying next to a soft, sweet woman with crazy hair and artist's hands who didn't remember who he was or know what he was or care what he was, and loved him anyway. While on the other side laid a strong guy with kind eyes, a sexy smile, and a hard cock.

Keir dressed in black pants, a black roll-neck sweater, and running shoes. He slung an empty backpack over his shoulder and slid open the window of his second-floor room. He spent some time listening before he dropped onto the ground. He landed on all fours and moved from shadow to shadow until he reached the woods. He couldn't hear or scent anyone, but that didn't mean he wasn't being watched. Keir stripped and slotted everything into the backpack. He arranged the pack on the ground so he could pick it up in puma form, and then he shifted.

Man to cat in an instant. He had to swallow his purr of happiness before it escaped. Life was simpler as a puma. Run and hunt. Get caught, and he'd be shot. Keir wriggled, with no small amount of difficulty, into the backpack's straps. He knew he looked stupid, but he'd make sure no one saw him. He ran all the way to Lincoln, bounding over the winter-plowed fields, leaping hedges, not even distracted by a startled rabbit that emerged right under his feet, though his mouth watered for the next mile. When the chances of detection increased, he threw off the backpack, shifted to two legs, dressed, and ran.

The Rising Sun was still closed to customers, with tape over the entrance, but the lights were on in Do Bad Things. Keir's heart pounded as he pushed open the door. Piper stood talking to the bald owner, whose arms were smothered in tattoos. They turned as Keir walked in. Piper smiled, and Hendrick narrowed his eyes. Keir had no time to wonder what that meant, because his attraction to Piper was so strong, so instant, his knees shook. *Damn, she is so pretty, and she's mine*. Keir's cock swelled, pressed against his zipper, and he stuck his hand in his pocket to try to hide the bulge.

"Piper," he said in a quiet voice, grateful he didn't squeak.

She glanced at Hendrick, and a shard of jealousy pierced Keir's heart.

"You remember him?" her boss asked her.

Keir spoke before she could. "My name's Keir. Piper tattooed me a few days ago. Someone called you? I need an addition to my marque. Please."

"It's okay, Hendrick," Piper said. "I'll do it. Come on through."

The bald guy sighed and gestured for Keir to go into the room after her. "Shout if you need me," he called as Keir closed the door.

Keir waited until she was facing him before he spoke. "Do you remember me?"

She blinked, and her hand tightened on the edge of the table before the hint of a smile crept onto her face. "You came in with two guys. Frick and Jardine. You have a fantastic tattoo on your lower back. I added a cat. You brought your own ink."

A thud of disappointment hit his heart. "You wrote that down before you left the tattoo parlor, but you saw me after that." He stepped closer to her. "You leaped from the path of a car driven by a guy I know. I drove you back to your apartment, Two-B Robin Hood Close. You have a large piece of paper tacked to the wall in your bedroom telling you your name because you can't remember anything personal after you fall asleep. We fucked in your kitchen and again on your couch. You tried hard not to, but you fell asleep in my arms. I put you to bed."

She swallowed hard, and her eyes opened wider.

Why had he thought having a woman who didn't remember him would be cool? Keir wanted her to tell him how he'd made her feel, wanted to tell her she'd made him feel safe. He took a deep breath and froze.

Vampire.

He could smell vampire.

"What's the matter?" Piper asked.

Keir had to fight hard to repress his agitation. Who had she been near? Been with?

"I wish I could say something, do something to make you remember," he whispered. "Because I recall every beautiful moment of the time we spent together." He clenched his fists so he wouldn't reach out and touch her. He couldn't stand the thought of her pulling away, couldn't stand the thought of a vampire touching her. "I wish there was a way to make you remember."

"Me too," she whispered.

"Maybe seeing my cute butt will help."

She gasped. "You read my notebook?"

"Only the bit about me. Your butt's cute too. Very cute."

"Oh God." Her cheeks reddened.

He smiled.

"I thought that Jardine and Frick were weird. But not you," she said.

Keir chuckled. "Actually I am weird but in a different way."

Shit, shit. Piper forced a smile onto her face. What did that mean? "You bring your own ink again?"

"I figured you could use what you kept."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Jardine and Frick are stupid as well as weird," he said.

He toed off his running shoes, pulled his sweater over his head, and unzipped his pants. No underwear. Wow, erect cock. Piper only managed to take another breath once he lay facedown on the treatment table. Doesn't that hurt? But he still stared at her, his dark eyes unblinking. Her gaze flickered to the tag around his ankle. She'd written about that too. Had he told her why he had it?

The door opened. "You okay in here?" Hendrick asked.

Piper's head shot up. "Fine."

He glared at Keir's butt and backed out.

Piper went through the mechanics of getting everything ready, while her brain spun. *I am such a slut. I slept with this guy, and now I have another guy in my bed.* And while she had the excuse of not being able to remember, she had no excuse for the desire she felt for the man lying naked in front of her.

Concentrate on the tattoo.

Oh my God.

It had to be coincidence, but Keir had the same curved design across his lower back as Rhyl and—as it turned out—her. Not quite the same, but very close.

Keir had such a beautiful butt. Muscular, curved, tanned, those little dips and that enticing dark crease she'd love to li—*Oh God*.

"Everything all right?" Hendrick asked from the door.

"Fine," Piper snapped.

The door closed again.

"What would you like me to do?" she asked, hoping Keir couldn't read her mind.

"Start where you finished. The sooner the marque reaches my neck, the better."

Piper frowned. "Do you want me to tattoo up to your neck?"

He gave a short laugh. "If only it was that easy. Just add one strand to the design, and if you want to decorate it, that's fine."

Piper wiped his skin and began to draw. "Maybe a little pink butterfly."

Keir growled.

"A flamingo?"

The growl grew louder.

"Trust me," she said.

"I do."

While Piper worked, he talked. Usually she only half listened to clients. Like Hendrick, she tended to zone out of boring conversations about unfaithful boyfriends and treacherous girlfriends, but Keir fascinated her. He told her what had happened from the point that she'd almost been knocked down by the car to when he'd left her in bed. Her panties damp and her heart pounding, Piper believed every word. *I'm a slut*.

He touched her hot cheek. "You are so beautiful."

Oh wow. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell the police that you were with me."

"That's okay."

"I did tell them I couldn't be sure, that you might have been there. The next day I felt..." She clamped her lips together.

"What?"

"Like I'd been up to something."

Keir laughed. "Oh yeah, we were definitely up to something." He took a breath. "I'd like to get up to something again."

"Me too." *Fuck*. How did that slip out? Why did she get herself into these scrapes? Piper concentrated on shading the eagle she'd inked within the vinelike design.

"Can I go home with you?" Keir asked.

Piper thought about the naked vampire in her bed. "Not tonight."

She saw the tight set of Keir's jaw and knew he was disappointed. But how could she take him back? She opened her mouth to tell him she was seeing someone and then closed it. Her messed-up life had just got a lot more messed up.

"All okay?" Hendrick asked from the doorway.

"Fuck off," Keir shouted.

Piper glared at Hendrick, and he sighed and left.

"What's his problem?" Keir asked.

"He's worried about me because he thinks—" Piper shut her mouth.

"I would never hurt you."

"I know." Piper took a deep breath. "It's not as if you're a vampire like Frick and Jardine."

She watched his face. He didn't even blink.

"Are you?" she whispered.

"No. I'm not."

Shit. Piper felt the hope of finding a source of Plasmix for Rhyl slipping through her fingers.

"You look disappointed."

She didn't miss the sharp tone to his voice. He pushed himself up and reached for his pants.

"No, it's—"

"Do you actually believe there is such a thing?"

"Yes.

Keir laughed. "Bloodsucking fiends that creep in your window and stick their fangs in your neck? You get off on that?"

Piper didn't rise to the bait. "Don't you want to look at your tattoo?"

"Why? Want to check if I have a reflection?"

"No, I just thought you'd like to see what I'd done."

"Yeah, and I just thought you were different." Keir pulled on his sweater and shoved his feet into his shoes. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Here, that should cover tonight." He tossed the notes onto the table and walked out.

The bell tinkled, and the door slammed. *Oh damn*.

Hendrick appeared. "What did you do to piss him off? You wearing a cross or something?"

"He's not a vampire."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

Hendrick picked up the cash and whistled.

"Can I use your laptop?" Piper asked.

"Go ahead."

A few minutes later, she wiped the history of where she'd been looking. VAL met twice a week in a converted Methodist chapel a few streets away. They were meeting tonight, but only for another twenty minutes or so.

"I need to run," Piper called as she crept toward the door. "See you Monday."

She heard Hendrick calling, but she continued racing down the street. No point taking the car. It would be a pain to park.

* * *

Piper tried to slip unnoticed into the venue, but the elderly guy at the front of the room shut up when he saw her shuffle onto a seat in the back.

"Welcome. Please come closer and join us."

Shit. But with every face turned her way, Piper didn't feel she had much choice. She glanced around as she moved forward. No way would she blend in. She was the only one not wearing black. Oh, well apart from a gray-haired woman in a pink coat who was knitting something at the end of the row. It seemed like a lifetime since Piper had left her blood-soaked coat in the hospital. Considering what she'd been through today, she was surprised she wasn't more tired.

A tall blonde with long black fingernails stood up. "My name is Angelica Fina, and I'm a vampire."

Not so much of the anonymous, then, Piper thought and tried not to snigger. Everyone clapped.

"Would you like to share how you became a vampire?" asked the elderly guy.

He looked too fat to be one of the undead. And weren't they supposed to not age? Piper only half listened. This wasn't quite what she'd expected, but that was a good thing. These people seemed to *like* being vampires, except she doubted any of them were. But did that mean they didn't drink blood or Plasmix? Piper hoped for a convivial glass of something appropriate at the end of the evening that she could pretend to quaff and a chance to snaffle a bottle or two for Rhyl.

Applause broke out, and Piper joined in.

"Would you like to introduce yourself?" asked the fat imposter.

Piper almost turned to look behind her, but no use hoping he wasn't speaking to her. She got to her feet, ready to lie, and then panicked. What if there was someone here who knew her from the tattoo parlor?

"I'm Piper Kennedy, and I..." A sea of faces turned to look at her, and her mouth lost all moisture.

"Don't worry, dear. We've all been through this. Just say it. Spit it out. This is the hard part," said a middle-aged woman with a bad perm.

"I...I think I'm a vampire."

Everyone clapped.

"Why is that?" asked the steely eyed leader.

Piper wanted a hole to open up in the floor and swallow her.

"I sleep all day and work at night. I like my steak very rare. I don't go to church." *Struggling now*. "My teeth are sharp. I'm allergic to garlic. I...bite my boyfriend."

Fortunately, nothing more seemed to be required of her; she was applauded, and the conversation turned to TTTTA. It took Piper a moment before she realized the illustrious leader didn't have a stutter. *God, these people liked acronyms*.

"Top Ten Things to Try to Avoid," the lady in front of her turned to tell her.

Accidents with sharp pencils headed the list.

"No running with a pencil," everyone chorused.

Piper transformed her groan into a cough.

"Any questions?" asked the guy when they'd finished with number ten—careful handling of paper to avoid cuts.

Piper raised her hand. "Does anyone know where I can buy Plasmix?"

Another sea of faces. All of them blank.

"Never mind," she mumbled and slid down in her seat.

The meeting over, Piper could smell coffee and knew she'd wasted her time. She might as well go home to Rhyl and let him bite her.

She'd reached the door when a guy tapped her on the shoulder. Tall, young, and handsome and Piper's first thought, as it was with everyone she met, was oh hell, do I know him?

"Outside," he whispered.

Once they reached the street, Piper shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her neck.

He glanced around and then lowered his lips to her ear. "You want Plasmix?"

"Yes."

"Fifty pounds a bag."

She gulped. "I'll have to go to a cashpoint machine."

"There's one around the corner."

"Show me the Plasmix first."

"It's in the back of my car."

"Where's your car?"

He smiled. "Next to the cashpoint."

Piper walked with him.

"How do you know about Plasmix?" he asked.

"Google." A reply Piper could use for just about everything.

"Why do you want it?"

"To drink. I figure if I am a vampire, it'll make me feel better."

Piper had a whole raft of questions on the tip of her tongue but kept her mouth shut. Better not to know, and she didn't yet trust this guy. He flipped open the trunk of a large silver BMW.

"Take a look," he said.

Piper didn't want to get too close. "You show me."

He sighed and reached into a cardboard box. "Here. See?"

Piper had no idea what Plasmix looked like. She had no choice but to accept the plastic bag held what he said it did. He stayed well back when she walked to the machine. Reassured he wasn't trying to see her PIN, Piper withdrew two hundred and fifty pounds.

"Five bags, please," she said.

"Come and get them."

Two steps toward the car and she found herself flying headfirst into the trunk—minus her money.

The lid slammed down, the car engine roared, and wheels squealed on the tarmac.

 $\it The\ little\ shit.$ Piper was pissed.

The jerk had grabbed her money, and what she thought was Plasmix appeared to be a bag of big fat nothing. There was virtually no room to move, but Piper twisted until she was lying on her back, her knees pressed to her chest, and then kicked up as hard as she could. There was a satisfying *crunch*, but the lid didn't fly up as she'd hoped. She kicked again and again and again.

The moment she saw sky, Piper threw herself out. She hit the road hard and rolled. Kept on rolling until she collided with a parked vehicle. She looked back, saw red taillights receding in the distance, and sighed.

Ouch, I hurt. Only not perhaps as much as I should.

"Need a hand out of the gutter—again?"

Piper looked up at Keir staring down at her, his hand extended. What the hell is he doing here? She let him pull her up. Why hadn't she broken a leg, an arm, her skull? Piper brushed herself down.

"What happened?" Keir asked.

"Didn't you see?"

"I turned the corner to see you airborne. Again."

Piper exhaled noisily. "I've been robbed."

She felt the change in his body, the coiled tension as he looked around.

"I was trying to buy something, and this guy pretended he had it, but he took my money and pushed me in the trunk of his car. Oh God, he might be that killer." Her heart pounded at the thought of what might have happened.

"How did you get out?"

"I managed to kick my way free."

He gaped at her. "You kicked the trunk lid open?"

"Yes," Piper snapped. Then her shoulders slumped.

"What did you want to buy?" he asked, his voice hard. "Drugs?"

She looked straight at him. "No. Plasmix. Know where I can get some?"

Keir opened his mouth and said, "Yes," without thinking. Well, he was thinking, but not with his head.

"Can you get me some? I can't pay you until tomorrow. Well, another fifty minutes and it will be tomorrow, if you want to wait."

"Where's your car?" he asked.

"Outside Do Bad Things."

Keir stalked back down the road. He didn't need to ask why she wanted the blood substitute. There could only be one reason. She had a vamp to feed. Guess that was why she had the scent of vamp on her and why she hadn't wanted him back at her flat. Keir clamped his teeth into the insides of his cheeks until he tasted blood

Who was the vamp? One of Cuba's familia? Sobel's? But Plasmix was provided for members of the familia and guests. So he had to be an outsider. A vamp who'd stayed after the others had left? A vamp without a family? Maybe the vamp who'd killed the barmaid.

Shit.

So the sensible thing to do would be to get the Plasmix, take her back to her apartment, and find out who she was feeding. Maybe he could hand the rogue vamp over to Cuba, who would let Keir go out of gratitude, and then Piper would fall into his arms. *Oh look, a flying pig.* Keir raged with fury, jealousy, and spite. Piper was *his.*

She unlocked her car with the remote, and Keir got in the driver's side before she could and held out his hand for the keys. "I'll drive. It'll be quicker."

Piper sat next to him and fastened her seat belt, her lips pressed together. Even when she was angry, he still fancied her. Even when he was angry, he still fancied her. *Fuck it, more than fancied*. Beneath the taint of vampire, he found her scent both comforting and enticing. It was all he could do not to stop the car and drag her onto his lap. His cock tried to nod in agreement.

Keir managed to get to the outskirts of Lincoln before he snapped and spoke first. "Who is he?"

"Someone who needs help."

And I don't?

Keir pressed his foot down on the accelerator. He drove too fast and didn't care. Whoever this vamp was, he was history. He pulled up to the other side of the woods, well away from Lam Hall.

"Wait here. Don't leave the car. I'll be back as soon as I can with what you need." As he started to get out, he turned to face her. "And don't fall asleep."

She glared and slumped down in the seat.

Chapter Fourteen

On the other side of the woods, Lam Hall sailed into view like a ghostly galleon in the silvery moonlight, and Keir hesitated. He had no plan other than to go to the refrigerated storage area, help himself to several bags of Plasmix, and return through the woods to Piper. The chances of sneaking in and out unseen were not high, though it was *who* saw him that mattered.

He slinked slow and low from cover to cover. The last hiding place was behind a silver BMW. A piece of rope secured a damaged trunk. *What the fuck*? Someone from here had tried to grab Piper? Why?

Keir ran to the back door and scented trouble too late to avoid bumping into it.

Oz grabbed him by the throat and flung him back against the wall, pinning him in place. Keir's fists clenched as he thought about fighting back. He decided not to.

"What are you up to?" Oz stared straight at him.

"Nothing." Keir choked out the word.

"Where have you been?"

"For a run."

Oz relaxed his hold. His rough fingers stroked Keir's cheek. "You puzzle me."

Keir kept his mouth shut.

"I thought you were a sub, but that's not the essence of your kink. You want pain, but not for the right reason. You desire punishment, but it doesn't give you a buzz. No submissive could fight like you. You surprised me tonight. I'm not easily impressed." Oz smiled.

Keir wasn't sure he wanted to impress Oz.

"Explain why you're still here," Oz said. "Why risk your life fighting for that bitch?"

Keir lifted the leg of his pants. "Remember what I have around my ankle? If I stray too far, poison will be injected into my bloodstream."

Oz raised his eyebrows. "You sure?"

Keir gave a quiet laugh. "No, but I can hardly put it to the test."

"True"

Oz cocked his head to one side. "You're still alive because you haven't yet given her what she wants."

Something Keir had already figured out.

"Smart cat. Though if you don't give me what *I* want, you're of no use to me and might as well be dead."

Keir didn't miss the threat in Oz's voice or the change in his demeanor. Energy rolled from him in strong black waves that froze the breath in Keir's throat and blurred his vision.

"Somewhere in this butt fuck of a pathetic excuse for a city, someone is hiding from me." Oz's fingers wrapped once more around Keir's throat and squeezed. "That someone has power they shouldn't have, power they've stolen."

"What does that have to do with me?" Keir gasped, trying to resist the urge to slam his knee into Oz's groin.

"You're going to help me find them."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll hold you down while Cuba takes what she wants, and I'll fuck you to death afterward."

Oz loosened his hold, and Keir drew in a ragged breath. The question hovered on his lips, and he spit it out before he swallowed it. "Do you know what she wants from me?"

The smile on Oz's face sent chills racing down Keir's spine. "I suspect she wishes to make a hole in your soul."

That didn't sound good. Keir gulped, but the lump in his throat stayed put.

"Haven't you worked out what she is?" Oz asked.

"A demon." Like you.

"And?" Oz tilted his head.

Isn't that enough?

Oz sighed. "Use your brain. Think of her name."

"Cuba, Cu-ba." Even as Keir said it, the truth leaped at him and shook him like a rabid dog. "Succubae," he whispered. "Succubus."

"When you sleep with her, she'll suck whatever she wants from your body along with your cum."

"But what does she want?" Keir asked, his heart hammering. "How can she make a hole in my soul?"

Oz slid his hands around Keir's hips and dragged them against his. Keir felt the hardness of Oz's erection, and his treacherous cock responded despite his brain yelling obscenities.

"She wants whatever it is that she feels she needs to feed her energy. Your lust perhaps. She'll take it, and you'll never get it back. You'll never be the same again."

Keir hadn't known, but in a way he had. He could have fucked her months ago, but something had stopped him.

"Talking of sucking," Oz said and pulled Keir's hand over his crotch. "Your mouth. My cock. Now."

"Here?" Keir asked.

They were by the back door of the hall.

"Here."

Do it fast. Go get the Plasmix and get back to Piper before she falls asleep.

Keir dropped to his knees and unbuttoned and unzipped Oz's pants. His cock sprang out to smear precum on Keir's cheek. Oz's hands settled in Keir's hair as Keir's tongue traced the swollen veins of Oz's shaft down to the firm ball sac. Keir tugged Oz's pants a little farther down and spread his hands over his butt cheeks as he licked and nipped and kissed the demon's cock.

Despite everything, Keir was turned on. Maybe losing his lust to Cuba wouldn't be such a bad thing if it made him less of a slut. Oz moaned soft and low as Keir enveloped the crest of his cock between his lips and slid his tongue into the slit. He moved one hand to caress Oz's balls and wrapped the other around the base of his dick and began to work magic that was as familiar to him as breathing. His own cock stiffened and swelled in his pants, pressing against the zipper with no underwear to buffer it, and yet Keir knew there was something missing. He wasn't going to deny that he enjoyed doing this, having it done to him, but he felt as though there should be something more than animalistic gratification.

He thought of Piper waiting in the car, and his heart stuttered, his hands and mouth faltering.

"Harder," Oz said.

The taste of Oz filled Keir's head as precum surged to coat his tongue.

"Deeper," the demon ordered.

Keir sucked harder, dipped lower until the head of Oz's cock brushed the back of his throat. No way could he get the whole thing in, but Keir had long ago learned how to overcome his gag reflex. He changed his breathing, swallowed, and yawned at the same time and let Oz fuck his mouth as he moved his hands to Oz's muscular thighs.

Hurry, hurry, hurry.

Fingers fell from Keir's hair to stroke his neck. He knew Oz could feel his cock moving in and out of his throat under his skin. Keir tightened his mouth and used his tongue to urge Oz on. He looked up at the demon staring down at him. A deep groan spilled from Oz's throat, and for some unaccountable reason, Keir's cock deflated as Oz pumped harder.

No time to wonder why, Keir slid a finger to Oz's asshole, circled, and pushed inside past the ring of restrictive tissue. Room for two fingers, so Keir added another and bunched up the rest so his fist smacked against Oz's ass as he thrust in and out. One hand in his ass, the other back around Oz's balls, and his mouth sucking until his cheeks hollowed, Keir could do nothing more than *will* Oz to come.

He felt the change in the demon's body, the sudden increase in tension as Oz's cock swelled and his balls separated. Keir didn't let up with his mouth and tongue and bent his fingers inside Oz to stroke his prostate.

A moment later, the geyser erupted. Keir could barely swallow fast enough. When the last spasm had faded away, Oz pulled Keir to his feet.

Oh shit, he'll feel my dick. Keir pushed his hand into his pocket and stepped away. Oz gave him a curious look and then smiled.

"Meet me back here in fifteen minutes. I need your nose at Arthington Manor."

I don't even get a thank-you? "The place that fell down?"

Oz nodded. "I need you to track."

Keir lifted the leg of his pants. "Too far away. I can't go more than twenty miles from here."

"Then I'll speak to Cuba and persuade her to have it removed. After all, you're not going to run, are you? More than that tether keeps you here." Oz narrowed his eyes.

"If I find what you're looking for, can I ask a favor?"

Oz gripped Keir by the hair and tipped his head back to bare his throat. "Yes, I'll suck you off next time."

Keir forced out a laugh as Oz let him go. He left the demon zipping up and slipped into the house. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to tell Oz about Piper, but Keir wondered if Oz had the power to restore her memory. Keir went straight to the kitchen, making sure no one saw him. He'd hoped to find it empty, but the cook was in there.

"You hungry again?" the werebear asked.

"I'm always hungry. Can I take a look in the cold store, see what I fancy?"

"Go ahead."

Keir lifted the heavy latch on the door and went inside.

"Great fight," the cook called. "Of course you wouldn't last five seconds with a bear."

Keir stuffed the plastic bags of Plasmix into his backpack. He kept pushing them in until there was no room left, then pulled the neck tight and fastened the flap.

"Found anything? I could cook you a steak. Or you can have it raw."

Keir emerged and closed up the cold room. He waved a piece of steak at Jellicoe. "Read my mind. Raw it is. Thanks."

The moment Keir was out of the kitchen, he ran. All the way across the garden and through the woods. Hopefully Oz was busy with Cuba and wouldn't miss him for a while. Keir jettisoned the meat when he saw Piper's car sitting where he'd left it. Though there was no sign of Piper.

He flung open the door, saw her crouched down, and sighed in relief that she was still there, sitting in the driver's seat and thankfully awake.

She jumped when he got in the passenger side. "Did you get it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You...you don't need to come with me."

"Oh yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

She put her hand on his thigh, and his cock burst to life, hard as a rock in an instant.

"Keir, I can't let you get mixed up in this."

"Mixed up in what?"

"Thank you for getting the Plasmix. It really is better that you don't come with me."

She leaned over and kissed him. Sweet but too fast.

Even as he reached for her, she pulled back. "Don't follow me. Please."

She was trying to protect him? Keir let out a muffled laugh. Then he remembered why she wanted the blood, and a scowl replaced his smile.

"Okay." He got out of the car and stepped aside.

The longer she delayed, the greater the chance of detection by Oz or one the familia. The car turned a corner and was gone. Keir ran into the woods, stripped, and let his cat out to play. Might as well not waste the steak he'd jettisoned. One sniff and he found it. Two chomps and it disappeared.

His top speed was about thirty-five miles an hour, but unlike a motorized vehicle, he could take the most direct route to his destination. Keir nudged his clothes into a crumpled pile at the base of a tree and ran, his muscles bunching and flowing as he ate up the ground.

* * *

Piper kept glancing at the backpack beside her, expecting it to disappear. How had Keir been able to get Plasmix? At a hotel? Was he staying there? Were vampires staying there? Keir wasn't a vampire, but he was *something*.

She felt like she'd been dropped into the middle of a supernatural movie with no idea how it had started, nor any clue how it would end. A tiny part of Piper was relieved to know she'd wake up tomorrow and not remember any of this. She only needed to write down what she wanted to remember. Except she wanted to remember Keir and Rhyl. Plus something was wrong with her too. Her reflexes, speed, power—she didn't need memory to know they weren't normal. Something had happened to her at Arthington Manor, and Rhyl was the key. And if she needed Plasmix to keep him safe, then Piper needed Keir too.

Her mouth twitched in a smile as she registered her brain making excuses for wanting both guys in her life. Then the smile faded as she accepted the impossibility of that. Hard enough to keep one, let alone think she could handle two.

When she called her house phone on her mobile, there was no answer, and her heart beat faster. Had Rhyl gone looking for blood? Piper put her foot down harder on the accelerator and only slowed for the section of road leading back into the city with speed cameras every few hundred yards.

Clutching the backpack, she took the stairs to her apartment two at a time and unlocked the door.

"Rhyl, I've got—"

Lips clamped to hers, and she was propelled to the floor under a mountain of naked male. Rhyl's tongue teased its way into her mouth, and Piper groaned. Dimly aware that the door wasn't even closed, she struggled to kick it shut. Then Rhyl's fingers were between the buttons of her coat, squeezing her breast through her sweater as he kissed her harder, and Piper forgot the door, forgot she had neighbors, and kissed him back.

The fingers of his other hand threaded her hair to hold her just where he wanted, and Piper was fine with that. He tasted so good, his tongue dancing with hers as he deepened the kiss. She gulped air when he broke away, and then groaned as he kissed a wet path from her lips, over the line of her chin, and down her throat. She felt the rasp of his teeth, but her fuzzy head took a moment to realize what he was about to do.

"I've got—" she said.

"One taste, please. I can stop," Rhyl whispered.

Sharp teeth sank into her neck, and she gasped. Piper struggled, but he wrapped his arms and legs more tightly around her and sucked harder. She opened her mouth to tell him she had Plasmix, but the words wouldn't come out, and a moment later, she didn't want them to. It was as if lightning flared and thunder rolled through her body. Her nipples tightened, and her muscles tensed. Sexual excitement teased every cell until she felt like she was coming all over her body. At the same time, Piper knew Rhyl was taking too much, that she'd lose consciousness and wreck everything.

Should have stopped him sooner.

She tried to reach the strap of the backpack and pull it closer, but her fingers came back empty. Instead she grabbed Rhyl's hair and yanked.

"Rhyl. Stop," she gasped.

Her eyes fluttered closed as she fought to drag air into her lungs. Then she jerked as the weight of Rhyl's body shifted off hers, his mouth the last thing to leave her neck. The door shut, and Piper opened her eyes to see Keir slam his fist into Rhyl's face.

"The Plasmix," Keir snapped.

Piper rolled and snagged the backpack. Her fingers fumbled as she unfastened it.

Keir straddled Rhyl to pin him down. "Slap it on the vampire's teeth."

The moment the bag hit Rhyl's mouth, he began to suck.

"Get another ready," Keir told her.

By the time Piper had one in her hand, the first was empty.

After the fifth bag, Keir climbed off Rhyl and sat with his arm resting on his bent knee, staring at the vamp. Piper offered Rhyl another bag, and he shook his head. He lay on his back, his chest heaving, blood trickling from his nose.

Keir reached for Piper's neck and felt the place where Rhyl had bitten her. She saw a smudge of blood on his fingers. "You okay?" he asked, his voice cool and guarded.

She nodded. "Thank you." Piper slid her hand over the floor to clutch his fingers and squeeze.

Keir sighed, then pulled her into his arms and hugged her. It took a moment to sink into her thick skull that he was nude. Over his shoulder she saw Rhyl glaring up at them, his mouth a tight line, brow furrowed, eyes getting blacker. *Shit*. She had no idea how to handle this. Then she felt Keir's erection pressing between them even through her thick coat, and she had a feeling a bad situation was going to get a whole lot worse. Piper thrust Keir away and pushed herself to stand on shaky legs.

"Why aren't you wearing any clothes? You followed me here after I told you not to. You think I was going to fuck you?"

Piper's head swam, and she slid back to the floor. Oops.

"Who's this?" Rhyl asked, wiping away the blood from under his nose.

"The guy she fucked before you," Keir snapped. "Only even though we fucked like bunnies, she doesn't remember, and she's not going to remember you either, bloodsucker."

Rhyl rose to a sitting position and snarled. His fangs came out, and Piper gulped.

"Don't," she pleaded. "Rhyl, you should be thanking Keir. He got me the Plasmix. And you nearly killed me. Again."

Rhyl's face fell, and he turned to her. "I'm sorry, angel. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Again?" Keir asked. "What the fuck is going on here? Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"My name is Rhyl. Piper saved me. I'd been trapped for a long time, and she found me." Rhyl reached for Piper's hand and held it tight. "I bit her wrist and drank too much. I hurt her. But she came back." He smiled, and then the smile fell away. "I'm not well. I've spent so long without feeding regularly that I'm out of balance. I'm sorry I hurt you, Piper." He turned to Keir. "Thank you for striking me. If I was taking too much, I hope you'd have killed me."

Keir smiled. "Oh yeah. I'd have ripped your fucking head off, sunshine."

"That's enough," Piper said. "Can one of you help me to the couch? The other can make me a drink of tea."

She was in Rhyl's arms before she'd finished the last word.

"I have no idea how to make tea," he said, a condescending smile filling his face.

Rhyl sat her on the couch and helped her take off her coat. Piper kept her gaze above his shoulders. His erect cock kept nudging her. *Don't look*. He sat at her side. *So hard not to stare*. So hard...period.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry; I'm sorry," he whispered and stroked her face. "Oh God, I ought to leave right away. I really could have killed you."

Keir handed her a cup of tea. "She nearly got killed trying to get you Plasmix. Some jerk trapped her in the trunk of his car. Remember what he looked like, sweetheart?"

"Young, dark, handsome."

"Well, that narrows it down," Keir said, scowling.

He sat on the other side of Piper and slung his arm across the back of the couch, letting his fingers curl around her neck. Rhyl's hand settled over her thigh. Piper could almost taste the tension in the air. She fumbled in her pocket for her notebook and pencil. "I have to write this down before I forget."

"Start with 'I need to stay away from bloodsuckers," Keir said.

"If you have access to Plasmix, you're not following your own advice," Rhyl snapped back. "And what the fuck is that round your ankle?"

"A decorative band. Very exclusive. Want one?"

Piper could feel them glowering at each other. "Look, I have to write this down. My life is difficult enough without you two making it worse. I'm really freaked-out at the idea that I'll forget you, either of you, because I don't want to."

They stayed silent as she wrote, though Keir's fingers teased her neck while Rhyl stroked her leg. Piper scribbled notes, hoping what she wrote would make sense when she woke. She paused on the word *naked*. So why *was* Keir naked? He hadn't explained. And how the hell had he managed to get to her flat so fast?

"Where did you find Fang Boy?" Keir asked.

"Arthington Manor," Piper said. "Well, in the ruins of it. Holding a fish."

Keir's fingers paused for a moment in their caress of her neck. Well she supposed the fish was unusual.

"A little striped wooden one," she said.

Rhyl sighed. "My lucky fish. I'd been trapped under the house for a long time. The collapse somehow shifted me closer to the surface."

"Trapped as in imprisoned?" Keir asked.

"I got caught between slabs of rock. I couldn't move."

Piper stared at him. Rhyl traced his fingers along the line of her jaw.

"I was staked with a piece of wood the fish was attached to." His hand dropped to touch the scar on his chest. "Not quite in the right place."

"Pity," Keir quipped.

Rhyl smiled. "Yeah, that's what I came to think. Now I've never been so thankful."

He stared straight at Piper, and she felt Keir vibrate like a road drill on her other side.

"Who did it?" she asked.

Rhyl sighed. "I don't remember. Not yet. It will come to me. But clearly someone wanted me dead."

"I wonder why." Keir snorted.

Piper rolled her eyes. These two were like teenagers.

"How did you survive?" Piper asked.

"I sucked blood from rats, chewed bugs, anything that came near. When I saw the hand reaching for me, I... Sorry, Piper."

"How long were you down there?" Keir asked.

Rhyl blinked. "Four...years."

"Christ," Keir gasped.

"Oh my God." Piper gaped at Rhyl.

"Give or take a couple of weeks. I lost my memory and my mind. I didn't lose the fish." He smiled. "But I'm out of sync. I can't predict my behavior if I don't get blood regularly." Rhyl sighed. "I should leave you."

"No," Piper said.

"Yes," Keir said at the same time. "Piper doesn't need your sort of complication in her life."

"And she needs yours? Does she know what you are?"

Piper sat between two bristling, naked men and wondered how to defuse the situation. Whether they knew it or not, they both needed her, and the thrill of being needed overwhelmed any thought of danger.

Two men.

Two gorgeous dark-haired men.

Two gorgeous dark-haired, naked men.

Both of whom had erections.

Both of whom she wanted.

Oh fuck.

"Piper, why don't you ask him why he's naked?" Rhyl glared at Keir.

She turned to look at Keir. "Are your clothes outside the door? Should I go and get them?"

"No, they're not outside the door. They're a few miles away in the woods."

Rhyl laughed. Piper understood that there was something she wasn't getting here but had no idea what it could be.

"What are you?" Rhyl asked. "Weresnake? Wererat? Wereskunk?"

"Want me to show you?" Keir said with a growl.

Rhyl cocked an eyebrow. "Go ahead."

Everything happened so fast, Piper had little time to register more than a blur of movement and the brush of something exquisitely soft against her hand before the couch tipped up and she and Rhyl flew backward. She turned her head to see Rhyl on his back with a big cat crouched over him, teeth hovering above his throat.

"Ah, werepuma," Rhyl said.

Chapter Fifteen

Keir was a jaw snap away from killing the vamp. Rhyl stared up at him, dark shadows under his defiant eyes and the hint of a smile on his lips. Keir felt a hand on his flank, soft fingers running through his fur, and he turned to Piper. He wasn't sure what he'd have done if he'd seen fear or disgust on her face, but her eyes were wide open in wonder. When she touched his face and smiled, Keir turned into her caress and purred, sensing this moment was one of the most important in his life.

Piper lowered her head and rubbed her cheek against his. *Oh fuck*. Keir's cock hardened. His head reeled as though he was drunk, and in a way he was. The aroma of Piper's desire, the scent of her overwhelmed him until he could barely breathe. Not just her, but the smell of the bloodsucker too, except Keir wanted *him* out of his head. Rhyl was the one Oz sought, the stealer of power, and therefore trouble. Keir only wanted Piper, but the vamp lay there all long and lean and hard and...fucking sexy.

Shit, shit, shit.

Keir shifted back.

He helped Piper to her feet, and he and Rhyl lifted the couch into place, no damage done except to Keir's head, where confusion reigned. Did he really want the vamp too? Did Piper want them both? How would the vamp feel about that?

"Wow," Piper said. "That was absolutely amazing."

"A saber-toothed tiger would have been more impressive," said the bloodsucker.

Piper frowned. "Don't be mean."

"Sorry." Rhyl sighed. "Quite the show." He lowered his voice. "If you like cats, that is."

This was who Oz sought? The vamp? Keir stalked around the room, chewing his lip, trying to think. It had to be Rhyl, only he didn't seem very powerful, not even now that he'd fed. And what the fuck was he doing with Piper? Okay, so she'd rescued him, but didn't he have someplace else to be? Keir's shoulders slumped. Stupid questions. Answers he didn't want to hear.

"You know, you two have very similar tattoos," Piper said. "Apart from the fact that Keir's goes up his leg as well, they're on the same place on your body, the same sort of Celtic twist, the same sharp detail. Makes me wonder if you had them done at the same place."

"No," both men said together.

"It's a common design," Keir said. "Yours is similar."

"Yeah, I know. Isn't it weird?" Piper said. "I wonder—"

"I should put something on," Rhyl said.

The vamp had paled. Keir knew he was missing something. Was the tattoo in some way significant?

"Do you have any clothes I could wear?" Rhyl asked.

"Yeah, better cover up that worm before an early bird spots it," Keir said.

"At least I have something worth covering up," Rhyl retorted.

"Fuckwit," Keir spat.

"Dickhead," Rhyl muttered.

"I doubt anything of mine will fit either of you," Piper said, her voice dull. She got to her feet and walked toward the bedroom. "Take a look around and use what you like. Not the curtains. Let yourselves out. Nice to meet you. Bye."

The bedroom door slammed.

"Well done, you prat," Rhyl snarled.

"You started it."

"No, I fucking didn't. And what's that damn thing on your ankle? You belong to someone?"

Keir reared up. "No, I fucking don't!"

"Is it tracking your movements? Are you putting her in danger?"

"I'm the only one in danger," Keir snapped. He was sure that was true until he thought about that car with the damaged trunk. *Shit*.

They glared at each other, and then both heads jerked toward the bedroom door at the same time. Muffled sobs. Piper was crying.

"Oh shit," Keir muttered.

"That's your fault."

Keir clenched his fists. "No, it isn't."

The sobs got louder.

Keir moved toward the door. "I'll speak to her."

Rhyl stepped in front of him. "No, I will."

Piper wailed.

"We both will," said Rhyl.

Keir frowned and then nodded. He pushed the door open. Piper lay facedown in the middle of her bed. He looked at her lower back and then glanced at Rhyl. The vampire smiled. Piper had their initials added in her tattoo. PRK.

As Keir went to lie on one side of her, Rhyl took the other side, concern back on his face. An imaginary fist thumped Keir hard in the belly and sent vibrations racing through his body. He hated that he'd made Piper cry, but the feeling in his gut wasn't solely due to that. It had a lot to do with the sight of her lying here

between them, the thought of getting her naked, the idea of them both fucking her and fucking each other. Keir lifted his gaze from Piper's rigid back and looked straight into Rhyl's eyes. The vamp was staring at him.

At the sight of the quirky smile on Rhyl's lips, a lump erupted in Keir's throat and his balls tightened. He watched Rhyl swallow, the vision of the rounded cartilage moving up and down triggering his own to do the same. Oh fuck, the bloodsucker feels it too. The vamp might annoy the hell out of him, but Keir had fallen into a deep pool of lust. Not water, but quicksand, and he was going down—fast.

Piper's muffled sobs dragged his attention back to her.

"Don't cry, angel," Rhyl whispered and rubbed soothing circles over her back.
"Want me to thump the cat in the mouth?"

"No," she mumbled into the pillow.

"In the balls?" Rhyl asked.

She groaned.

"Sorry," Keir said, not sure why he was apologizing, but he figured it was always the right word with an upset woman. He rubbed Piper's shoulders, kneading the tight knots of her muscles.

Keir's fingers touched Rhyl's as he stroked Piper's back. Neither man pulled back. For a long moment Keir stared at their hands and didn't breathe. He thought about moving, but it was Rhyl who trailed the pad of his index finger down the line of Keir's thumb, over the first joint, to the bony knuckle.

Oh fuck. Electricity fizzled down Keir's spine straight to his groin. He could have sworn he heard his cock groan.

"Why haven't you two gone?" Piper said into the pillow.

Keir pressed his mouth to her ear. "Really want us to leave, sweetheart? I like what you've done with your tattoo. Piper, Rhyl, Keir—PRK."

She stiffened and then slumped again. "Ah."

Rhyl nuzzled her hair. "We can make you happy."

"You've made me cry," she mumbled.

"We can do better," Keir said. "Let us try."

Piper tensed. "Both of you?" She lifted her head and looked from one to the other.

Where was the tearstained face? *Little minx*. The tattooed initials were a clear sign of what she wanted. Keir grinned.

"We have a lot to offer," Rhyl said. "Two mouths, two tongues, four arms, twenty fingers, two appendixes."

She laughed and rolled over.

"A finger girl, eh?" Rhyl asked.

"It was the two bits you didn't mention." She blushed so red Keir wanted to eat her.

Rhyl furrowed his brow. "Gallbladders?"

She laughed again.

Keir's heart threatened to burst out of his chest it beat so fast. Why couldn't he be funny and make her laugh? Rhyl was smiling as he tugged her arm out of her sweater. Was she okay with this? With them both? Maybe she just wants him. Oh shit, is he dangerous? Should—

Rhyl coughed and nodded at her other arm. Keir leaped into action. Too much thinking. Her sweater off, blouse off, T-shirt off, to reveal another T-shirt. They both chuckled.

"I get cold," Piper grumbled.

"Not with us," Keir said.

They worked together to take off her shoes and socks and pull her pants from her legs. Keir expected to see bruises, but she looked untouched. How the hell could she fall from a moving car and not have a mark, let alone not kill herself?

"Get your brain in gear," Rhyl whispered.

Keir blinked as he stared at Piper. She lay in the middle of the bed on her back in a tight pink T-shirt and black lace boy shorts, a line of soft flesh exposed at her middle, and she looked so delicious his mouth watered to match his cock. Keir yanked down on his balls, then pulled a hand up his shaft and caught sight of Rhyl doing the same.

"Gorgeous," Rhyl whispered.

Keir wished he'd said it first, and then sagged. This wasn't going to work. How could he share? He was—

"Yes, he is," Piper said, looking straight at him. "You both are."

Keir's gaze flicked to Rhyl. He wasn't staring at Piper. *Oh fuck, fuck, fuck*. He slammed his hand back to the base of his cock and squeezed harder.

Piper's panties were utterly soaked. There was probably a wet patch on the bed. Good thing the light was dim. Her face likely resembled a tomato. She felt hot inside and out. In desperation, she tried to keep her mind off the obvious.

Impossible.

Two guys?

Maybe it wasn't impossible.

Piper had no hope of ignoring this. She'd never been as turned on in her life.

I don't think.

She'd engineered it anyway. Okay, so she might not have thought it through, but at least they were here with her and not growling at each other. The pretending to cry had worked perfectly.

Piper wasn't stupid. The testosterone storm swirling in her apartment derived from more than their attraction to her. These two wanted each other. The thought brought a fresh flood of warmth between her legs. How bad was she to get turned on by the idea of two sexy guys making love? It excited her to the point that the muscles of her pussy clamped hard enough to make her gasp aloud.

"Just so we don't misunderstand." Keir said. "You—"

Piper shot him a look, and he pressed his lips together. She didn't want this spelled out, just needed it to happen.

"What do you want us to do, angel?" Rhyl asked.

Fuck each other stupid. Please. Piper hoped they could read minds.

Keir swallowed hard and asked, "You really want us to leave?"

"Noooo!" she wailed, and they laughed. Piper sighed. "I can ask you to do whatever I like?"

Keir's fingers rubbed her nipple through the T-shirt. Rhyl had tucked his hand in the side of her panties to draw circles on her hip.

"Whatever you want," Keir said.

She'd have liked to watch them make love but wasn't sure she dared ask for that. Plus, time ticked by. She'd fall asleep and lose all memories of what they'd done.

All the more reason to enjoy as much as she could now. Call me selfish.

"I want everything," she said. "I want the three of us to do everything."

"Right answer," Rhyl said.

They rolled up her T-shirt from the bottom, and the sensation of their palms and fingers teasing her skin made the breath catch in Piper's throat. She closed her eyes as the material slid over her breasts, her face, and then her head. Fingers closed hers over the edge of the wooden headboard.

"Hold tight," Rhyl said.

"Open your eyes, baby," Keir whispered. "See what you do to us."

Piper groaned when she saw the way they stared at her. Devils or angels? Maybe a bit of both.

"Look at these," Rhyl said. He brushed his fingers over her swollen nipples, and Piper bit her lip. "All tight and hard and aching."

"Difficult to know where to start," Keir said. "It's like having a banquet with all your favorite food spread out in front of you."

He trailed his fingers up the side of Piper's body and over the swell of her breast to squeeze the sensitive tip. A bolt of pleasure shot down her spine.

"Oh God, hurry up and eat something," she said with a groan, her fingers tightening on the bed head.

Rhyl licked one nipple, and Keir latched onto the other. Piper's back arched, pushing her breasts into their mouths as her muscles tightened and kept

tightening. They put hands on her hips to press her down, hands on her hands to keep them above her head, and then worked together, lips teasing, tongues stroking, mouths sucking until the air disappeared from Piper's lungs. She couldn't breathe, couldn't move, could only allow the growing wave to take her higher and higher while she waited for it to break and let her fall into pleasure.

Please, please.

"Come for us, angel," Rhyl whispered.

They'd worked her into a frenzy of need and hadn't even touched between her legs, which probably accounted for her desperate desire for release. Now Piper *had* to move. Every lick and suck at her breasts wound her tighter. The fingers kneading her hips, still pressing her down, made her buck and thrash for freedom. She made little mewling sounds as the pressure in her chest rose again.

Now.

A loud cry burst from her lips as she crashed and unraveled. Piper shook with the intensity of the orgasm, vibrations rippling through her body.

"Oh God, God," she gasped.

When she realized they'd let her hands go and her fingers had threaded through their hair to pull hard, Piper relaxed her grip.

"Sorry," she muttered as she shook stray dark hairs from her fingers.

"You are too cute," Keir said. "It's like setting off a firework. Flash and bang."

Rhyl dropped his head to nuzzle her breast, and Piper tried not to react when she felt the rasp of his teeth on her nipple.

He lifted his head. "I won't bite."

Can he read my mind?

"I might," Keir said, and she gulped.

The guys played her like an instrument, tickling along her collarbone, strumming the lines of her ribs, and sweeping around and over her breasts. Their mouths followed their fingers, and Piper gave herself up to sensation as they licked a path down her body. Rhyl's cheeks were smooth, Keir's stubble roughened. Keir's hair was finer and softer than Rhyl's, but their mouths, tongues, and lips worked the same magic to fog Piper's head and light fires all over her body, exciting every cell with the promise of more delight.

Piper wanted to touch them, slide her fingers over their muscles, trace the hills and valleys of their chests, but she could barely move. She could only feel. They fluttered their tongues on her belly, blew warm air over the places they'd licked to make her skin dance under their mouths. Piper could feel the pair smiling against her stomach. A single kiss brushed over her navel by Keir and a deep groan erupted from her throat. Then hands on either side of her hips pulled down her sodden panties and stripped them from her legs.

They'd mostly kept the length of their bodies away from her until now, but Piper could feel thick, heavy cocks pressed against her legs, the wet tips coating her skin with precum as they rocked against her. Hands roamed her stomach, fingers spread her legs to pin her thighs beneath their knees. A single finger stroked her soaked folds, and Piper whimpered as her breathing labored. Another finger joined the first, and she could no longer tell who was doing what. They had hands everywhere, mouths everywhere, as if there were ten of them, not two.

"Oh fuck," she groaned.

"Taste," Rhyl said and pressed a finger to her lips.

Piper opened her mouth and sucked, let him slide his finger in and out of her lips. So that had to be Keir with his face between her legs. Rhyl kissed her, his tongue invading her mouth as Keir's tongue speared her pussy and his fingers circled her clit. Piper felt the telltale spasms grip her belly as her body wound itself back to the brink. The guys changed places, Keir bringing her a mouth coated with her cream, while Rhyl fluttered his tongue over her clit in a lightning-fast action that broke her control and threw her back into oblivion. Behind her eyes, stars winked in a frenzy as every muscle tightened and slowly faded as she came down.

No time for her to recover; she was shifted, lifted, maneuvered until Rhyl's shoulders were between her legs and her hips were raised to give him better access. The feel of his hair on her inner thighs was so sensual, Piper shivered. Keir's cock waved close to her face, and she grabbed it, licked precum from the tip, and kept licking the rounded head as he gasped above her.

"Fuck, fuck," he groaned.

Piper entwined the fingers of one hand in Rhyl's hair and wrapped the other hand around the base of Keir's cock. She slid her fist up and down as she sucked, adoring the way the outer skin moved over the rock-hard core, loving the little surges of spicy-sweet cream that hit her tongue. Rhyl sucked her clit, and Piper sucked harder at Keir's cock.

"A woman who multitasks," Keir gasped. "He's right. You are an angel."

Piper pushed back her longing to just lie there and let them do what they liked. She struggled to concentrate, desperate to prove she *could* give and take pleasure at the same time. She circled her tongue over the head of Keir's cock, dipping into the tiny slit to make him groan and teasing the sensitive underside as she squeezed and pumped at the base. Rhyl was licking her anus. *Bloody hell*. Piper almost choked around Keir's cock. As she coughed, he pulled out of her mouth and stroked her face.

"Okay?"

"Yes." She glanced down at Rhyl and gulped.

Keir laughed. "Ah, right."

She took his cock back between her lips and shuddered as Rhyl's tongue teased her anus.

Bad, bad, bad. But feels good, good, good.

His hot, wet tongue circled her asshole over and over. The naughtiness of the sensation made her legs shake. Then a finger joined his tongue, and Piper

accidentally swallowed against Keir's cock, dragging it deeper into her mouth. He released a long moan. This was all about pleasure, making each other come and come and come. No one was being forced to do anything. No strings. No one would get hurt. If bodies could respond like this, rising and falling in crescendos of electrifying delight, then how could being together be wrong? Piper knew this might never happen again, accepted she'd not remember a thing, and finally she let go. She'd said she wanted to do everything, and she meant it.

Rhyl's finger breached the circle of restrictive muscle, and Piper felt the pop as it was sucked inside her body, the slight burning sensation morphing fast to pleasurable fullness. As Rhyl pushed gently in and out of her anus, he pulled back to lick the crease of her groin. Keir yanked the pillow from under her head to tuck it under her shoulders, and he straddled her chest. Piper took her hand from his cock and gripped his thighs as he gently fucked her mouth with his shaft.

"Oh Christ, you feel so good." Keir panted. "Hot, wet, tight. Fuck."

Piper tightened her mouth around him as he thrust between her lips. She could feel his balls hitting her chin and moved one hand to fondle the tight sac, letting her nails scratch lightly.

"Jesus Christ," Keir groaned.

She felt another finger join the first in her anus, a finger slide into her pussy, and she whimpered around Keir's cock. He withdrew from her mouth, and she whimpered again.

"You're going to make me come," Keir said.

"Thought...that was...the idea." Piper's breath came in fits and starts.

"Not yet," he whispered.

"Can I suck you both?" she asked.

Rhyl raised his head and groaned at the same time as Keir.

"Please?" Piper asked.

"How?" Rhyl asked.

"Stand together," Piper said.

She smiled when she saw the pair sway as they stood hip to hip, their erections rising thick and tall over their stomachs. Both long and thick and hard. Piper knelt on the bed and took their cocks in her hand. She licked from one to the other, bringing them closer and closer until she could fit the tips of both into her mouth at the same time. Hands threaded her hair. Rhyl held her tighter than Keir as she sucked and rolled her tongue over their cockheads.

"Sweet Jesus Christ," Keir gasped.

Piper loved hearing them moan, loved feeling the tremble in their bodies. She pressed one cock against the other, sliding her tongue in a figure eight between the two, over the heads, into the slits, savoring their salty musk.

"Going to come," Keir grunted.

Piper enveloped as much of them as she could and tightened her lips. She felt Keir's cock swell, Rhyl's jerk, and then they were both spurting into her mouth—thick jets of cum she had no hope of swallowing. Just as Piper thought she'd choke, they withdrew and pumped together onto her breasts. Keir's hand was wrapped around Rhyl's cock, and Rhyl's around Keir's.

The pair looked horrified.

Piper grinned.

Chapter Sixteen

Rhyl lay on his back with his hand flat on Piper's belly. Piper's hand lay over his, and Keir's lay over hers. Their fingers were entwined, and Rhyl thought if this moment was recompense for what he'd endured over the last four years, it had been worth it.

They were three.

And they were one.

This was right, but what had happened to him and his brother wasn't. His memory had returned, and Rhyl almost wished it hadn't.

"I remember how I was trapped," Rhyl said.

Keir leaned up on his elbow to look at him, eyes wide. Piper turned her head, spots of color glazing her cheeks.

"I have a brother. A twin. His name is Dominic." Rhyl felt his smile fade. "We were young and stupid and thought ourselves invincible. We left home and the safety of our family and waltzed straight into trouble."

"You were turned?" Keir bristled. "Who did it?"

Touched by Keir's belligerence, Rhyl reached over Piper's head to stroke Keir's hair. "No one. We were born to vampire parents and destined to lose our life in the sun once we reached maturity. Our secret, our pride, and our curse is that we're Truebloods—descendants of one of the original vampire families."

Rhyl had never said these words to anyone before, but this felt right.

"We're more powerful than most of our kind, able to withstand more light, and we're among the very few vampires capable of siring children, even on unfertile vamps." He stared at Piper. "Or humans."

Piper gulped. "Not me. I told you I take a contraceptive pill."

Rhyl felt Keir tense and guessed Piper hadn't told him that.

"No lies, no secrets," Rhyl said and turned his hand to wrap his fingers tight around theirs.

"No lies, no secrets," Piper repeated and then mumbled, "Not that I'll remember."

"No lies, no secrets," Keir said.

Keir had averted his eyes for a moment, and though he stared at Rhyl now, the vampire sensed something was wrong. Keir had been hurt too, was still hurting and

wasn't willing to share his secrets. Rhyl swallowed hard. He hoped to gain trust by offering it.

"I place my life in your hands by revealing what I am," Rhyl said. "My family lives apart without knowledge of each other to increase our chance of survival. Dominic and I have never met our siblings. They don't know we exist, but our mother told us we have two older brothers and a sister." Rhyl had often wondered if he'd ever meet them, if he'd just know who they were if he saw them. "Trueblood vampires are not liked. Other vampires see us as a threat because we have advantages they don't. As a consequence, we're feared, hunted, and destroyed." Rhyl took in Piper's gulp.

"Wow," she whispered. "I thought my life was weird, but now I feel like I've been transported into a parallel universe. Vampires and werepumas?"

"This world holds more than mortals," Rhyl said. "There are shifters, faeries, demons, and...others." He didn't look at Piper. "A demon called Malin seduced me and Dominic with kind words and hot sex. We were happy. The day we tried to leave, we learned the price of our apparent happiness." He tensed. "The price of our stupidity. Games that had been fun no longer appealed. Pain that had been pleasant turned to torture—and not just for us. We tried to escape and failed. Then we came up with a plan to distract Malin, but it involved the sacrifice of one brother for the other." Rhyl gave a short laugh. "Do you have any siblings, cat?"

Keir nodded.

"Then you can understand I would have done anything for Dominic, as he would for me. We played a game to see who'd stay. Dominic cheated, but so did I." He smiled. "We'd made a deal, and he had to flee. Afterward Malin staked me in the heart and threw me into hell."

Piper gasped. "Oh my God."

Strange how saying the words didn't hurt. It had happened, and Rhyl had dealt with it. All that mattered now was his brother and these two by Rhyl's side.

"I didn't think there really was a hell," Piper whispered. "How did you get out?"

"I didn't fall that far. Malin fucked up. The blow just missed my heart, and on the road to hell, I got caught up in the tunnels under Arthington Manor. I thought I was lucky, but I came to regret his incompetence. I lost my mind until an angel found me." He kissed Piper's cheek.

"So a demon lived in that place?" Piper asked. "You mean like a horned goattype guy with hooves and bad breath and red skin?"

Rhyl laughed. "Demons can be extraordinarily good-looking. How do you think they could seduce people otherwise?"

"Why didn't he realize you hadn't fallen to hell?" Keir asked. "Were you able to use some...power to hide your presence?"

Rhyl shrugged. "Maybe he knew and didn't care. I hovered in a semiexistence for most of those four years. Maybe I was too close to death for him to notice I still

lived. My brother—my brother didn't come for me, which either means he's dead or he couldn't sense me." Rhyl couldn't speak for a moment. Wouldn't he know if Dominic was dead? "I need to look for him, but first I'm going to find Malin and kill him, slowly and painfully."

Piper rolled until Rhyl was pinned beneath her. "Don't you dare go off and get yourself killed after I've saved you. That would be really ungrateful. Plus, you promised I could have whatever I wanted, and I have a long list to get through."

Unshed tears glistened in her eyes, and Rhyl felt a surge of need so strong, he wondered how much he'd give up to make Piper happy. His hands slid over her curvy butt and held her tight.

"She's right," Keir said. "You're not sucking my neck if you lose a few pints, so don't do anything stupid."

"Not unless we're with you," Piper added.

"Speak for yourself," Keir mumbled.

"What about you?" Rhyl asked. "How did you get your hands on Plasmix?"

"Guy where I work's a vamp. I stole the stuff out of his cold store."

"Thank you," Rhyl said. "I hope you don't get into trouble."

"I'm already in trouble," Keir said. "I've spent my whole life in trouble."

"Your ankle tag?" Rhyl asked.

Keir opened his mouth and then closed it and shook his head. Rhyl was disappointed but not surprised.

"No secrets," Piper whispered.

"It's all right for you. You can't have secrets if you can't remember anything," Keir snapped.

Rhyl made a noise deep in his throat. He would not have Piper spoken to like that. "Keir—"

"I don't want to talk about it," Keir said. "Not now. I want to forget. Let me watch you."

Rhyl had learned how to wait. He reached out and gripped Keir's hand. "You'll play too."

Keir grinned. "Try and stop me."

Piper pushed herself up on Rhyl and sat back so the crease of her backside rested against his balls. When she wriggled against his cock, Rhyl let out a sigh. The precum gathering at his crest fell in a shining thread onto his belly. Keir lay on his side and watched as Piper shifted back and forth, rubbing herself against Rhyl's cock, coating him with her cream.

Rhyl's shaft swelled and began to leak in earnest. Electric pulses skittered up and down his spine, and his balls fizzed.

Maybe another ten seconds.

Keir reached out to trail his fingers over Rhyl's belly, gathering a trail of glistening fluid. He held his sticky hand between them. "Who wants the first lick?"

Rhyl and Piper opened their mouths. Keir laughed and licked his fingers himself.

"Well, it's only fair if you get the first fuck tonight," Keir said.

Rhyl looked for resentment in his face and found nothing but excitement. He looked straight at Piper. "Do we need condoms?"

Keir swore. "Shit. No clothes. No wallet."

"There's a box of 'ultrasensitive, multicolored, multiflavored, ribbed, studded, and dotted for her ultimate delight' in the back of the bedside drawer," Rhyl said. "Unopened. Do we need them?" He circled his thumbs on Piper's hips.

"Only if you—" Piper pressed her lips together.

Keir pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers one by one. "Only if we what?"

"Only—" She groaned.

"We need to hear it's what you want," Keir said.

"She has lube. Also unopened," Rhyl added.

"Oh...God." Piper arched back and chewed her lip.

"Maybe I shouldn't mention the whip, the ten-inch vibrator, and the nipple clamps," Rhyl said.

"What?" Piper stared at him in horror. "I don't. Do I?"

Rhyl laughed, pulled open the top drawer of the bedside cabinet, and tossed the lube and the condoms onto the bed. He smiled at Keir. "Just in case she adds those extra words to 'only if you."

Piper stared at the two items as if she eyed a pair of hissing snakes. Rhyl smoothed his hands over her thighs, afraid he'd pushed too hard. "We won't do anything you don't want, angel. Trust us."

Rhyl slid his hands around her hips and lifted her so she was poised over his cock. His shaft twitched to try and touch her. *Clever dick*. He had to fight the urge to yank her down, impale her on his cock, and fuck her hard.

"I don't want to forget this. Don't let me fall asleep," she whispered.

Rhyl's chuckle matched Keir's.

"You think we'll let you sleep?" Keir asked. "I'll pinch you if your eyes close."

"But we need you relaxed," Rhyl said. "We want you to come and come until you you're sure you can't come anymore, and then we're going to make you come again and again. We'll make you remember. We won't let you forget."

He saw her swallow hard and wished he could actually make that happen. There had to be some way to help her. What if he turned her? Not that he knew how. Well, he knew the basics, but it was hardly a solution, nor one she was likely to agree with. The cat wouldn't either. Rhyl didn't want her to forget him—to forget

them. He glanced at Keir, who stared at Piper with his mouth partly open, his dark eyes oozing lust. Rhyl imagined himself fucking Keir's luscious mouth, and the ache in his balls jumped up the scale. *Shit*.

Keir's fingers brushed Rhyl's cock as he reached for Piper, and Rhyl clenched his jaw. He was ultrasensitive to a touch from either of them. And the sight of them. The sound of them. Rhyl watched Keir rub the lips of Piper's sex with his thumb and could almost feel that same thumb circling his anus. Oh the fun they could have with three, the positions, so many combinations. His cock throbbed.

"You're pink and pretty, so hot and wet," Keir whispered. "You smell divine."

"And I need you now," Rhyl added.

As Rhyl lowered Piper, Keir grasped Rhyl's cock and placed it so the fat head nudged against the entrance to her body. Piper groaned, her hands flailed, and she clenched her fists.

"Look at me," Rhyl whispered.

The moment their gazes collided, he gripped her hips tighter and pulled her down as he thrust up, trapping Keir's fingers. A deep sigh burst from Piper's lips, and Rhyl shuddered with pleasure. Keir laughed and withdrew his hand, allowing Rhyl to push deeper into her. Rhyl fucked her in slow, measured strokes, making each hot glide count, watching her chest heave, her nipples tighten, and the way a rosy flush spread across her breasts. Rhyl tried not to think about biting her, but his fangs pricked his mouth.

"Oh God," Keir said with a groan and wrapped his hand around his own cock.

Rhyl looked at Keir and then dragged his gaze back to Piper. Every time his cock sank as deep into her as he could get, her muscles clenched to keep him there, and Rhyl had to fight not to whimper with joy.

"More," Piper whispered. "Harder, faster, deeper. Fuck me."

"And you fuck me," Rhyl replied.

She began to move, pressing her hips down to kiss his, her hands spread on his chest to push up, ready for the downward stroke. Piper bucked faster against him, his balls slapping her backside, and Rhyl sucked in a sharp breath that he didn't even need. He gulped again when he felt Keir's fingers touch the base of his cock and realized he was rubbing Piper's clit.

Piper's breathing became erratic, and as the muscles of her pussy contracted around him in an increasingly rapid rhythm, Rhyl felt the moment she tipped over the edge. He was about to follow when Keir's fingers tightened around the root of Rhyl's shaft. Then the fingers of Keir's other hand pressed the strip of flesh between Rhyl's balls and his anus and froze his orgasm in its tracks while Piper unraveled in hers.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Rhyl groaned.

Keir laughed, and without taking his fingers from that magic strip, he straddled Rhyl behind Piper, who was a limp mess between them.

Rhyl shuddered. "Let me come."

"Good things come to those who wait," Keir said.

"I've been waiting four years," Rhyl said with a groan. "Let the good times roll."

Piper wondered where her brain had gone. Most likely skedaddled the moment she'd decided not to hide in the closet and pretend this wasn't happening. She had Rhyl's rigid cock inside her, Keir's equally rigid shaft pressed against her backside, and as the gentle aftershocks of orgasm faded, all she could think about was how soon she could come again. Rhyl's face was etched with tension, his eyes half-lidded as he glanced between her and Keir. Keir supported her, his hands resting on her hips as he kissed her neck. One touch of his tongue behind her ear and Piper's already gel-like spine turned liquid. She slithered onto Rhyl's chest.

"You okay?" He wrapped his arms around her.

"Define okay," Piper whispered.

Rhyl kissed her. He opened his mouth and pulled on her lips, his tongue slipping in and out until Piper's head fogged with longing for his cock to do the same in her pussy. A finger pressed against her anus, and her head shot up. Rhyl caught her cheeks and pulled her back down.

"Relax, angel."

His hands soothed her back, his palms sliding to cup her butt, and Piper settled into his embrace. She heard the sound of something squelch, and then the finger was back, cold this time, circling the puckered ring of her asshole, pressing harder in rhythmic play until the tension seeped from her. A fingertip pushed inside. Piper groaned, exhaled, and the rest of Keir's finger slid in, sucked in by her anxious body.

"Fuck, I can feel your cock," Keir whispered. "She's tight. I don't think we can do this."

A stab of disappointment pierced Piper's heart. "You can't offer me a box of chocolates and then snatch them back."

"You are so cute," Keir whispered, and Piper felt another finger pierce her. "Too much?" he asked.

"Not enough," she mumbled into Rhyl's chest, though the feeling of being stretched wasn't exactly comfortable.

Rhyl's jaw was taut, his cock not moving, and Piper could guess the strain he was under. Keir's fingers pushed and stroked inside her, and the burning sensation lessened into one of pleasure. She imagined him feeling Rhyl's cock through the thin membrane that separated the two channels.

"Oh fuck, I need to..." Rhyl blurted and then sighed. "Maybe not."

"What did you do?" Piper gasped.

"There's a place to press behind a guy's balls that can stop him coming, only it needs the right touch," Keir said.

"You have it," Rhyl said. "Thank God."

Piper shifted her hips, and Rhyl clamped his hands on her waist. "But if you move, I'm in trouble."

Keir laughed.

"Wait until it's your turn, kitten. See if you can hold on," Rhyl growled.

Piper relaxed into Keir's caress, the smooth penetration and withdrawal. Her muscles clenched around Rhyl's cock, and he hissed.

"Sorry. I didn't do it on purpose," Piper said and then did it on purpose.

"Please," he pleaded.

"What do you think, sweetheart?" Keir asked. "You up for this?"

"Yes," Piper said.

The firm, wet tip of his cock nudged her anus.

"Wow, you're really big," she whispered.

Keir laughed, and the vibration ran through his cock into her body.

"Push back into me. Don't think about letting me in. Instead try to push me out."

"Are you sure?" Piper asked.

"Do you need to have this conversation?" Rhyl said with a groan. "I am desperate here."

"Hold tight," Keir said.

Piper pushed against him as he pressed into her. *Oh Christ, too big*. She sucked the corner of her lower lip between her teeth and bit down. The metallic tang of blood slipped over her tongue, and Rhyl grunted.

"That's one thing you must not do," he whispered.

Slowly Keir eased his way inside her. It hurt, but no way was Piper saying so. She felt as though something built inside her, as if every nerve in her body was primed for explosion. Her vision seemed clearer, her hearing sharper. Then Keir slid the rest of the way inside her until his groin pressed tight against her backside. He exhaled noisily and lay trembling over her back.

"No one move," Keir pleaded.

Piper couldn't move. She was sandwiched between the guys, impaled on long, thick cocks, Keir's head on one side of her and Rhyl's the other. The only things working were her lungs, and they were struggling to draw air. The pain had all gone; now she tingled from head to toe and felt pleasantly full. And ready.

"Someone move," she pleaded.

Piper clenched every muscle she could around their cocks and was rewarded by long groans from either side.

Keir raised his head and pushed himself up on his hands. "Okay, I'll move."

Taking it slow and steady, he pulled back from her ass and then gently thrust into her. Each movement sent tendrils of heat flickering into Piper's core.

"Good?" Keir gasped.

"Mmmm," Piper mumbled.

Then Rhyl began to move, withdrawing his cock as Keir pushed into her, surging back when Keir pulled out.

"Oh. My. God." Piper could feel herself coming. Breathing grew difficult as her chest tightened.

In hard and powerful strokes, they fucked her as one, holding her between them. Piper braced her hands on Rhyl's chest as he clasped her hips, Keir's hands under his.

"Sweet Jesus." Keir panted onto her back. "So good. So hot and tight. Rhyl. Your cock. Sliding against mine. Oh God."

Piper's body climbed faster and faster. She forced her eyes open to see Rhyl staring up at her, his eyes black.

"Going to come," Piper gasped.

"With us," Keir grunted.

The pace of their shunts increased, the rhythm faltering, so for a moment both cocks surged into her at the same time. The wet slap of their flesh, the sounds of their breathing, Piper's little cries all seemed to swirl around her head. Waves of tightening pleasure swept over her, and as much as Piper needed the release, she didn't want this to end.

"Piper, come," Keir begged.

One more thrust. And another. Piper moved beyond control and felt her vision waver. *Shit. No.*

Then Keir sank his teeth into her shoulder, and she came so fast and so strong, she felt every muscle in her body go into spasm. Keir and Rhyl shuddered, and their cocks jerked and pulsed inside her.

"Stay with us," Rhyl whispered, his eyes full of concern.

But try as she might, Piper couldn't.

Chapter Seventeen

"Oh fuck." Keir groaned and slipped from Piper's limp body. "Now what do we do?"

Rhyl eased out his cock and rolled from under her. "Is she unconscious or sleeping?"

"You mean did that mind-blowing orgasm actually blow her mind or did it send her to sleep?" Keir asked and then worried that they might actually have hurt her.

Piper gave a quiet snore, and Rhyl stifled a laugh.

"It's not funny," Keir snapped. "When she opens her eyes, she won't remember either of us."

"Then we'll remind her."

Keir rolled his eyes. "How do you think she's going to react on finding two naked guys in bed with her?"

Rhyl lowered his hand as if to stroke Piper's back and then lifted it before he touched her. "She's written about us in her book."

"Not what we just did together. She has no photos of us. Well, she can't take one of you, can she?"

Rhyl looked toward the window. "Dawn's coming."

"Shit. She's really going to freak out if she wakes to find a dead guy lying next to her. What if she yanks open the drapes and you fry?"

"I have nowhere to go." Rhyl raised his eyebrows in question.

"No, you can't come with me."

"Why?"

"It's too dangerous." Keir knew Rhyl waited for him to explain, but the less the vamp knew, the better.

"I have no clothes. Can you bring me some of yours?" Rhyl asked.

"Yes, but not until tonight. I can't stay much longer." Keir suspected Oz would be furious that he'd made a run for it. There was always the danger that he'd talk to Jardine, put two and two together, and pay a visit to the tattoo parlor. The fact that it would be closed was hardly a deterrent to a demon. From Do Bad Things, it was a hop, skip, and a pounce to Piper's apartment. Keir needed to figure out what to do, and he couldn't think while two distractions reclined naked in front of him. Even if one of them was unconscious.

"Why do you have to leave?" Rhyl asked.

"I just do."

Keir knew he'd snarled, and there was silence between them. He moved from the bed to the bathroom and cleaned up. Rhyl followed.

"I'll write in her book, tell her what we did, and then I'll find a place to hide," Rhyl said.

"I'll write in her book." Keir didn't want the vamp making up some lie. He went back into the bedroom, grabbed the notebook and pen, and scribbled a few lines before he put the book aside.

"I won't rip out the page or lie. You can trust me," Rhyl said.

Keir looked down. Rhyl's hand lay over his. Keir snatched his away. "Write what the fuck you want."

How could he trust him? Keir knew better than to trust anyone. He stormed out of the room, but as he reached the door of Piper's apartment, Rhyl appeared at his side.

"Don't leave angry," Rhyl said.

"Don't fucking tell me what to do."

Keir reached for the door handle, but Rhyl leaned against the wood.

"What's wrong? I don't understand. We shared something." Rhyl put his hand on Keir's shoulder, and he shrugged it away.

"We fucked. It was fun. End of story." It *had* to be. Keir wasn't going to let himself get hurt again.

"No, it's not." Rhyl spun him around so Keir's back slammed against the door. "Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

Keir's gaze dropped over the long, sleek line of the vampire's body, then rose slowly over Rhyl's long legs, heavy balls, thick cock, firm abs, tight copper nipples, and wide shoulders until Keir stared him in the eyes. "I wish I'd never met you."

To his astonishment, Rhyl smiled. Keir wanted the vamp to kick his butt and throw him out, and instead the idiot kissed him. At the firm press of Rhyl's lips, Keir's fists clenched. When the vampire eased his tongue into his mouth and slid his hand down Keir's chest to stroke his cock, Keir began to melt.

The kiss was hard and soft, demanding and persuasive. Rhyl's tongue twisted alongside his, teased the roof of Keir's mouth with little flicks, and then guided him to feel his fangs. *Ouch, sharp*. The taste of blood dragged a groan and shudder from them both. Rhyl's thumb brushed back and forth over the little peak of nerve endings at the head of Keir's cock, and then he pulled their shafts together and rubbed them between their undulating bodies. As his thumb spread precum over both crests, Keir sank farther into his mouth. Rhyl's other hand reached to trace the seam of Keir's ass, sliding down into the crack until Keir's breath hitched.

Keir's eyes were shut tight, his heart pounding. This felt so good, Rhyl's single-finger invasion making him crave more, and Keir's wall of ice thawed faster. His body flooded with heat as Rhyl stroked deeper and harder.

He needed to leave.

He needed to think of something to tell Oz.

He needed this.

Rhyl lifted his mouth from Keir's to trail his tongue along his jaw to his ear.

Then the vamp surprised him again and handed him the lube. "Fuck me," Rhyl whispered, rocking into him.

Rhyl moved to lie back on the table, his butt at the edge, knees up and bent, and Keir licked his lips. How long since he'd fucked Piper in the same place? Only not quite the same place. Rhyl's dark puckered anus winked at him.

"Condom," Keir muttered.

Rhyl shook his head. "You know we don't need them."

Keir's cock bobbed in response. The idea of barebacking sent every red cell racing to get in on the act. Keir moved to the table, his hand wrapped around his cock, precum pearling at the tip. He smeared lube down his length, shuddering at the feel of soft skin sliding over the steel-hard core, before he rubbed the sensitive crown down the crease of Rhyl's butt. Keir's cock hovered over Rhyl's anus, and he gently rocked his hips.

One push and Keir slid straight in. Rhyl thrust back against him, and Keir sighed at the gut-wrenching sensation of being dragged into another man's body. A hot, dark, warm haven. He thrust into Rhyl as Rhyl pushed back into him. They slid into a quick rhythm, Keir's hands on Rhyl's thighs, Rhyl's hands around the cock squeezed between them, pressing and pumping, working themselves to release.

Keir's hips jerked as he pounded deeper, faster.

"Oh that's good." Rhyl grunted.

Keir could make it better. He came up on the balls of his feet, changed the angle, and rammed his cock harder.

Rhyl released a quiet yelp, and when Keir forced open his eyes, the vamp was staring straight at him.

"Oh fuck," Rhyl gasped, and cum spurted from his cock, splattering his chest.

As Keir watched the streaks of cream fly from the tip of Rhyl's cock, and the way the vamp milked his release, Keir felt the familiar burn in his groin spread to his balls, the frantic electric pulses zipping around the base of his cock. His chest was tight enough to burst, the pressure in his head zoomed off the scale, and as Rhyl caught hold of Keir's wrists and squeezed, Keir emptied himself in mindfogging pulses of raw pleasure.

His knees trembled, and his heart hammered. Keir didn't want to move, couldn't move. He was balls-deep in Rhyl's ass, his cock still spasming. Rhyl's thumbs rubbed circles on his palms, and Keir felt the last of his glacial barriers fall.

He wanted to blurt out every wretched thing he'd ever done and for Rhyl to tell him it didn't matter. He wanted to keep Rhyl safe and not fail him as Dominic had, as Keir had failed *his* brother. He wanted Piper snug between them with her sweet smile and quirky hair. He wanted her to draw them into a world where they could live happily ever after.

He wanted to love.

What the fuck is the matter with me?

He yanked himself out of Rhyl's butt, opened the door, and fled.

Keir shifted before he got partway down the stairs and had to shift back to open the outer door. Paws weren't much use with door handles.

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.

He shifted back and dropped to all fours. The woman delivering milk let out an ear-piercing shriek and dropped the crate of bottles she was holding. Keir winced and ran on. He had a feeling she'd have been as freaked by a naked man as she was by his puma, so Keir could see no point in shifting back. The sooner he got to Lam Hall, the better.

Only that wasn't true.

What the fuck was he going to say to Oz?

He had maybe fifteen minutes to come up with something believable.

Rhyl had to be the one Oz was looking for—this stealer of power—only Keir couldn't see what was so powerful about Rhyl except for his ability to make Keir's knees shake with a single look. Keir froze in the shadows as a police car blazed past, its lights flashing. Maybe the power was information Rhyl had, something about Malin, facts that Oz needed. That made more sense than anything physical.

Keir wouldn't give Rhyl away, though he wondered if he could uncover Malin's whereabouts from Oz. Not that he wanted Rhyl going after the demon, but the more Keir knew, the safer he could keep everyone. *Yep, knowledge is power*.

The big problem was that Oz wouldn't go back to hell without what he'd come for, and Cuba wouldn't let Keir go until she got what she wanted. Was Reed really in danger? Keir couldn't imagine his father letting the golden boy younger son go without a fight. The entire puma pack against a succubus? No way could she win, but then she only had to get her hands on Reed, take what she wanted, and she'd win. How had his father known Cuba? What was the link between them? Was that the key to defeating her?

Keir raced across the flat fields as the sun rose. Too many questions and nowhere near enough answers. He wanted to keep Rhyl and Reed safe. He didn't want to give up Rhyl or Piper. He wanted Piper to regain her memory. He wanted to curl up in bed with Rhyl and Piper and find ways to drive them wild.

He couldn't have everything. Maybe he didn't deserve anything. Maybe the only way to keep everyone safe was to sacrifice himself.

By the time he drew closer to Lam Hall, Keir had a flimsy plan. He'd go back to Piper's before sunset with clothes and Plasmix. He'd try to play Oz off against Cuba. Promise to help Cuba if she got rid of Oz. Promise to help Oz if he got rid of Cuba. The large flaw was that Keir doubted Cuba had that sort of power.

As Keir neared the edge of the woods that lined the main road to the hall, he slowed his pace. His puma detected a significant number of humans and fumes from their vehicles, but above that lingered the scent of blood. He wished it were Cuba's, but he wouldn't be that lucky. Keir circled round to emerge from the trees farther away from the hall and found the road barricaded by police cars. People in white protective suits gathered around a spotlighted area close to the gates.

Keir slinked across the road and cautiously approached the place where he'd left his clothes.

Not there. Fuck.

He'd not made a mistake. Faint traces of his scent remained. The sky grew lighter as each minute passed, and Keir didn't want to get shot in his puma form or be found wandering around naked, especially when he didn't know what was happening. He padded to the edge of the woods and looked over the expanse of lawn. Three police cars sat on the gravel drive in front of the house, with several more cars parked behind. Keir slid back into the woods and stayed among the trees as he circled until he could see the newer building and the window of his room. Still ajar.

Shifting to human and climbing up would not only be difficult but would leave him exposed for too long. Keir wasn't sure how he could explain running around naked when the temperature was near-freezing, nor why he was trying to sneak back into his room when something bad had clearly happened here. He'd be in a police cell before he could blink. Staying as a puma and leaping to the window seemed the best option. Though he'd have to shift once his claws had fastened on the sill, so he could push the sash window higher and climb in.

No point hesitating. Keir listened to ensure no one was coming and then ran straight toward the building at full speed. A puma's hind legs were proportionately the largest of all members of the big cat family, so Keir knew he could leap high enough. Staying up was another matter. He launched himself into the air and experienced the all too brief exhilaration of power and flight. If he hadn't judged this correctly, he'd end up facedown in the dirt. Keir reached with his front paws and slammed them onto the concrete sill. As his claws skidded on the hard surface, he shifted. Even before the rest of his body had returned to his two-legged form, Keir raised one human hand to push up the window and then slithered into the room.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

Keir sprawled on the floor and stared up at Oz's enraged face. *Shit. I should have known*. The demon reclined on Keir's bed, but the tension in his body was unmistakable, the anger rippling from him enough to make Keir think about throwing himself back out of the window. He'd never attempted to shift in midair, but it might be worth trying.

He'd wasted time thinking, and Oz reached him before Keir had begun to move. The demon hauled him to his feet and threw him across the room. Keir collided with a chair and groaned as it crumpled beneath him. The next toss sent him flying into the wall, and the air whooshed out of his lungs. The third time Oz picked him up, Keir wrapped his arms around him, and as Oz tried to throw him, Keir shifted his weight so they both fell. *God, the demon weighs a ton*.

Oz grinned. "That's it. Fight me, you little fucker."

Keir narrowed his eyes and head-butted Oz in the mouth. Blood sprayed, Oz growled, and then the pair rolled over the floor, trading blows and punches until Keir wondered why he was bothering when Oz would inevitably win.

Oz pressed Keir facedown and nipped his ear. "You were supposed to meet me hours ago."

"I got distracted."

Keir grunted as Oz twisted his arm up his back.

"What by? Catnip? A mouse?"

"A scent."

To Keir's surprise, Oz let him go. Keir pulled his arm back into position with a groan and shook his fingers to restore his circulation.

"What sort of scent?" Oz asked.

"One I didn't recognize. I tracked it from here all the way to Lincoln. Lost it around the cathedral and came back to tell you."

Keir stared straight at Oz, willing him to believe.

"Interesting. I felt...something tonight. Some sort of surge. Whoever I'm looking for is fucking teasing me." Oz narrowed his eyes. "You should have waited."

"Sorry." Keir tried to look contrite. "What's been happening here?"

"A human was attacked just outside the gates. I suspect you followed the trail of the person who did it."

Was that lucky or what? Then Keir felt guilty for thinking it. "Were they killed?"

Oz shook his head. "No, but badly injured. He managed to call the police on his mobile. Cuba is livid. Hardly a low-profile operation when the police are here twice within a couple of days. If Sobel had still been around, I suspect she'd have combusted in embarrassment." He grinned. "She assumes you're responsible. So do the police."

"Shit."

Oz yanked Keir into his arms. "Of course, they can't suspect you if you were with me."

His hand slipped down to enclose Keir's balls. He squeezed too hard, and Keir flinched.

"So you're going to help me, and I'm going to help you. The police are interviewing everyone. Cuba has no idea where you are and is trying to delay producing you for questioning, though the vamps had to be interrogated first before they fell asleep. I can tell her you've been with me all night."

The pain in his balls was so intense Keir couldn't think straight.

"Want to go up to the attic and pretend we've been there all along, or go tell the police what you've really been doing?" Oz asked.

"Attic," Keir blurted.

The hand came off his balls, and he sighed with relief.

Keir wasn't sure what Oz was up to, but if being arrested by the police was the other option, he had no choice. He had to do everything he could to keep Oz from finding Rhyl until he could figure out some way to keep the vamp safe. Piper too. If they were discovered together, she was in just as much danger. Keir pulled clothes from his closet and carried them.

They took the underground passage to the main house, the back stairs to the attic, and passed no one. Keir had the distinct impression Oz had made that happen. No way was Cuba any match for this guy. Keir's stomach churned when he entered the dimly lit room, but he made no objection when Oz fastened him into the vertical X frame. With his buttocks pressed to the center of the wood and his wrists and ankles secured, Keir had rarely felt more vulnerable, but he said and showed nothing. He kept his lips pressed together, though he sucked in a breath when Oz picked up a handful of clamps with razor-sharp metal teeth.

The demon found every sensitive place on Keir's body and let the clips snap shut to cut his skin. Keir clenched his teeth to stop from crying out. It wasn't until Oz picked up his whip that Keir realized what was about to happen.

"Cuba will eventually check up here, and in the meantime, we'll play." Oz cracked the whip, Keir tensed, and every clasp pinched hard and drew blood.

Oz laughed.

The first strike dislodged metal from his inner thigh along with a spray of blood. Keir groaned as pain bit like a snake. He tried not to tense, but it was impossible.

"Where were you tonight?" Oz asked and cracked the whip along the underside of Keir's arm.

"Ahhh. I already told you."

"Who did you fuck?"

"Shiiiit. No one."

By the time the only clips left were those on his nipples and in his groin, Keir's head ached with the strain of not screaming.

Oz put his mouth next to Keir's ear. "Who did you piss off to end up at Lam Hall?"

"What are you doing?" Cuba stormed across the room.

Oz stepped back. The whip flicked Keir's left nipple, and the clamp skittered across the floor to stop at Cuba's feet.

"Inflicting torment, feeding my ardor. One of my demonic specialties. I am *the* demon of lust after all." Oz launched the whip with an almighty *crack* to release Keir's other nipple from the clamp.

Acute pain followed by pleasurable relief. Sort of exciting, as evidenced by his erection, though Keir suspected it was the bite of the clamp at the base of his cock more than his peripheral interest in BDSM that kept him turgid. Cuba walked forward until she stood next to them.

"The police are asking to speak to you."

"Me in particular?" Oz asked. "And how did they know I'm here? Are you hoping I've fucked up my proof of identity? That I actually did the dreadful deed?"

His hand morphed to turn his nails into long claws, and he drew one down Cuba's face to leave a red scratch. Her mouth twitched, but other than that she didn't react. The mark vanished as Keir stared.

"Sorry to disappoint. Keir and I have been playing, off and on, on and off, for hours. How I love a sucker for punishment."

"You didn't tell me he was still in the house," Cuba said angrily.

"You didn't ask."

Cuba glanced at Keir. "But you asked for his tether to be removed and then never turned up at the medical room."

Keir's heart stuttered. They were going to take the band from his ankle? Could he run?

"I decided to have a little fun first before we went out. I still want this thing taken off."

Cuba tightened her mouth. "He'll run."

Oz sighed and stared at Keir. "Do you want to run?"

"Yes," Keir said.

"See." Cuba sneered.

"Will you run?" Oz asked.

Keir sucked in his cheeks. "No."

Cuba spun around to stare at him.

"Why not?" Oz asked.

"In return for fighting for familia Mantel, she leaves my brother alone. When my marque is complete, then I'm free."

Oz licked his lips. "You think a demon will keep his or her word?"

"No, but I keep mine. My brother was hurt because of me. I don't want to be responsible for that happening again. If I die to keep him safe, so be it."

Oz laughed. He reached out to twist Cuba's long dark hair in his fingers and then yanked her back into his arms. "Poor, darling," he crooned. "You made a mistake when you chose him. A dreamer. What were you thinking?"

She scowled. "He seemed ideal. He'd fucked his stepmother for years, made her climax every time. She was obsessed with him. Lust. Then he killed her. Wrath. He wanted his father to love him as much as he did his little brother. Envy. Keir is too pigheaded to see the truth about his situation. Pride. His two delights are sleeping and eating. Sloth and gluttony. Plus, he's a greedy little tomcat. He fucks everything with a pulse."

"Except you." Oz pressed his chin into the top of her head.

Keir saw her wince.

"What do you think she wants from you?" Oz asked him.

"You can't tell him. It's not allowed," Cuba shrieked.

Tell me what?

Oz twisted her hair so tight she rose to her toes, her face contorted in pain.

"Don't dare to tell me what to do. I helped make the fucking rules," Oz snapped.

"I apologize, Lord."

Keir arched his brows.

"She was banished from hell for...misdeeds in the mortal realm. In order to regain her place, she has to recharge the seven deadly sins. Since she's a succubus, it should have been easy, but her...donors...have to be amenable to fucking her. Although they might feel they're getting a good deal—I'm sure sex with Cuba is just...lovely—she's fucking more than their dicks or pussies. She sucks the strongest emotion from their soul. Feeding from others increases her power."

Keir had guessed something of the sort. "But since I won't cooperate, why not go elsewhere?"

Oz gave a mock sigh of dismay. "Once she's chosen her primary source of sin, she can't pick another. She can still feed from whomever she can tempt into her bed, but the power they provide will be transitory. Your power, withheld longer, would last longer. The more you resist, the more enticing she finds you."

Cuba snarled.

Oh shit. That didn't sound good.

"So while I refuse to fuck her, she's stuck here?" Keir asked.

"Yes, unless you die, of course. Then she can choose another. But if she kills you, she has to start the collection process all over again. How long have you been doing this, Cuba?" Oz asked.

"Nine years, eleven months, one week, one day, ten hours, and thirteen minutes!"

"Not that she's counting." Oz grinned and pushed her away from him.

Keir's head was spinning. Thank fuck he hadn't fucked her.

In a flurry of whip action, over so fast he hardly felt it, the other clips flew off his cock and balls. Keir groaned, desperate to clutch his tackle to check that everything was still attached.

Oz untied him and threw him a wet cloth. "Get dressed. I'll tell the police you've been with me all night; we'll get that thing off your ankle and go on a little trip." He turned to Cuba. "Don't worry. You'll get him back. You still have time to get what you want."

Keir rubbed his wrists. "Time?"

"Ten years to fill up with all of hell's bounties, or she starts all over again."

"That's not the rule," she screeched.

"It is now," Oz said and walked out.

Keir wiped the blood from his body. When Cuba stroked his back with a cloth, he froze.

"I want you so much," she whispered. "I ache for you. Please fuck me. All I want is to go home. You can leave then. I won't touch your brother. I'll tell your father you've died, if you want."

Keir turned to look at her. She almost looked human for a moment. Her eyes had lost that cold glitter. He stumbled to his clothes and pulled on his pants.

"We can do it where you like. You want to fuck in a car? You want a guy there too? You want me to lie on my back on the passenger seat and fuck me in the mouth?"

What? Why had she said that? Keir stumbled downstairs with her in pursuit.

"I'll do anything. Give you anything," she whispered. "Anything that's in my power to give."

He stopped walking, and she banged into his back. Keir turned to face her. "Can you restore lost memories?"

"Yes."

"You could restore the memory of someone who forgets what happens day to day?"

She stared him straight in the eyes. "Yes."

"Can you get rid of Oz?"

"Yes."

She was lying.

Chapter Eighteen

Keir paced outside the library while a uniformed police officer stood in front of the door watching him.

"Who was attacked?" Keir asked.

"Not at liberty to say, sir."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Not at liberty to say, sir."

Keir gave up. Oz came out and snapped him a grin out of sight of the policeman.

"I'll wait for you," Oz said.

The two detectives, Frost and Jackson, had identical grim expressions. Keir made sure he showed no reaction.

"Close the door and take a seat," said Jackson.

Keir sat on the sofa and tried not to slouch.

"What have you been doing over the last ten hours?" Frost asked.

"I've been here at Lam Hall."

Keir stared straight at Frost, not letting his gaze slide away. If he told the truth, Rhyl could vouch for him, but only after the sun set. Better to lie.

"Doing what?" Jackson asked.

"Hanging around." Keir bit his lip.

"On your own?"

"With Oz."

The two detectives exchanged looks, and for one uncomfortable moment, Keir wondered if he'd been set up to take a fall.

"Doing what?" Frost asked.

"Playing...games," Keir said.

"What sort of games?" Jackson barely restrained his snigger.

Oh fuck. What had Oz said? "I don't see what relevance that has," Keir snapped.

Jackson's mouth tightened. "When did you last see Neil Harmon?"

Keir jumped to his feet. "Neil's the one who's been attacked?"

Frost frowned. "You didn't know?"

"No, I didn't. Is he going to be okay?"

"He was seriously injured, but the doctors think he'll recover," Frost said.

Keir paced while his mind accelerated out of control. Had Neil been attacked to implicate him? Did that quip from Cuba about fucking her mouth come because she knew that's what he and Neil had done? Keir plowed on, not listening to the cops. Keir had told Neil he was a trainer at the hotel. Neil had come here looking for him. Had Cuba fucked him—sucked him? Is that how she knew about the car? Once she'd had him, did she encourage one of the vamps or weres to attack?

"Are listening to me?" Frost snapped.

"Sorry. I'm just...shocked," Keir said.

"When did you last see Mr. Harmon?" Jackson asked.

"Not since the time I already told you about, when he nearly knocked Piper Kennedy down."

"After which he reported the fact you were in the vicinity when the barmaid was murdered. Upset about that, were you?" Frost raised his eyebrows. "Feel you needed to shut him up? Did you threaten him?"

"I have nothing to hide. I've done nothing wrong. Anyway, once Neil recovers, you can ask who attacked him. He'll confirm it wasn't me."

By the time they let him go, Keir felt exhausted, physically and mentally. When he found Oz waiting, he groaned. He needed to sleep, and instead he had to keep his wits about him. Plus he had Rhyl and Piper to worry about.

* * *

She stretched like a starfish, spread her arms and legs to the four corners of the bed, and yelped. *Ouch, that hurt. Everywhere. Why do I ache?* Lifting her face from the pillow, she blinked in the dim light seeping around the curtains. *Where am I?* Then she sat bolt upright. *Who am I?* She spun around and looked at a room she didn't recognize. A large sheet of paper was taped to the wall opposite the bed, and she read it without blinking.

Oh fuck.

Her gaze drifted to the notebook and phone next to the bed. Another piece of paper lay on top. The handwriting was different. She picked it up.

Angel, try not to freak out. You can do this. We can help you. Read all your notebooks. Read the last few pages carefully, and don't look under the bed until you have.

Piper leaned over the edge of the bed and slowly lifted the duvet. A heap of blankets took up nearly all the space underneath. Why had she shoved blankets under there? She sat up again and made for the closet. *Oh fuck*. Hundreds of notebooks lined the shelves. She went looking for a mirror and stared at a pale, wide-eyed face, messy white hair, and then opened her mouth and spoke. "My name is Piper Kennedy."

No flash of light. No roll of drums.

Back in bed, she opened the notebook.

And read.

And read.

Piper tossed the book aside and gulped. Now she knew why she ached, particularly her—*Oh flip*. Her head felt about to explode. According to her book, last night she'd had sex with two guys at the same time. Well, not quite two guys. Sex with a werepuma and a vampire. *Bloody hell*.

And the vamp was hiding under her bed.

Piper clamped her hand to her mouth to stifle the surge of hysteria.

She curled up under the covers and struggled to make sense of the situation. Right, well, that was pretty much impossible. *Take a deep breath and pinch yourself.*

Ouch.

Okay, well, she definitely got that she couldn't remember anything, even having sex, but the empty condom wrappers and open bottle of lube—oh God—confirmed what her body told her. She was a lot less freaked by that than the fact that she couldn't remember doing it. Even so, what she'd read in her notebooks sounded as if it had come straight from the pages of a novel. Piper didn't know if she wanted it to be true or not. But if she couldn't believe her notebooks, what could she believe?

She wrote a couple of scribbled lines on an empty page and then compared the handwriting. *Yep, that's my writing*. Piper turned again to the last two entries in the book, written in different hands. The first was just a couple of lines of scribbled script.

Sweetheart, you're amazing. Wish you could remember how stupendous I was. Much better than the vamp. xx Keir.

The second entry was longer. The vampire detailed everything she'd done for him from the moment he'd grabbed her wrist at Arthington Manor, and what she'd done with him and Keir to the point that Piper's face glowed with heat. She might not remember any of it, but the last words went a long way to convincing her it was all true.

Angel, you saved my life once. Now I return it to your hands. I'm wrapped in blankets and lying underneath your bed. I'll sleep until just before the sun sets. If daylight touches me, I will burn. I will find a way to help you remember everything. I want to make you happy. I'm yours. Rhyl.

Piper slipped off the bed and shuffled beneath the wooden frame. She wriggled her fingers under the blankets, felt the firm shape of a chest, and thought her heart was going to leap out of her mouth. There was so little light. Would it hurt if she took a look at his face? Piper delved through the blankets until she could feel just a single layer of material separating her from her goal.

One quick look and she covered him up. A gorgeous guy with dark tousled hair, a square jaw, and a strong nose. Piper wanted desperately to remember him, but she didn't.

* * *

When Keir walked into the medical room in the compound, Cuba was waiting. Oz slipped in behind him. Keir sat on the examination table and pulled up the leg of his pants. Cuba entered information into the computer and spun around on her chair to face them.

"No need to remove the ankle tag. I've changed the parameters. He can travel in a forty-mile radius from here." She smiled, and Keir wanted to slam his fist into her face.

Oz moved to look into the computer monitor. "And we should trust you because?"

"I can't kill him. You made that quite clear, but I don't want to risk him running."

Even Keir's sleepy brain saw the logic in that. "If I stray beyond the forty-mile limit, I'd be killing myself."

Oz laughed. "I'm almost impressed with that, Cuba."

"I'm arranging another fight," she said. "One last bout. Then you're free to leave. If you win."

"What's the catch?" Keir asked.

"No catch," she said.

Keir's heart sank, because he knew the catch would be enormous.

* * *

"We'll take the motorbike," Oz said as they left the compound. "That way I can follow you across country while you track."

Keir headed for the garage. *I have to outthink a demon*. He stood no fucking chance. Keir tugged a leather jacket and helmet from the garage locker and pulled them on. Oz copied him.

"You're quiet," Oz said.

"I've got a lot on my mind."

The demon wheeled the big bike out of the garage. "Such as?"

"Cuba suddenly being reasonable. Neil being attacked and me being blamed. I don't scent so well when I'm distracted."

Oz sighed and turned to face him. "What do you want?"

"The hospital's on the way to Arthington Manor."

"Fine."

Keir sat astride the bike, and Oz tucked up tight behind him, his hands on Keir's hips, the ridge of his cock pressing against Keir's back. He wondered if Oz was ever *not* hard.

When Keir saw the police guard at the entrance to the ward, he groaned.

Oz gripped his elbow. "Keep walking. He won't see us. We'll slip in with those two nurses."

He kept hold of Keir once they were through the doors, and Keir guessed that while the demon continued to touch him, they were invisible. A white board behind the nurses' station detailed who was in which bed, and they found Neil in a private room at the end of the corridor.

Keir groaned when he saw him. There were stitches all over his face, long slash marks in parallel lines, very like the marks Keir's claws or razor-sharp fingernails would inflict. His throat was bandaged, as were his arms. An IV dripped fluid into a vein.

"Hey, Neil," Keir whispered and crouched by the side of the bed.

Neil opened his eyes. Keir saw the moment Neil recognized him and then Oz.

"How are you feeling?" Keir asked.

"Should be...ready for the decathlon...in an hour or so." He spoke in a hoarse voice.

"Did you see who did it?" Keir asked.

"Too fast, too dark. Guy. Dark hair. Shorter...younger than you."

"What were you doing at Lam Hall?"

"Wanted to see you. Can't think why now. Did you want to buy a car?"

Keir frowned. He reached out to Neil's hand and stroked his fingers. Neil jerked his hand away.

"What you doing?" Neil grunted.

Oz stepped up to the bed and smiled down at Neil. "Who did you speak to at Lam Hall?"

"Woman. Pretty. Sweet smile."

Oz caught hold of Keir and pulled him to his feet. He put his hand around the back of Keir's head and kissed him, forcing his tongue into Keir's mouth as his other hand pressed on his lower back to bring their hips together. Keir uttered a mumbled protest, but Oz didn't let him go. He didn't want to feel anything from the kiss, but he did, and so did his cock.

When Keir finally pulled free, he glanced at Neil's face and saw...nothing.

"Get a room, guys," Neil mumbled.

"What was that about?" Keir asked.

"Cuba's fucked him, sucked his lust for you out of him."

"My lust for him?" Neil laughed and then winced.

"Is he safe now?" Keir whispered.

Oz nodded. "Until his next temptation."

The door slid open, and as Oz caught hold of Keir's arm, a guy stepped into the room. When he ignored them, Keir guessed Oz had rendered them invisible again.

"Neil? It's me, Jock. Christ. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. I thought you'd—"

"Not quite." Neil grunted. "Come to get a scoop, have you? Want me on the front page?"

Oz made to pull Keir out of the room, but Keir shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I tried to help," Jock said. "There was nothing I could do."

Had this guy been there when Neil was attacked?

"Did you know who it was?" Jock asked.

"Someone with sharp teeth," Neil said with a rasp.

"Yeah," Jock muttered. "Could it have been a big cat? There've been a couple of sightings locally. Some escaped pet?"

Oh shit. Why didn't I let Oz pull me out of here? Keir could feel Oz staring at him.

"Wearing clothes?" Neil asked.

"Some maniac, then. Did you...did you tell the police I was with you?"

"Not spoken to them yet."

"Maybe—"

"How am I going to explain how I got out there without a car?" Neil asked. "You better go see them before I tell them you were there too."

"Right. Okay."

"Am I going to make the front page?"

"Not sure that's a good idea," Jock mumbled. "Think I'll stick with the story about the mad woman who thought I was her flight trainer. Much safer."

Keir realized this was the newspaper guy who'd been in the plane with Piper.

"Worried whoever attacked me is going to come after you?" Neil asked.

"Yes," Jock whispered. "There's a police guard on the ward. They must think you're still in danger."

"Yet you got in."

"My wife works here so I know some of the staff."

"And you've outstayed your welcome," said a nurse in the doorway. "Doctor's on his way. You're going to get me into trouble."

Keir and Oz followed Jock and the nurse out of Neil's room.

Jock gave the nurse a quick peck on the cheek and a longer caress on her backside. "Thanks, Sylvie. I owe you."

"Yeah, you do and for the heads-up on the incident at Arthington Manor."

Oz's hold on Keir's arm tightened to the point of pain. Keir felt panic surge inside him. He needed to shut this pair up before they said something about Piper and Rhyl. Only how?

"You realize I'll get sacked if I'm found out?" she whispered.

"I would never quote you as my source. Anyway, there was something odd about that woman. She wasn't injured."

Shutupshutupshutup.

The nurse gaped at him. "Then you got the wrong person. She had over forty stitches in her wrist."

Keir needed Oz to move, but if he tried to pull him away, the demon would know this was something Keir didn't want him to hear. Fear swept through him, and he fought to stay calm.

"Doctor's here. Get lost," Sylvie whispered.

Oz dragged Keir after Jock and then cursed when he saw Jock approach the policeman sitting outside the ward.

"I witnessed the attack on Neil Harmon," Jock said, and the policeman straightened up.

"Damn, I wanted to talk to him," Oz muttered.

"Let's go to Arthington Manor and see if I can pick up a scent," Keir said.

And lead you in entirely the wrong direction.

Chapter Nineteen

By the time Keir and Oz reached Arthington Manor, it was midafternoon. The entire journey Keir had struggled for a means to distract Oz from what he'd heard in the hospital. If Keir failed in this, Oz would go after the newspaper reporter, and the trail would inevitably lead back to Piper and on to Rhyl. Keir couldn't let that happen.

Oz got off the bike to push open the gates and then climbed back on for the ride up the drive. Keir switched off the engine, removed his helmet, and stared at the pile of stones. He needed to play ignorant.

"What happened?" he asked.

Oz put his helmet on the seat next to Keir's.

"A demon owned this place. When Malin was destroyed, all his property crumbled."

Malin's dead? Keir hoped Oz couldn't detect the increase in his heartbeat. Well, that was one thing less for Rhyl to worry about.

"The demon's dead?" Keir asked to make certain.

"Didn't I just say that?" Oz snapped. "Malin hadn't lived here for years, but unusually, remnants of his power remained after he moved out. They should have disappeared with his death but didn't." He strode onto the stones. "There *was* power here; I felt it. It's not here now. Someone has stolen it, perhaps a vaseel."

"What's a vaseel?" Keir asked.

"Servant to a demon. Take your clothes off."

Keir stripped. "That's what I'm looking for? A demon's servant?"

"You're here to follow a scent."

"Is a vaseel human?"

"Mostly."

"Why—"

"No more questions. I need to find that power as soon as possible."

Keir wanted to ask what would happen if he didn't, but he kept his mouth shut, folded his clothes, and slotted them into the bike's pannier. He shivered in the chilly breeze.

"One more thing," Keir said. "Does this thief know they have it? I don't want to suddenly find my ass blasted to kingdom come."

"Of course they know. That's why they fucking took it." Oz lowered his voice. "Don't worry. I won't let anyone hurt you. That's my pleasure."

Keir tried to make his shudder look like a shiver.

Didn't work.

Oz laughed. "Even the cat on your tattoo looks scared. Find me the person I'm looking for, and if Cuba doesn't keep her word after the fight and let you go, I'll make her."

Keir nodded. He had to win the fight first, and if he didn't come up with something to deter Oz this afternoon, maybe the demon wouldn't care what happened to him.

Make him care.

He doubted sex would work. Oz needed this power too much. Why?

Keir shifted. He settled into his puma form, stretched, and bounded onto the stones. No problem finding the place where Rhyl had been trapped, but Keir wasn't sure which was the stronger draw—the vamp's scent or Piper's blood.

Oz came up behind him, ran his fingers over the stains on the rock, and exhaled at his ear. "Yesssss."

Now Keir had to lead him on a wild-goose chase.

He wandered over the ruins, picking up traces of humans and dogs crisscrossing the rocks, but found no sign of a *mostly* human vaseel. Did that confirm Rhyl was the one Oz looked for? Keir spun the search out as long as he could before he shifted back and stood up.

"Well?" Oz demanded.

"There are scents everywhere. I'd guess emergency-services personnel and dogs searching the ruins."

"What about the injured woman?"

"What about her?" Keir's brain scrambled for a way out. "The reporter said she wasn't injured."

"Then where did the blood come from? Follow her trail."

"I don't need to. We know they took her to the hospital."

"Then we'll go back there and speak to that nurse."

"There's something else," Keir blurted. "I can scent a vamp. Maybe I should follow his trail."

Oz smiled. "And I'll follow you."

* * *

Piper sat by the apartment window and watched the sun slide down the sky. She kept glancing at the bedroom door, wondering when the vampire would wake. A few minutes ago she'd taken the bag of Plasmix out of the fridge, per his written instructions, and now she held it tight in her fingers, a flimsy shield.

I'll need to feed, Rhyl had written.

Only after what she'd read, Piper feared one bag was nowhere near enough. Apparently Keir would come with more Plasmix and some clothes. She hoped he came soon.

She'd had a few hours to get her head around her messed-up life, read until she gave herself a headache, but eased into acceptance. It seemed to Piper that she had no choice but to let things run; otherwise she'd go crazy. Perhaps she was already in an asylum, living inside her head.

The moment Rhyl stirred, she heard him. The whisper-soft shuffle of moving blankets filled her mind. The clarity of the sound surprised her. She listened as he slid from under her bed and stood, heard him wrap a blanket around his waist and pad across the room.

How can I hear that? Her heart began to race.

Piper stared at the door. She knew the moment he put his fingers on the handle, and when the door opened, she held her breath.

Air whooshed out of her lungs. Tall, dark hair, strong face, pale skin, broad shoulders, sculptured chest, and a tent in the blanket. *God*. Her gaze jerked back to his face. He looked...strained.

"Piper." The word flowed from his lips, but it still didn't feel like her name. "I'm Rhyl."

She nodded.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"Not too freaked?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it. *I've had sex with this guy*. Her heartbeat pounded all over her body. He took a step toward her, and Piper thrust out the Plasmix. He smiled, came the rest of the way, and took the bag from her hand. He pressed the container to his mouth, and a couple of seconds later the liquid was finished.

"Shouldn't bolt your food. You'll get indigestion," she said.

"Yes, mum." He tossed the bag aside, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and swallowed a burp. "Pardon."

Piper's mouth twitched.

"Did you read your notebooks?" he asked.

"Yes."

"We're going to find a way to beat this," he said. "There has to be a trigger to help you remember. While you were asleep last night and before dawn, I read as many of your notebooks as I could."

Piper's throat felt constricted as if she'd tried to swallow a large lump of bread. She felt alarmed yet had a sense of relief that he understood.

"You're not alone anymore," he whispered. "And you know what?"

"What?"

"Neither am I."

His voice coiled around her heart and squeezed. When Rhyl held out his arms, Piper walked into them. She felt him shaking as she clutched his shoulders. When he pulled back to look at her, she knew why he trembled. His eyes were black with lust and need.

"Oh my God," he mumbled.

She stroked his back, the muscles rigid under his fingers. "It's okay."

"I wanted to wait until you were sure of me, but I can't. And then I wanted to make you come with my mouth, with my fingers, and finally with my cock, but I have to reverse the order. I need to fuck you now."

Piper's nipples tingled, and a surge of warmth wet her panties. She uncurled the blanket from his waist. His cock looked dark and desperate. A bead of precum glistened at the tip. It grew larger as she stared, and she licked her lips.

"No," Rhyl groaned. "Don't even look at me, let alone think of doing that."

He scooped her up, carried her to the bedroom, and undressed her, stripping off her socks, black pants, sweater, T-shirt. Piper tried to help, but her fingers just got in the way of his swift assault. Her clothes flew all over the room like streaks of black lightning, and then Rhyl froze.

"Did you wear those for us?" he whispered.

Piper glanced down at the red-laced G-string and matching demi-cup bra. No point denying what had been in her mind as she'd dressed. "Yes."

Rhyl smiled. "You'll have to put them back on again for Keir."

He ran his fingers along the edge of the lace over her breasts, his thumbs brushing her peaked nipples. The muscles between her thighs clenched hard. One hand slid to unclip the bra, and he lifted it away.

"You're beautiful but deadly," Rhyl said. "If I touch you, I'll explode."

You're not the only one. "Isn't that the idea?"

He laughed. "Yeah, but I don't want you telling that damn cat I only lasted two seconds."

Rhyl peeled the G-string down her legs and flipped her so she knelt on the bed with her butt in the air. He gave a long sigh before he trailed his fingers up the outsides of her thighs to grip her hips. His strong legs pressed against hers, and the head of his cock nuzzled against her folds. Piper felt him hesitate.

"Fuck me," she whispered.

Her words broke his control, and Rhyl plunged his cock into her, withdrawing almost at once to slam forward. Piper gripped the sheets and hung on as he fucked her with his whole body, banging against her, the wet slap of his balls against her flesh echoing in her ears. Each hot, fast glide of his cock sent ripples of pleasure surging into her clit, then out of her clit, to rough-ride rivers of nerves to every part of her body.

"Piper, Piper," Rhyl groaned.

One hand threaded through her hair to pull up her head so she arched into him.

"You feel so hot, so tight. Oh God, hurry up and come so I can."

"No." Piper grunted. "Fuck me harder."

"You little..."

She laughed and made her muscles ripple against the length of his cock. Rhyl growled and pounded into her as if he was trying to get all of him inside her. He tipped her onto her side, and Piper hooked her leg back over his. She'd thought he was as deep as he could get, but she'd been wrong. Each upward propulsion forced air from her lungs and shoved them both up the bed. Then his fingers touched her clit, and she broke in pieces, shuddering and gasping.

Rhyl's hold on her tightened as he came. His mouth pressed against the back of her neck as his body went taut. Each spurt of his cream was swallowed by a spasm from her pussy. They shook together, pulsed together, descended together. Before she could take a breath, Rhyl flipped her onto her back and dropped down to press his head between her legs. His fingers worked in perfect harmony with his tongue, teasing and tormenting her clit, and she felt herself rising again, her chest tightening, the breath catching in her throat. Another orgasm came so fast and hard, it caught Piper unawares, and she cried out as it dragged her fast and deep into a pounding current.

She'd barely brought herself back under control when he put two fingers inside her and twisted them as he thrust. Piper groaned and hauled him back up the bed to lie by her side, face-to-face.

"Put your hands...where I can see them...vampire," she gasped.

He laughed and tugged her close. "You smell so good and taste divine."

"I smell of you. I taste of you."

"Oh yeah."

She smiled, and when his tongue traced the seam of her lips, Piper opened to let him inside. His kiss started tenderly but quickly grew more forceful. She could feel the tension back in his body. When his mouth drifted to her chin, he groaned and rushed back to her mouth, then grabbed her head to keep their lips pressed together. Piper ran her hands softly down his arms, patting and petting, trying to calm him.

Rhyl's mouth slipped again. He kissed a wet trail to her neck and then flung himself on his back, his arm over his eyes, fist clenched.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"Nothing, angel."

Piper huffed. "You need blood."

"I can wait until Keir gets here."

"What if he doesn't come?"

Rhyl lifted his arm and turned to look at her. "He will." But Piper saw the flicker of concern in his eyes.

"What if someone stops him? How long before you get desperate?"

He laughed. "I passed desperate a while ago."

Piper took a deep breath. "Are you a neck or a wrist guy, or is there some other place where veins are near the surface?"

He groaned and moved farther away from her.

Piper shuffled closer. "Unless you want to get dressed in my clothes so you can go hunting, you've no choice, and anyway, I don't like the idea of you slurping on a stranger."

Rhyl edged back.

"Promise to stop when I tell you to?" she asked.

He snorted. "It's not that easy. I'm still not quite balanced. I'm afraid I'll hurt you. I need to wait for Keir."

"Let me help you."

He groaned, rolled again, and fell off the bed. Piper held back her chuckle and leaned over to look at him. She put out her hand and yanked him up, as astonished as Rhyl when he flew over her head to land on the floor on the other side. Piper stared at her fingers. Rhyl popped up, and he levered himself onto the mattress, his eyes wide.

She gulped. "Did I do that? No way could I have done that. You must be weak or something. Oh damn, you really need blood. Just have a sip."

Rhyl's eyes darkened. "I can't just sip. But I..." He leaned over her and released a strangled grunt. "I should wait."

Piper stroked his chest and slid a hand down to clasp his erect cock. "It's okay."

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can."

She put her hands on his hips and groaned as he thrust his cock into her, one long, deep slide to fill her completely. Rhyl held himself up on his elbows and stared into her eyes. "I love you."

Piper blinked. *Oh God*. Tears threatened, and she swallowed hard. Rhyl rocked into her, pulling out so only the tip of his cock remained inside her, then driving back in. She groaned, wrapped her arms and legs around him, and pulled him down onto her chest.

"I love you," he repeated.

"I'll forget." Her heart thudded.

Rhyl smiled. "No, you won't."

He increased the speed of his thrusts until Piper was panting. She lost the capacity to think, her brain dissolving as her body moved with one aim. Muscles tightened and released in more powerful surges as he stared into her eyes. Harder, faster, deeper to merge jolts of pure pleasure into a bone-melting explosion of ecstasy. One last gulp and then every nerve ending snapped to catapult her into free fall, and Piper stopped breathing.

As Rhyl stiffened and spurted inside her, he dropped his mouth to her neck and bit down. Piper's back stiffened as her waning orgasm flared back to life and rocked her body with pulsing aftershocks. The sting of the bite morphed to acute pleasure, and she turned from solid to liquid, sliding into bliss. Each draw from her neck was echoed by a throb from her pussy, just as every pulse of Rhyl's cock was accompanied by a jolt from her heart.

Breathe. Breathe.

She dragged air into her lungs and forced her eyes open. Rhyl's hips lazily rocked into her as he continued to suck, and Piper struggled to clear her head. It would be easy to let herself slide deeper into this like a steamy, hot bath after a long day.

Yet...

How much blood was too much?

Stop him now.

"Rhyl, that's enough." Piper wrenched his head away, saw the wild look in his eyes, and flinched.

"Lick. Heal," he muttered, running his tongue over sharp teeth.

When his mouth fell to her neck, she felt him sucking again. Piper couldn't risk losing consciousness. She thrust him away and whimpered when he flew through the air to hit the wall where her note was taped, and slithered to the floor.

"I'm sorry." Piper rushed to his side.

"You need...to leave...the flat." Rhyl grunted. "Please."

Burning with embarrassment, Piper gathered her clothes and dressed. What the hell was the matter with her? She was dangerous. She grabbed her keys and fled.

Miles away and driving too fast, Piper wondered what the hell she was doing. Not only had she left without her notebook, Keir would walk into trouble. She should have just sat in her car outside her flat and waited for him. Piper turned and drove back.

* * *

Keir had a legitimate reason for taking his time following the vampire scent. Even though the light had gone, he couldn't risk getting spotted in his puma form. Of course, he wasn't actually following a scent to Lam Hall, but since a number of vampires resided there, Oz could hardly call him on it. If Oz was searching for some mysterious power, where better to lead him than a nest of weirdos? And the more

Keir delayed, the better, except Rhyl needed Plasmix, and the longer Keir delayed, the more Rhyl needed it.

In the woods that edged onto Lam Hall, Keir shifted back to two legs and waited. Oz switched off the engine and brought Keir his clothes but didn't hand them over. As Oz stared at Keir in the gloom, Keir's cock slowly rose.

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Seems like you're looking for someone here," Keir said.

"Seems so."

Keir's heart tumbled.

Oz leaned against a tree. "Who was trapped? The vampire or the woman? Who had the power? One of them or neither of them? Was the woman injured or not? A lot of questions unanswered."

Keir felt he had no choice but to try to push Oz in the wrong direction. "Maybe the woman was trapped. The vamp found her, bit her, and healed the wound."

"But she went to the hospital with an injury."

Shit. "Maybe there's only one person. The woman is the vamp."

Oz looked toward Lam Hall. "Any female vamps here?"

"Two. Can I have my clothes?"

"In a hurry to go somewhere?"

"I'm cold."

Oz unzipped his pants. "Warm your mouth on my dick."

Keir walked forward, dropped to his knees, and yanked Oz's pants down to his ankles. Oz's cock stuck out, and a thick string of precum dripped from the tip. Keir wrapped his arms around Oz's thighs and licked up the length of his shaft, forcing himself to go slow until his tongue wrapped around the head. He lapped the silky crest, let his tongue slide around the ridge, and then sucked Oz into his mouth, deeper and deeper until Keir felt rigid flesh hit the back of his throat.

Oz groaned, and Keir tightened the muscles of his throat as he pulled back, letting the drag work against Oz's cock.

Don't rush, don't rush, urged one half of his brain.

Hurry up, hurry up, urged the other half.

The thick veins that laced Oz's shaft pulsed against Keir's tongue, and his own cock twitched and thickened as he sucked. Keir both wanted and didn't want this, and he didn't understand why. Oz caught the back of Keir's head and ground his hips into his face. Despite his common sense demanding otherwise, Keir's hand slipped down to his groin. He wrapped his fingers around his cock and began to stroke himself. With his other hand, he reached up to massage Oz's balls.

Keir didn't try to breathe as Oz deep throated him. He knew the demon was close from the way his cock thickened. Oz's fingers tightened in his hair, and his hips twitched convulsively before he sprayed thick jets of cum into Keir's mouth.

Keir didn't want to swallow, but it was that or drown. Even as he jerked himself off until his cock exploded, guilt raced through him. What the fuck is the matter with me?

Oz let him go, and Keir dragged a breath through cum-splattered lips. Then Oz's hand was back, wrapped around his neck, hauling him to his feet.

"If I find you've been holding out on me, you'll beg me to let Cuba fuck you. Understand?"

"Yes." Keir choked the word out.

Chapter Twenty

Rhyl's fists were clenched so tight he struggled to unpeel his fingers. Thank fuck Piper had left when he'd told her to. Until he could control his appetite, no one was safe. Rhyl could hear his blood rushing through his veins, blood brought to life by Piper. His energy levels were up, and everything was sharper, clearer, sweeter. He'd taken too much, but she'd tasted so good, so pure, so seductive he'd wanted to drink until he was full and she was empty. Rhyl groaned and pushed himself to his feet, out of her bed.

He strode to the shower and smiled when he saw the fish he'd treasured for so long. His good-luck charm. He picked it up and put it on a shelf before he stood under the water. Strange, but now he didn't feel as though he needed blood. Maybe Piper had given him enough. But the moment he thought of her and then the tattoo on her back, the need to drink swept over him like a storm surge, and he trembled. The sooner Keir got here, the better.

His cock filled with blood at the thought of Keir, and Rhyl groaned. Not only was his feeding out of control, so was his libido. Flooded with lust, need, love, Rhyl felt as though he was drowning in emotion. He was already weak, and love made him weaker, yet he wouldn't have it any other way. Rhyl loved Piper with an intensity that almost scared him. Her trust in him was humbling. That she managed to cope so well with her life when she had to live from day to day without remembering amazed him. Rhyl wanted to put her world right more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life, even escape from his stone tomb. He loved her, and he'd die for her.

He even loved the cat, and he'd always thought himself a dog sort of guy. Rhyl smiled. The werepuma didn't want to be loved and would push them away to hide his secrets, but Rhyl had learned patience, and he and Piper would make Keir theirs. No matter how Keir viewed himself, Rhyl knew he wasn't a bad guy. Not deep-down bad. That he'd wanted to protect Piper told Rhyl everything. That he was prepared to share Piper made Rhyl love him. They were mates for life, only Rhyl hoped they got to have a long one together.

Though maybe he was underestimating Piper's need for their support. Rhyl soaped his chest and wondered. Piper was stronger than she looked. A bit too strong. Or was it just that he was weak? Even so, how had she managed to toss him across the room? It puzzled him. Rhyl heard a knock and sighed with relief. Keir with food. Rhyl wanted both. He turned off the water, grabbed a towel, and wrapped it around his hips.

As Rhyl pulled open the door to the apartment and said, "Come in," a number of thoughts flashed through his mind—none of them good. He'd made a stupid mistake, because this wasn't Keir. Rhyl had given permission for two vamps to enter the apartment. Two heavyweight shifters followed. The four circled him before Rhyl could get his back against something solid.

"You don't have authority to be in this town," said one of the vamps. *Shit*.

* * *

Piper knew before she pulled up outside her building that something bad had happened. A couple of miles away, while she'd sat reading her notebook, her heart had begun to pound, and she'd sensed that Rhyl was in trouble. She bounded up the stairs. The apartment door stood ajar, and she shoved it open to come face-to-face with a tall, dark-eyed guy. Not Rhyl, but just as good-looking.

"Piper, I'm Keir," he said. "Where's Rhyl?"

He held bags of Plasmix in one hand, a little wooden fish in the other and she sighed. He was telling the truth.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

She looked around at her wrecked kitchen—the table and chairs in pieces, broken plates littering the floor. "Oh no. Rhyl told me to go," she whispered.

"Go where?"

Piper pushed past him and groaned at the devastation in her lounge. When Keir put his arms around her, she crumpled.

"He needed to feed, only he was afraid of taking too much. He made me leave, and then I worried you'd walk in on a hungry vamp, and I came back. What's happened in here?"

"I don't know. I found the door open and this mess." Keir tightened his jaw. "Someone took him."

"Who? How did they know where he was? Why would they want him?"

Keir cupped her chin and looked into her eyes. "I might know where he is. Stay here. Write everything down so you don't forget. Keep half the Plasmix in case he comes back." He pushed three bags into her arms.

"I want to come with you."

"You need to stay in case Rhyl gets away. He has nowhere else to go."

Keir wrapped his arms around her, and Piper felt his heart beating against her chest. She might not remember him, but she felt safe with him. His lips touched hers, and Piper's head fogged with lust. Keir groaned and pulled away.

"Lock the door and stay safe," he whispered.

After he'd gone, Piper put the Plasmix in the fridge and went to check the bedroom. At least *that* looked untouched, and there was no sign of a scuffle in the bathroom.

She took one step back into her living room and froze. A big, big guy in a black leather jacket leaned against the closed door. Dark hair, dark eyes, and a very white smile.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Piper had no explanation for the sensation that swept over her. Her vision wavered. Nothing moved. There was no sound. She didn't breathe, didn't even blink, and then the air began to shimmer.

Dangerdangerdanger.

She might be frozen in place, but her organs were in chaos. Her heart hammered, her stomach roiled, and something inside her fought to get out. Piper knew she shouldn't let it.

Hidehidehide.

She battled to keep upright. Then, as suddenly as the feeling had come over her, it disappeared. The air cleared, and the guy blinked. Piper hoped it was her in control and not him.

"Going to answer?" he asked.

"Who are you?"

He smiled, but the mouthful of white teeth didn't reassure her.

"Okay, I'll go first. I'm Oz."

"Piper."

"Nice to meet you, Piper."

He held out his hand. Piper ignored it, and his smile broadened as he let his hand drop.

"What are you doing in my apartment?"

"The door was open." He took a step toward her.

"It wasn't."

He shrugged. "Unlocked, then."

"It wasn't. Please leave."

"What's Keir up to?"

Piper tried to look innocent. "Who's Keir?"

"The guy who's just gone tearing out of here."

No point denying it, then, she thought. This guy oozed danger, yet Piper didn't feel herself quivering with fear. Even so as Oz moved toward her, she took a couple of steps back. No way out except for the bedroom window with a long drop, but it might not look so far in a moment.

"Why do you want him?" she asked, and her butt hit the wall.

"He's looking for somebody for me. A vampire."

Piper suspected her face gave her away.

Oz cocked his head to one side. "I know the vampire was here. I can sense traces of power. What I don't know is why Keir didn't tell me."

Piper didn't want to believe this. Keir worked for this guy?

"What's been happening here?" Oz asked.

Her head buzzed. How did she know Keir had arrived after Rhyl disappeared? What if Keir and Rhyl had fought, and Keir had engineered Rhyl's disappearance? *Oh God.*

"I saw Keir arrive, and I saw him leave," Oz said. "He didn't have time to do this. So who did?"

Piper felt guilty for thinking badly of Keir and then remembered he worked for this... Not a man.

"What are you?" she whispered.

He raised his eyebrows. "Good question. What are you?"

"A tattoo artist."

He grinned. "No, I mean what are you?"

"A woman," she snapped.

He ran his tongue over his upper lip. "I can see that, but what else?"

She had no idea what he meant. Was he asking if she was a vampire or shifter? "I'm just...Piper. I'm normal. Well, except for..."

His face was now inches from hers, his breath brushing her cheeks. "Except for what, sweetheart?"

If Piper hadn't felt in imminent danger before, she did now. Her heart pounded, and her mouth went dry.

"Except for what?" he repeated.

She ducked and ran into the bedroom. Piper was fast, but Oz was faster. He caught her before she reached the window, and yanked her back against his chest.

"Mmm, you feel good, smell good"—he licked her neck—"and taste good."

Piper shuddered. Oz pinned her against him with one arm and fondled her breast through her sweater. Piper's anger trumped her fear.

"Get your hands off me," she snarled.

"Playing hard to get, baby? Fine by me. I like fiery tempers and hot women. So what have you been up to with the vamp and the cat?" He nuzzled her neck.

"Let me go."

"Have you fed the vampire? 'Course you have. Feels good, doesn't it? That rush when they suck and fuck at the same time. Well, it'll be even better with me." He slipped a hand between her legs and squeezed her crotch.

Piper yanked an arm free and elbowed him in the chest. He groaned but didn't let her go.

"You dig him up at Arthington Manor?" Oz asked.

She pressed her lips together.

"What happened?"

"Don't remember."

"He bit you, and you ended up in the hospital. Your injury healed very fast. Am I right?"

"Don't remember." How did he know all this?

"Of course you do."

"Read the sheet of paper taped to the wall," Piper blurted.

A moment later, he let her out of his arms and gave a short laugh. "You really don't remember."

Piper backed away but had nowhere to go. He stood between her and the door, the window no longer an option. She'd have no time to yank it open before he grabbed her.

He stared at her and frowned. "You don't want me, do you? No wet pussy, no tightening nipples. I wonder why that is."

"Do you want a list?"

He laughed. "What a novelty. I actually want you, and you don't want me. You have any idea how frustrating it is to be the demon of lust? I hardly have to lift a finger, and people can't get enough of me. I have so much love to give. How I am supposed to find the real thing?"

Demon of lust? Shit. "Is that what you're searching for? To find someone who loves you for your big heart?"

"Rather than my big cock?"

He gave her a mocking leer, but Piper caught a hint of vulnerability in his eyes, a glint of light before they turned black again.

"Nothing wrong with wanting to love and be loved," she said.

Oz reached out and yanked her back into his arms. "Demons don't know how to love. Teach me."

Piper wriggled free. "No, thanks."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"Because it's not something that can be taught. You feel love."

"You could feel me." He rubbed the bulge in his pants.

"And what would I get out of it?"

His eyes lit up. "Fucking great sex."

Piper gulped.

His shoulders slumped. "Sorry. I get carried away. You're really cute. I love your eyes. Your hair's wild. I find you...enticing. I'd love to strip you naked and drive you crazy with my fingers, my tongue, and my very long cock." His voice caressed her skin like silk. "I'm the best you'll ever have. I promise."

Oz stared straight at her, and Piper stared back. "No, thanks."

His eyes opened wide in surprise. "I'm a prince of hell. You should be groveling at my feet. And sucking my cock." He waggled his eyebrows, and a laugh burst from Piper's throat.

She had no reason to believe he was a demon, but the feeling of danger hadn't passed.

"There's something about you, something different." Oz stared at her. "Maybe it's you I've been looking for."

Piper hoped not.

"So who wrecked your apartment?" Oz asked, his voice back in business mode. "The vampire? Did someone take him? Is that who Keir was after?"

"I don't know."

He suddenly yelled at the floor. "I still have time." He clenched his fists. "I can handle this."

Piper hadn't a clue what was going on. Who was he talking to? She already knew he was crazy. *Prince of hell?*

He raised his gaze to her and snapped, "Pack a few things. You're going to stay next to me until I find out what's happening. And before you start to argue, if you don't do as I say, I'll kill Keir."

* * *

Keir was exhausted. He had to use all his powers of concentration to keep the bike traveling in a straight line back to Lam Hall. He'd not slept, barely eaten, and his nerves were screwed so tight he could have played a tune on them. While he'd gathered clothes and Plasmix, Oz must have gone to Lincoln and grabbed Rhyl. *Fuck*.

Except there were a couple of problems with that. The first was timing. Had there been sufficient opportunity for Oz to have taken Rhyl? The second was the last thing Oz said, that if he found Keir had been holding out on him, Keir would be begging Oz to give him to Cuba. Why issue the threat if he already knew Rhyl's location?

On the other hand, Keir had no idea how fast Oz could move, and just because Keir hadn't told him where Rhyl was hiding didn't mean he hadn't found out from another source. Had Keir been followed before? Frick? That little prick, Jardine? Even the werebear cook. If Oz had Rhyl, Keir was toast. If he didn't, Keir had no idea where Rhyl could be. So why was he racing back to Lam Hall? Would Oz be there? If the demon had what he'd come for, he'd leave. Unless he intended to pummel Keir into hell first for his treachery.

Keir thought about going back to Piper and in the end kept the bike heading for Lam Hall. What the hell could he say to her? He'd been trying to keep Rhyl safe, but Keir hadn't even warned the vampire about Oz. Piper was in less danger where she was. If Oz didn't kill him in the meantime, Keir was tempted to sneak back to her apartment and destroy all references to him and Rhyl in her notebooks. She'd be better off without them.

He parked the bike in the garage and stared at the gap. Someone else was out on a bike. Keir shook his head. It meant nothing. He stripped and shifted. Because he was tired and stressed, the transformation was slower and painful. As bones shortened and muscles lengthened, he hissed. He'd have to keep shifting back and forth to move around the buildings, but if Rhyl was here, Keir needed his puma senses to find him.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Keir was back in the hallway, sure that Rhyl was nowhere in the vicinity. He'd checked the main building and the compound, and even though entry to several rooms was barred, no familiar scent teased Keir's nostrils. He needed to go back to Piper's and start the search from there—what he should have done in the first place. Except continued shifting to get through doors had left him even more exhausted. He couldn't remember when he'd last slept.

"Here, kitty."

Keir turned his puma head to look at Cuba and snarled. Two of the familia stood behind her; otherwise Keir might have been tempted to pounce.

"You're in trouble," she said.

So what's new? But the smile on her face alarmed him. Not the police, but something else.

"Get some clothes on and come to the library."

Keir slinked away. His heart felt so heavy he could barely shift back. If he didn't eat soon, he'd not be able to shift at all. He stood up as his fur dissolved and his body morphed, then leaned his shaky back against the wall, closed his eyes, and groaned. Food first or clothes? Trouble could wait. Keir headed for the kitchen.

Jellicoe, the werebear cook, was in there with Jardine. Keir wasn't sure if it was his imagination that the two exchanged a look when he walked in. Hell, why not? He was naked after all. Jardine licked his lips.

"Wouldn't mind you as my hood ornament," Jardine commented. "Puma beats jaguar any day."

Keir's tired brain registered something odd, but the moment passed.

"Hungry?" Jellicoe asked.

Keir was always hungry. Weres had such a high metabolism they needed to eat a lot and often. He sat at the table. "Just run a cow through a flamethrower, beat out the flames, and toss it in front of me."

Jardine sat next to him. "Cuba told you that you're fighting tomorrow?"

"No." Shit.

"Sobel's flown in a werebear from Canada. Offered him a million if he wins," Jellicoe said.

A million? "Sobel again?" Keir asked.

This was the second time the vampire had wanted fights arranged outside the usual timetable. What was going on?

"It was Cuba who wanted the fight," Jardine said.

The cook plunked a plate in front of Keir. It held two large, bloody steaks, barely singed by the hot plate.

"Just the way you like them, eh?" Jellicoe said.

Keir had lost his appetite, but he forced them down. Jardine watched him swallow every bite, making no attempt to hide his fangs, particularly when Keir tipped the plate to his mouth and drank the juice.

"Rumor has it this is your last fight," Jardine said.

Jellicoe laughed. "Yeah, it will be."

Keir hoped so too, but not for the same reason as Jellicoe.

* * *

Jardine followed Keir to his room, waited while he dressed, and escorted him to the library. Keir walked in and slammed to a halt. Jardine stumbled into his back and knocked him forward. Cuba sat on the couch with her arm over the shoulder of Keir's brother.

Keir dragged air into his lungs. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The smile dropped off Reed's face.

"Now is that a nice way to greet your brother?" Cuba asked.

"Does Dad know where you are?" Please say yes, even if it's not true.

Reed shook his head. "I wanted to see you."

"You've seen me; now go home."

Cuba's fingers played in Reed's shoulder-length brown hair. The idiot looked relaxed and unworried, and he had a scorpion ready to sting him.

"Reed wants to stay for a while. That's fine by me."

"But not by me. You and I have an agreement. It does *not* involve Reed."

Cuba rose to her feet and sauntered over to him. "But that agreement is almost at an end. Your last fight is tomorrow night. I'll need someone to take your place."

Keir gaped at her. "He's fifteen years old. He wouldn't last a second."

"He's over six feet tall," Cuba said. "He's strong enough to bring down an adult human, maybe a barmaid."

Oh Christ. Keir wondered if Reed was behind the deaths, and then shook the thought away.

"Amazing how resourceful even immature weres can be when they're far from home and have nowhere to go."

Panic filled Reed's face, and the thought came back to Keir. *Oh God, is Reed the killer?*

"Have you attacked any humans?" Keir snapped at his brother.

"No." Reed glared.

Keir's fury soared like a kite. "You are not setting him up for those deaths."

"How do you know he isn't responsible?"

Keir snarled. "Because he said so."

"I haven't done anything," Reed said and looked like the young boy he was.

"Maybe Keir's behind the attacks," Cuba said.

"He wouldn't attack humans," Reed retorted.

Cuba raised her eyebrows. "His clothes were found in the woods covered in blood."

Christ. "They weren't covered in blood when I left them, and they weren't there when I came back," Keir said. "Someone's trying to set me up."

Cuba walked in a circle around him. "Why would they do that? You're popular in the familia."

"Frick doesn't like me."

She waved her hand dismissively. "He's all mouth."

"Maybe they want to make trouble for you," Reed said, looking at Cuba.

She inclined her head. "Interesting point." Her gaze turned on Keir. "Explain why Oz would cover for you. What does he need? To track someone, something? If you find it for me, I'll let you go with your baby brother. I wouldn't need you if I had something Oz wanted."

Keir could see the greed in her eyes. When she pulled Reed to his feet and stroked his chest, Keir struggled to control his rage.

"He's sweet."

Two steps and Keir's hand wrapped around her throat. "Let him go."

"Let me go, or Jardine will kill him," she rasped.

Keir had forgotten about the vamp. Jardine had moved fast and stood poised like a cobra over Reed. Keir dropped his hold.

Cuba rubbed her neck. "Perhaps you'd like to reconsider your objection to my request."

Keir's head ached. His world was disintegrating. He'd been alone, with little hope, found Piper and Rhyl, then lost them, and now if he didn't let Cuba take what she wanted, he'd lose his brother too. Why the hell had their father not kept a better eye on him? He frantically tried to cobble together a plan. The only ace in Keir's hand was that he had to fuck Cuba willingly. She needed his cooperation.

"Well?" she asked.

"If you want me to win tomorrow night, I need every emotion intact. If you take what you want now, then I'll lose."

Her eyes brightened. "I can wait another day."

"Let my brother go."

Cuba smiled. "I don't think so. After you give me what I want, and do it willingly, then he can leave. If you fail to win, he can replace you."

"What does she want?" Reed whispered.

Cuba rubbed her cheek on his shoulder. "Just a little bit of him. He won't miss it. Alternatively, whatever it is that Oz wants."

Keir was glad he didn't know the location of the vamp. He didn't want to make a choice between Rhyl and Reed.

"Reed stays with me until the fight," Keir said.

And first chance he got, he was getting his brother the hell out of here.

"Fine." Cuba pushed Reed toward him. "Show him your present, Reed."

Keir knew before Reed lifted the leg of his pants. An ankle band that matched his. *Fuck*.

* * *

"Why do you still have him in the net?"

Rhyl tried to force his eyes open at the sound of the voice, but the effort to do so made him shake from head to toe.

"He's strong. We couldn't restrain him any other way. We sent the shifter in like you said, but the vamp got the jump on him. The shifter will be out of action for a while. He's too badly injured to transform."

"Shit. There were four of you, and you couldn't control him?"

"For a while, not even with the net. He's feral."

"Interesting."

Rhyl didn't want to be interesting. He wasn't feral. He'd been hungry and fighting for his life.

Another man spoke. "Maybe we shouldn't feed him?"

"I've thought of another use for him. I need him strong, not weak, but desperate rather than sated. Get him blood and remove the net."

"Plasmix or a blood whore?"

"Plasmix. Two bags. I don't want him killing one of our food sources."

Rhyl would have liked to leap up and grab whoever it was in charge, but very few parts of his body seemed to be working. The silver net lay on him like a blanket of lead. He tried to speak, and nothing came from his mouth. He opened his eyes, and through the mesh saw a tall, silver-haired vampire leaving the stone cell. Power oozed from him. Five others remained. Two still bore marks inflicted by Rhyl in Piper's apartment. Two bags of Plasmix landed on the floor nearby, and then

they yanked the net off him with gloved hands before clambering to get through the door. It clanged shut, and Rhyl sighed.

His body was covered with a crisscross pattern of bleeding lines from where the silver had eaten into his flesh. Now the net had gone, he'd begin to heal. Rhyl crawled to the Plasmix and snagged the first bag. Things could be worse. At least they were feeding him and the room had a way out.

"You're trespassing, vampire." It was the voice of the silver-haired vamp that came from the other side of the door. "What's your name? Where are you from?"

Rhyl wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "My name is Rhyl. I've lived near this city for almost five years. I guess that makes me from here."

"Impossible. Who's your master?"

"I have no master."

"Who made you?"

Rhyl cast aside the second empty bag. "Dominic Markov."

"Never heard of him."

Rhyl supposed that was good news in a way. He'd thrown his brother's name out to see if it provoked a response.

"I'm your master now," said the vampire.

And there was the bad news.

Chapter Twenty-one

"Not one word," Keir snapped as he led Reed down the compound corridor and up to his room.

Jardine tagged along behind, and Keir considered offering to say yes to whatever the vamp wanted if he'd find a way to get Reed out of here. Except Keir didn't trust him. He'd known long ago it wasn't a good idea to let Jardine fuck him, and it still wasn't. Keir slammed the door of his room in Jardine's face and shoved Reed into the bathroom. He turned on the shower to muffle their voices and glared at his stupid brother.

"Sorry," Reed said.

Keir pulled Reed into his arms and hugged him. "You idiotic wanker," he whispered. Keir was torn between pleasure in seeing his brother again and despair that he'd walked into a viper's nest.

"I'm really sorry." Reed pulled away.

"Why've you come?"

"To see you. To tell you I was really, really sorry." Reed swallowed hard. "I told Dad what she did."

Keir's heart twisted. Reed had never spoken of what their whore of a stepmother had done to him. After Keir killed her and the pride had been in an uproar, he'd hoped Reed would summon the courage to speak out, if only to their father, but he hadn't. Keir understood. When she'd first come on to him, he'd kept quiet too.

"I should have said something earlier," Reed whispered. "I was so fucked-up about everything. All those years when I thought she loved you better than me because she always wanted to be alone with you." He looked straight at Keir. "I hated you."

Keir leaned back against the wall. He hadn't thought how his absences with their stepmother would look to Reed.

Reed sighed. "After I found out why, I didn't hate you anymore. I hated her. Only when I spoke out in your defense, no one believed me. They thought I was trying to cover for you because you always protected me." He rubbed a hand over his face. "Then she came to my bed one night when you were away and Dad was hunting, and I really did understand then. I thought it was my fault." His voice dropped to a whisper. "You killed her, and that was my fault too."

"No," Keir said and stood upright.

Reed hung his head. "I'm so ashamed. Of what she did, of what I let her do. I know you kept doing what she wanted to protect me. Then Dad sent you away, and he wouldn't tell me where. When I told Dad what she'd done, how she'd forced you to fuck her on the promise that she wouldn't touch me, I thought he'd bring you back."

Keir wasn't surprised that hadn't happened. Their father wouldn't tolerate losing face with the pack for admitting to a mistake.

"I did some research and tracked you to here. Cuba said you're a great fighter. The best she has."

"If you're not the best, you die." Keir wasn't sure Reed understood what the fight was about.

"Your last fight?" Reed asked.

"So she says."

"What does she want from you?"

"To suck out a piece of my soul and leave a hole in it forever." And if it meant Reed went free, Keir would let her do it.

"Really? That's whacked. You can't let her. We have to leave, right?" Reed lifted the leg of his pants. "What are these things around our ankles?"

"They'll inject a silver colloid into our bloodstream if we stray beyond a certain distance from here. Then we die."

Reed paled. "We can't take them off?"

"Interference will activate the injection system." Keir's tired brain struggled to think of a way out of this. "I need to sleep. I can't think."

He left the bathroom and lay down on the bed. A moment later, Reed curled up behind him, wrapping his arms around him. Keir's heart felt full enough to burst.

"We can't call Dad, can we?" Reed said.

"No." Though Keir had thought about it. But if a puma pack came into this territory without permission, the price would be very high. Werepumas were too rare to risk sacrificing many lives for one—or two.

"I'm sorry for everything," Reed said.

"I know."

Reed slipped into sleep while Keir's mind raced. Could he persuade Jardine to remove Reed's ankle tag before the fight, maybe with the promise of a fuck afterward? Jardine could fight Cuba for first go. *Yeah*, *right*. Reed could look for an opportunity to sneak out, shift to his puma, and run while everyone watched the fight. A puma could outrun a vamp—on foot anyway, and once dawn broke, Reed would be safe.

If Keir beat the werebear, a big if, he'd run before his tether was replaced, before Jardine extracted payment, before Cuba made a move. If he could. Another big if. Only there were still two lives to consider. Piper should be safe enough in her

apartment, though she'd be wondering where he was, at least until she fell asleep. Keir swallowed hard. His cock unfurled as need roared into his head.

Mate.

Was she? Keir groaned. Did it matter? If he wanted to keep her safe, he had to forget her, at least until this mess was sorted out. He imagined being free of Cuba, free to roam, yet all he wanted was to lock himself away in a little house with Piper and Rhyl. Keir's cock throbbed.

Mate.

Was he? Oh shit, I am so fucked-up. Where the hell was Rhyl? Despite Keir's attempts to mislead Oz, had he found Rhyl? Maybe Frick had grabbed him. Keir wouldn't put it past the bastard.

Keir couldn't sleep. Something was niggling, something he'd said or thought. He slipped from under Reed's arm and headed back to the hall.

That comment about hood ornaments—was that it? Had Jardine attacked Neil? Keir shook his head. Not that. He was clutching at straws. Still, there was something.

* * *

Piper clung to Oz as he accelerated along the country lanes, the bike tipping so far over she thought she'd fall off. She was cold and scared, though that kept her alert. Oz's threat to kill Keir resonated inside her. Even so, as they'd sped along, Piper considered throwing herself from the bike, but tempting fate for the third time with a moving vehicle seemed a step too far. Sometimes reading her notebooks was a disadvantage.

The sky was light by the time Oz pulled up outside a garage at Lam Hall. Piper climbed off, removed her helmet, and looked up at the imposing building. There was no sign of life. Was Keir inside? Piper hoped Rhyl was safe under cover.

Oz tugged her up the steps and pushed open the door.

Keir stood a few feet in front of her. "Oh fuck."

He looked horrified to see her, but Piper shrugged off Oz's hold and ran into his arms. The moment he held her, relief flooded her body.

Keir pressed his mouth to her ear. "You need to get out of here right now."

And panic flooded back in. "Did you find Rhyl?" she whispered.

"No. Oz mustn't find him either."

As Oz grabbed one arm and Keir tugged at Piper's other, a figure emerged from a room on their left. She was one of the most beautiful women Piper had ever seen—dressed in skintight pants and a low-cut, floaty red top. She had perfect flowing black hair, curves in the right places, and an angelic face. Oz yanked Piper into his arms, and the woman draped an arm proprietarily over Keir's shoulder.

Piper wanted to scratch the bitch's eyes out.

Damn, where did that come from?

The woman gazed at Piper as if she knew exactly what she'd been thinking. Or maybe the glare on Piper's face said it all.

Piper was about to let a growl loose when Oz slid his hand inside her coat and tweaked her nipple. Instead she whimpered, and Keir growled.

"Introduce me," the woman said.

"Cuba, meet Piper. Piper, meet Cuba." Oz squeezed Piper's breast.

Cuba stared her up and down. "The tattooist? What's she doing here?"

"She amuses me." Oz licked a path to Piper's ear and muttered, "If you want to save your life, kiss me."

Piper had no time to think; she could only act on instinct. She let Oz kiss her. His tongue pressed against the seam of her lips and kept pressing until he'd forced a way inside her mouth. Piper had expected him to be rough, but he wasn't. He kissed her gently, trailing his tongue along hers while his hands slid around her back to hold her against him. It was only when she felt the rigid length of his cock sandwiched between them that she tried to pull away.

One glance revealed Keir's fury. His body tense as steel, his eyes black with anger and despair. Piper tried again to move from Oz, but he kept her close.

"Planning a little ménage?" Cuba asked. "I'll take Keir's place. He's fighting tonight and needs to conserve his strength."

"Fighting?" Piper squeaked.

"Didn't he tell you how he earns the additions to his marque?" Cuba smiled. "He belongs to me, fights for me, and is prepared to die for me. Why don't you stay and watch?"

"No," Keir blurted.

Cuba ran a long fingernail down the zipper of his pants. "You can't hide your lust for her, and you've no idea how *delicious* I find that. Who does she want? I wonder. You or Mr. Expert over there?"

"Let her go," Keir said.

"Ozmodeus has brought her into *my* house. She stays. Her presence will be an added incentive for you to win. She can sit next to your brother. Goodness me, two incentives. Now go to your room and get some sleep, or you won't stand a chance against the bear. Or perhaps you'd prefer to come with me, and I'll make sure everything turns out as it should."

Keir lifted her fingers from his crotch and stepped back.

"Suit yourself." Cuba strolled away.

"Take your hands off Piper," Keir said with a growl.

Oz let her go. Piper wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"Not a good idea to let Cuba know how you feel about your little kitten," Oz said. "I tried to help, but your dick has a mind of its own. I'm afraid I've already guessed how you feel about the vampire. Found him yet?"

Piper raised her eyes to Keir.

"He's not in the house or the grounds," Keir said, avoiding her gaze.

"Someone took him from Piper's apartment. Not me. Not you. Who?" Oz looked at the early-morning sun streaming through the window. "Better hope he's under cover."

"Let her leave," Keir whispered.

"I don't think so. She ensures your cooperation, and she might tempt the vampire if he's not dust."

Keir squared his shoulders. "Please don't hurt her. I'll do anything you want."

"Produce the vamp."

Piper's heart pounded. Did Keir know where Rhyl was?

"I have no idea where he is."

Oz grabbed her again. "You'd better look harder. You could have produced him earlier, and we wouldn't be having this conversation. Still, I might not need you anymore now that I have Piper. The vamp will come for her, so your survival is less of an issue."

Keir glared.

"You're not wondering where Cuba went?" Oz asked. "Nothing tempts more than fresh meat."

Keir's face went so pale, Piper thought he might collapse.

"This one's safe with me," Oz said. "Cuba won't touch her. Go to bed. You do need to sleep if you're to survive."

Keir hesitated, gave Piper a despairing look, and then hurried away. Piper wanted to go after him, but Oz held her back.

"Survive?" she asked.

"The fight is to the death."

Piper's knees collapsed. Oz caught her and tugged her toward the stairs.

"Keir might die tonight?" she whispered.

"Yes."

Piper bit back her sob. How could everything go so wrong? Fights weren't supposed to be to the death. But then the world shouldn't contain demons, vampires, and shape-shifters.

Oz dragged her down a corridor, opened a door, and shoved her into a bedroom. He pocketed the key and threw himself on the bed.

"What are you doing?" Piper whispered.

"I'm distraught with grief that you aren't lusting for me. I might as well get some sleep. Lie here next to me. I promise not to do anything unless you want me to." "That's not what I mean. What are you doing here? Why are you looking for Rhyl? You said if I didn't come with you that Keir would die. I'm here, and now you're telling me he has to fight and might die anyway."

"I didn't know he was going to fight. Come and lie down. You're too tense."

Piper bristled. "Tense? I'm bloody rigid with anger. I want answers. Start with why you're looking for Rhyl."

Oz gave her an amused look. "He has something that belongs to me."

She gaped at him. "He doesn't even have any clothes."

Oz laughed.

"It's not funny," Piper snapped.

"Yeah, it is. Lie down and get some sleep."

She stood up straighter. "I can't. If I fall asleep, I won't remember any of this. Away from my apartment, my life is impossible. I only have one notebook with me. I don't have my photographs. I'll panic when I wake." She was panicking just thinking about it.

He pushed himself up on one elbow. "Good. Then I'll tell you we're lovers, and you'll let me fuck you."

She clenched her fists.

Oz's eyes glittered. "I'll be sure to remind you how you like to play games, to be my slave and call me master."

Piper bubbled with fury. He'd voiced her fear that if a guy stayed the night, her trust could so easily be misplaced. She had no way of telling truth from lies.

Oz tucked his arms behind his head. "You like the kiss of the whip, the bite of a clamp around your clit, and my cock in your asshole." He grinned. "I'm looking forward to this."

Rage consumed Piper, white-hot anger bubbling in her veins. "Go. Fuck. Yourself."

The air shimmered in front of her while everything else went still. Oz had stopped laughing with his mouth open and looked...frozen. What the hell? Piper wondered if her rage was in some way fueling the disturbance. She took a deep breath and tried to relax. The diffused air quivered and then settled.

Oz carried on with his laugh as though nothing had happened. "If only I could," he said.

Piper had to think what he was referring to. Oh yeah. She'd told him to fuck himself. Hadn't he realized he'd been out of it for a moment?

"You okay?" He stared at her.

"You're an asshole," she muttered and leaned back against the door.

Had she made him freeze? When she'd read about the way she'd leaped from the path of that car, how she could hear more clearly, see farther, Piper had known something about her had changed. It had started the day she flew over Arthington Manor. She was linked to the place whether she liked it or not. And if she was going along with the whole symphony of paranormals, why not believe that she had a touch of weirdness inside her?

Oz sat up. "I can make you remember."

Piper snorted. "You mean, if we fuck, I'll never forget the experience?"

He grinned. "You wouldn't, but that's not what I mean. Let me into your head, and I can destroy the barrier that's keeping you from remembering."

Piper felt as though all the cells in her body had solidified in shock. Every day for eleven years, she'd wanted to hear those words from someone. Only she hadn't wanted to hear it from someone like Oz. Hope and distrust warred for control of Piper's mouth. How could she possibly trust a demon? Could he really help her control her memory? Was it just a trick?

"What do you have to lose?" Oz asked.

There's the rub. "What do you have to gain?"

"The knowledge that I've done good in the world, made someone happy." He laid his hand over his heart and fluttered his eyelashes.

Piper chuckled. "I'm surprised that didn't choke you."

Oz sat up. "Women like that sort of thing."

"Along with men who strive for world peace and provide an unlimited supply of chocolate. Preferably at the same time."

His mouth twitched. "I'm intrigued. There must be some reason why your brain isn't letting you remember. Maybe I can find the trigger. If your past is too horrible, I won't tell you."

"I'll only let you do it if you do tell me."

Piper could scarcely believe she was contemplating this. Why should she trust a demon? Particularly one who'd already threatened to lie to her when she woke. But then, he was right. What did she have to lose? Nothing was currently telling her to run the other way, and she didn't *have* to believe what he said.

"How do you get in my head?" Piper asked, still looking for the catch. "Hammer and a blunt spoon? Electric drill? Sex? Think I might prefer the first."

He gaped at her. "You are—Damnation, I've never met anyone like you before." He narrowed his eyes. "If you want me to, I could fuck my way into your mind."

"No, thank you."

"You know, you're beginning to worry me. Am I losing my touch? Please let me check." He waggled his fingers.

"You try anything, and I'll—"

"What?"

"Pray for you," she blurted.

Oz smiled. "You are cute. Come here and lie down beside me. Hold my hand."

Piper hesitated. She knew he wanted something from her, but what? Her power—whatever it was? Not a good thing to let him have.

Hide it away before he takes my hand.

Piper shivered as ribbons of sensation rippled from every extremity to focus on her lower back. Fiery streams flowed through her until she could feel her tattoo begin to writhe, every line and every curl burning like a brand on her body.

Safe.

She lay down next to Oz, and he wrapped his hand around hers. "Just think about allowing me into your head. Don't erect barriers. Don't think of anything but me."

Piper's eyelids fluttered, and she forced her eyes to stay open.

Oz stared straight at her. "Let me in."

She willed herself to slide into his black pupils. A long, slow glide into darkness.

Alyssa struggled, but the demon was too strong. He'd stripped her, forced his way inside her to pound into her, and now he stiffened as the first pulse of his seed flooded her womb. She clenched her muscles in a futile attempt to prevent conception, but this was her period of feutil, the only time in her long life that a child was allowed, and he'd stolen it from her. With a roar of triumph, he thrust inside her for the final time and then collapsed.

She wished he were dead and then revoked the thought. Whether she liked it or not, he was the father of her unborn child. Even as she lay beneath him, one of his sperm was winning the race to fertilize her precious egg. There had to be some goodness inside him, didn't there? Of all those billions of seeds, couldn't just one be good?

Malin withdrew from her body and lay at her side. "Next time, if you don't look as though you're enjoying yourself, I'll cut a smile in your face."

He threw his arm over her chest, grabbed her breast, and fell asleep. Negative emotions overpowered Alyssa's natural inclination to think only good things. Now she knew how to hate. She'd made a monumental mistake. Her curiosity had led her to this plane, and her innocence had drawn her to this demon's bed.

Their child...would be a female. She would not be evil. Alyssa wouldn't let that happen. But there was a choice to be made now, assuming she could find a portal and escape. If she gave up her immortality and stayed, she would never be able to return to her brothers and sisters in heaven, and the child would remain vulnerable. If she returned to heaven pregnant, she'd have a mere fourteen years with her child and then have to give her up. Neither of them would retain memories of the time they'd spent together, but the child would be grown and able to take care of herself.

Alyssa had nothing: no skill, no money, no home. How could she survive in the mortal world with a baby? There was no choice. She would return home, but not without a gift from this demon to their child. He had a pathetic excuse for a soul—a

shriveled, wizened little thing. He cared for no one but himself. There was nothing of him worth having, so Alyssa stole a little of his energy and gave it to their unborn baby.

Fourteen years later, she added some of her own power and locked it away in her beloved daughter with a tattooed key. It was all she could offer.

Oz smiled and ran his finger down the middle of Piper's forehead, over her nose, her lips, and down her chin. He should have known or at least guessed that the power didn't reside in the vamp. This slip of a woman was the one he sought. He'd not been able to find her because she didn't know what she had. That and the fact that he wasn't good at differentiating between types of power, and this city seethed with energy.

"Well? Did you do anything to fix me?" Piper asked.

Had she not seen what he had?

"Perhaps. When was the first time you saw Arthington Manor?"

"In my notebook it says I flew over it a few days ago."

Oz exhaled. A plane. That's why the power had been there one moment and then gone. He laughed.

"Show me your tattoo," he said.

She sucked her lip for a moment, then rolled on her side and lifted her sweater.

Her lower back was intricately inked with a twisted design that had no beginning and no end. It looked uncommonly like the one on Keir's back, which brought Oz up short.

Inside the design were the initials PRK.

"What's your full name?" Oz asked.

"Piper Kennedy. What did you find in my head?" Piper asked, pulling her top down. "Was...was I raped?"

"Not you. Your mother. Name of Alyssa."

Piper's eyes widened.

"Your father's name is Malin."

She gasped. "My father was a demon? The one who nearly killed Rhyl?"

"Is he the vampire?"

"Damn. That slipped out."

Oz grinned. "The good news is that your mother's an angel."

Piper stared at him and then guffawed. "Oh ha-ha. You had me going there for a moment."

Oz sighed. "It's the truth. Malin raped her. Made her pregnant. She chose to keep you with her in heaven for fourteen years and then had to give you up. She

isn't allowed to remember you, nor you her, but I don't think she intended you not to remember what happened in your life once you were back on earth."

Piper sat up. "Well, I guess that's no crazier than anything else. You think I'll remember what happens from now on?"

"I know you'll remember now." Actually he didn't know anything of the sort.

She chewed her lip, and her hand slid to her pocket. "How do I know if I can recall anything more than what I've read?"

"Sleep, and you'll remember."

Piper furrowed her brow. "You could be lying."

Yes, I am. "No, I'm not."

"You won't mind if I stay awake just in case?"

Yes. "No."

She leaned over and kissed him on the lips. "You can be sweet. Thank you."

Oz was so astonished that he lay with his mouth open like a gulping fish. He wasn't sweet. He was *never* sweet. He was thinking of a way to get her power, knowing it might kill her. How could he be sweet?

He closed his eyes. He needed to think. If her tattoo was the key to her power, how was he supposed to use it? Taking back power was always straightforward. When the thief used it, Oz grabbed it. But he had no idea how to take back Malin's power when neither he nor Piper knew what it was. The power could destroy him or her. The only way to be sure he'd dealt with it was to obliterate it. But if he did that without first identifying it, he'd obliterate Piper too. Oz found himself curiously reluctant to choose that path.

Take her to hell.

He could handle things differently there, isolate the power without risk to her, but he couldn't force her to go. And if she died at this very second, the little angel would be a shoo-in for heaven.

"Ever done anything really bad?" he asked hopefully. "Run over a dog? Killed an old lady? Eaten a whole tub of chocolate chip cookie-dough ice cream with hot fudge sauce and nuts while watching porn?"

"No! Well, I don't think so."

Assuming he could convince her to open up to him again, he doubted he'd be lucky enough to uncover some terrible sin in her locked-up memory. So he couldn't drag her to hell. She had to want to go. It wasn't that bad, not if you were in his Circle or above. Piper *should* start at the bottom in the fiery pit, but maybe he could find a way around that and offer to train her for something special. His personal assistant. Oz's cock shot straight to parade-ground attention. He was surprised it had taken this long. Lust bubbled inside him, though sadly not inside her.

Alternatively he could go back and tell the boss he couldn't find the power. In which case Oz might end up in the fiery pit staring up at a burning corporate ladder.

"Piper?" He didn't open his eyes. "I lied. I don't know if you'll get your memory back if you sleep."

"Thank you for telling me, candyman."

Oh Lucifer's balls. I'll never live this down.

"Can you think of a way I can help Keir and Rhyl?" she asked and offered him hope.

And he offered her damnation. "Yes, if you give me what I want."

"What's the trade?"

Oz sat up. "Your power."

"What power?"

"The power that was your father's." He looked at her bewildered face. "To get it, I need to take you away."

"Where to?"

"A vacation to somewhere warm and cozy."

"Florida?"

"Nearly. Hell."

Piper glared.

He shrugged. "I don't know why people are so down on hell. It never rains; it's always hot; you can get a nice tan; there's plenty to do. You could be my assistant. Lots of perks with that job." He stuffed his hand in his pocket to adjust his swelling cock.

Oz was only half-serious, but Piper bit her lip as though she was considering it. "Can you save Keir?"

"Stop him from getting killed in the ring? Yes. I can do that."

She took a deep breath. "If you save Keir *and* Rhyl, I'd go with you to hell so you could get this power, so long as you brought me back."

Never going to happen. He held his breath.

"With one condition. I want a last night with them before I go."

"Done," Oz said. Tricked her, and for the first time, he didn't feel good about winning.

Piper hid her face. She thought she'd fooled him, but how could you know you'd tricked a demon? When he'd held her hand, the knowledge had come flooding into her head. Her mother. Her demon father. Her mother adding to the power she'd taken from Malin. Piper had steeled herself not to react. She didn't know why it was important Oz not know she'd understood all of it; she just felt it.

She had some sort of power he wanted, and now Piper had to work out a way to stop him getting it.

Chapter Twenty-two

Keir pushed open the door of the medical room, and the veterinarian, Bill Clarke, waved a hand in greeting. Reed followed Keir with Jardine close behind.

"I'm surprised to see you fighting again so soon," Bill said.

Keir stripped off his clothes and flung them on a chair. Reed picked them up and began to fold them. Keir's mouth twitched in a smile.

"And who's this?" Bill asked.

"My brother, Reed. Reed, this is Bill. He puts me back together after a fight."

"You don't heal?" Reed asked.

"Stitches help."

Keir sat naked on the examination table with his legs hanging over the side. Now he had to rely on Reed doing as he was told. Keir gave him a pointed look.

"Have you ever fought?" Reed asked Jardine.

"No."

"What about your friends?" Reed asked.

"Some." Jardine stared at Keir's cock.

"Is it true that vampires have to lose their heads or their hearts before they die—properly die, that is?"

"Yes."

For fuck's sake, Reed. Ask something that doesn't require a one-word answer.

"Do you think I'm cute?" Reed whispered.

Not that. Keir wanted to strangle him.

"You're kind of cute. Bit young for me," Jardine said and smiled.

"How old are you?" Reed asked.

"Fifty-seven."

Reed laughed and closed in. He nudged Jardine to the other side of the room. "I've never kissed a guy." His whisper was perfectly audible to Keir.

There was a bulge in Jardine's pants. This was *not* what Keir had in mind for his little brat-cat brother to try. He stood.

"Keep still." Bill tapped away at the keyboard to unlock Keir's tether.

Keir sat but tensed as Jardine backed Reed to the wall.

"Not in here," Reed whispered. "In the corridor."

Jardine grabbed Reed's elbow and whisked him outside. *Fuck*. Keir was torn between storming out of the room and hauling the vamp off his brother or following the plan.

"Bill, I need a favor," Keir whispered. "A big one. Reed has a tag around his ankle. Would you take it off?"

The vet swallowed hard. "Cuba—"

"Will never know." Keir didn't care that his desperation showed. "You didn't put the tag on him. You can say whoever did it made a mistake and didn't attach it properly. Please. He's fifteen years old. I need him out of here. I'm not sure I'll survive this time."

The man nodded, and Keir breathed a sigh of relief.

"By the way, there's something different about your tag," Bill said.

"Yeah, I know. The range was extended."

"A tracker's been added."

Tracker? Since when? Keir's jaw clenched. "I'll send Reed back to get something from my pocket."

He was about to ask Bill when the monitor had been changed, when Reed and Jardine came back in. The vamp had a broad grin on his face. Out of sight, Reed pretended to be sick. Keir glared at him.

"Your taste sucks, Reed," he snapped, then jumped from the table and strode out of the room.

"What a sweet, sweet little boy," Jardine whispered as Keir strode down the corridor with Reed on his other side.

Keir almost wanted Jardine to touch Reed, so that he could hurt him.

"Hey, wait for me."

Four words and Keir's scheme to rescue his brother came crashing around his ankles. Frick caught up with them.

"Damn, I forgot my lucky charm," Keir said. "In the pocket of my pants. Nip back and get it, would you, Reed?"

"You're not allowed anything in the ring," Jardine said.

"I know. I forgot to touch it three times."

Reed edged back.

"Frick, go with him," Jardine said.

Keir forced a laugh from his throat. "We can wait here. He's not going anywhere. Be quick."

Reed ran back down the corridor. No one followed. Keir's heart burned with anxiety.

"No way are you walking back down here tonight, pussycat," Frick said.

"Is that right?" Keir could hear his name being chanted, and nausea churned in his gut. He had to keep talking to keep their attention away from why Reed was taking so long. Keir turned to Frick. "Why do you hate me so much? It goes beyond me being a were and you being a vamp."

Frick stared Keir in the face. "Remember the first vamp you killed?"

Keir remembered everyone he'd killed. "No."

Frick didn't blink. "Leyton was the partner of my sire."

"Oh." Well, that explained a lot.

"You were supposed to lose," Frick growled.

Keir opened his mouth and then shut it again. Nothing he could say would make this better.

Reed raced up the corridor holding Rhyl's little fish. "I got it."

Keir wrapped his fingers around it and brought it to his lips. He kissed it. *Please let Reed get home safe*. Another kiss. *Please let Piper stay safe*. One last kiss. *Please let Rhyl be safe*. None left for Keir. He handed the fish to Reed. "Look after it." With his eyes he sent his brother the message to not fuck up, to do as he was told and run.

"Good luck," Reed whispered, and Keir saw the fear in his eyes.

"Don't worry." Keir ruffled Reed's hair.

When they reached the doors, Jardine took Reed to one side. "You stay with me."

Keir bent his head to the vamp's ear. "If you touch him, by the time I've finished with you, you'll be begging me to take out your heart."

He walked forward to meet his fate.

* * *

Piper shivered as she gazed at the fidgeting, chanting audience waiting for the fight to begin, waiting for someone to get killed. She wanted to stand up and scream at them, but since most of them were already yelling, they'd get the wrong idea. Oz lounged at her side, and she had no idea whether she could trust him.

Everything had gone wrong. She'd persuaded Oz to search Lam Hall with her, but they hadn't been able to find Keir or Rhyl. Piper had the distinct impression the demon knew where Keir was but wouldn't let them meet. She had no idea whether she could remember things, because she hadn't dared to let herself fall asleep. Oz hadn't taken his eyes off her. He kept touching her, stroking her arm, and Piper kept shrugging him off.

Had she been stupid in agreeing to go to hell with him if he helped her? Probably, but it had been all she could think of.

The daughter of an angel and a demon? Was that even possible? Would she—could she grow wings? How could she go to hell without dying? Piper shivered. Part of her wondered if she'd finally flipped her lid and gone stark, staring bonkers.

Then the doors opened on one side of the ring. Keir walked in with his longlegged grace, and every cell in her body tingled with joy, longing, and fear. She might not hold the memory of him in her head, but Piper knew she would do anything to keep him safe, and her heart ached. *Oh God*. Is this what love was?

He looked magnificent. Dark, handsome, and dangerous with the intricate tattoo climbing up his body from his ankle to his lower back. She felt her own tingle in response. Piper wished she'd finished the design so it swept all the way to his shoulder. Maybe it would have made him stronger. The ache in Piper's heart brought tears to her eyes. He *had* to win. *Sorry, werebear*. She watched as Keir's gaze scanned the spectators and came to rest on her. His mouth curved in a smile. Piper grinned back, put her fingers to her lips, and let out an ear-piercing whistle that soared above the clamoring crowd.

Oz clapped his hands over his ears. "Jesus wept."

A bald guy patted Keir down, and Piper wondered what he expected to find on a naked guy. He handed Keir a leather cloth to cover his important bits, and Keir never shifted his gaze from her while he tied it. Piper put her hand over the left side of her chest, screwed up her fingers, pretended to tug out her heart, and threw it to him.

Keir reached up and snatched air with his fist, then pressed his hand to his chest. There was a loud roar, and Piper was aware Keir's opponent had entered the ring, but Keir kept looking at her, and she kept her gaze on him.

Win. Win. Win. He had to. Let the werebear be some horrible guy so she didn't feel guilty wishing his death, but Keir *had* to win.

"Oh shit," Oz said. "Someone's screwed. Seems like Keir's going to need a hand."

Piper's stomach cramped. She didn't want to look at Keir's opponent.

The bell rang once, and Keir's gaze slid away. Piper glanced across the ring and let out a choked cry.

Rhyl.

She jumped to her feet, and Oz dragged her down.

"Don't worry. I won't let the crazy guy win," he said.

"No, don't interfere," she gasped. "Don't do anything."

Fear spread like an ink stain, smothering her ability to think. Piper's heart pounded. Rhyl struggled in the arms of three men who could barely hold him. The guy who was supposed to be checking him rushed his work as Rhyl snapped at him, fangs out. He thrashed and fought like a madman, snarling and howling while the cloth was fastened around his hips.

The bell rang twice. Rhyl fought even harder to get free.

"Is that by any chance your vamp?" Oz asked.

Piper nodded, her gaze switching constantly between the two men. Keir stood motionless, the color leached from his face. She could see him talking, but Rhyl was too wild to listen.

Three bells rang, and the guys holding Rhyl released him and fled. Rhyl flung himself across the ring and knocked Keir flat on his back. Half the crowd roared its approval; the other half groaned in dismay.

"No, no!" Piper shouted. "What's the matter with him?"

Oz leaned forward and put his mouth to her ear. "Bloodlust. He can't think; he can't reason; he can only act. They've teased him with blood before they brought him to the ring."

"No, it has to be more than that. Rhyl went four years with hardly any blood. He's acting like he doesn't even recognize Keir."

She wailed as Rhyl brought Keir down again. Piper could see Keir's mouth working, guessed he was trying to get through to Rhyl, but the vamp was crazed.

"Maybe there's something else at work here," Oz said.

Keir jerked away just as Rhyl snapped his jaws together.

"Do something!" Piper cried.

"All I can do is disable one so the other wins."

Her shoulders slumped. "Don't do anything."

She groaned as Keir crumpled again under Rhyl, the vamp's teeth almost in his neck before Keir threw him off. Piper jumped to her feet and forced her way down the tiered seating through the baying audience until she reached the first row of spectators. From there, it was a sheer drop into the ring.

"Stop it!" she screamed, and panic wrapped around her throat like a tightening noose.

If one killed the other, they wouldn't be able to live with the consequences, and how could she? Both men were bleeding, though Keir was doing little more than defend himself. Oz elbowed his way to her side. Rhyl and Keir rolled across the ring, Keir struggling to keep Rhyl's teeth out of his neck.

Keir is going to lose.

Piper felt an icy calm descend on her. Why wasn't he fighting?

"I don't love you."

She jolted when Keir's voice sounded in her head.

"I can't love you."

"I don't deserve your love."

Piper shivered as Keir's emotions flooded her mind. He felt her love and trust as a burden because he couldn't meet her expectations. How could he love her forever? How could he be faithful? He'd let her down, disappoint her. He didn't want her love.

No!

She gasped under the torrent pouring from Keir. He was going to let Rhyl kill him.

Piper couldn't let that happen.

"Rhyl!" she screamed. "Stop this."

"He can't hear you," Oz said in her ear. "He's deaf to everything but his need for blood. Not sure how they've managed to get him this riled up, though. Maybe drugs or they fucked with his memory, told him Keir did something bad to someone he loved."

"I have to stop them."

Oz said she had power, and she'd seen that. It had come before when she was angry, so where was it now?

Keir landed with a sickening *crunch* on the far side of the ring, and Rhyl stalked toward him.

"Maybe you can stop them," Oz said, his breath washing against her neck. "Why don't you try?"

Was this a trick? If she could find her power, would he snatch it before she could use it?

A boy followed by a dark-haired guy pushed his way to stand next to her. "Why is he losing? Keir, fucking fight him."

Piper glanced at the boy and gulped. He looked like a young Keir.

"You the were's brother?" Oz asked.

He nodded.

Keir lifted his head, locked eyes on his brother, and Piper felt and saw the devastation take him. In that moment's lapse, Rhyl brought him down and sank his teeth into his neck. The crowd roared.

"No!" Piper screamed and grabbed hold of the boy's hand.

As Rhyl sucked, Keir's arms fell limp, and he stopped struggling.

Piper felt as though she were in the middle of an earthquake with all her hopes and dreams tumbling around her. Her fingers tightened around those holding hers as she felt something inside her splinter.

Sound evaporated to a muffled blur, and movement around her ceased. The air vibrated until nothing remained in sharp focus and the entire room quivered like a mirage. Oz stared at her, the quirk of a smile on his lips but frozen like those around him. *Oh no, what did I do?*

"What's happened?" asked the boy.

Piper spun around.

He poked the vampire standing next to him. "He can't feel me." He turned back to Piper and tightened his hold on her. "Did you do this?"

This was her power? To send everyone to sleep? Only they weren't asleep. Oz's face had changed slightly, and Piper finally understood.

I've slowed down time.

OhmyGodohmyGod. It was impossible.

"What did you do?" the boy asked.

Why's Keir's brother not frozen too? "I don't know."

"If you let go of me, will I be like them?" His voice trembled.

Ah, that's why. Piper's chest hurt.

"Maybe if you touch someone they'll unfreeze," he said.

Good point. She flinched away from Oz just in case.

"If I let you go, promise to grab my hand again if I stop moving?" he asked.

"Okay. What's your name?"

"Reed."

Piper let him go. He didn't move. Then he stuck out his tongue and she wanted to throttle him.

"Cool," he said. "Let's get Keir." He launched himself over the edge of the seating area into the ring.

Piper followed and yelped when she landed heavily. What happened to her catlike skills?

"Hey, concentrate, or they move!" Reed yelled.

Piper waited until the air had diffused and then walked on leaden legs to where Keir and Rhyl lay. Reed pushed Rhyl away from his brother. When he raised his fist to thump the vampire, Piper knocked his hand aside. "Leave him alone."

"Put your hands on Keir; make him get up," Reed said.

Piper knelt in the sawdust and wiped the blood from Keir's neck with shaking fingers. She held his hand, kissed his lips, and pulled back. Nothing happened. His eyes remained closed, and his body motionless. *Oh God, had Rhyl killed him?*

"Try again. Another kiss."

One second before Piper registered it was Keir who'd spoken and not Reed.

Keir opened his eyes. He levered himself to a sitting position and clamped a hand over his bleeding neck. Piper tightened her grip on his other hand.

"I should be dead." Keir turned to his brother and narrowed his eyes. "You're so dead. I told you to run."

Piper glanced toward the audience. People had changed, moved fractionally. The hum in the air grew louder. She had no idea what she was doing.

Keir looked around in bewilderment. "What the fuck is going on?"

Piper's head throbbed, and she groaned. "We can move, and they can't. But not for long."

"Let him go," Reed said. "See what happens."

Piper moved her hand off Keir.

"Is someone going to explain?" Keir growled.

Reed and Piper sighed in unison.

"Get out of here," Keir snapped at Reed. "Into the woods and then shift. Stay out of sight and keep running."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"Anywhere away from here. Home."

"I don't—"

"I'll find you. Now go!" Keir shouted.

Reed ran.

The pain in her head was so bad Piper wanted to curl up in a ball and howl.

Keir knelt over Rhyl and let out a shaky sigh. "Is he really dead? I didn't want to hurt him."

"He's not dead," Piper whispered.

Keir stared at him. "Why isn't he moving?" His gaze rose to the crowd and fell back to Rhyl.

"Time's slowed down." Piper panted. Her arms and legs felt as if they were being covered in concrete, numbness creeping over her.

Keir gave a short laugh. "Christ. How did you manage that?" His smile fell away. "Tell me you didn't make a deal with Oz."

"You need to leave. You'll have to carry Rhyl. If I touch him and wake him, he'll try to bite your head off."

Keir struggled to his feet and staggered as he hoisted Rhyl over his shoulder. Piper's speck of hope that he could carry her too floated away. He'd reached the other side of the ring before he realized Piper hadn't followed. She hid her trembling hands.

"Come on," Keir urged.

Piper shook her head. "Get Plasmix for Rhyl. I'll meet you at Do Bad Things tonight."

"No," Keir said.

"I promise. Please go."

"No," Keir repeated.

"Please. I don't think I can walk yet. You can't carry me too. Go."

"I'll carry her."

Reed was back at his brother's side. Then he was at Piper's.

"Run," said Keir.

* * *

Oz looked beside him and then scanned the ring. No sign of Piper or the were's brother. Keir and Rhyl had gone. The place was in an uproar. How the fuck had they got away without him seeing? What had she done?

Shit, she'd figured it out and played with time. Smart girl.

Cuba walked into the ring and held up her hands for silence. It took a while for the noise level to subside.

"Honored guests," she said. "I apologize for this interruption to our entertainment."

"Where are they?" someone near Oz shouted.

Not here. Oz began to make his way to the back exit.

"Your werepuma was losing. You've tricked us," came another voice, and others shouted agreement.

Oz turned, and when he saw Sobel join Cuba in the ring, he leaned against the wall to watch. Piper could wait. Now that she'd used her power, he could find her. This could be interesting.

Sobel looked around. "A shambles."

"I have people looking for them. The fight will recommence shortly," Cuba said.

The vampire scoffed. "What? After your werepuma has healed?"

Vampires moved into the ring to stand behind Sobel. Oz watched Cuba's eyes flicker, looking around for the support of her familia.

"I'll refund the entrance fee!" she shouted.

"What about the bets? Going to cover all those?" Sobel asked.

"I-I'd need time."

Sobel shook his head. "You're out of the club. You've broken the rules."

"What about you? You were supposed to field a werebear, not a vampire!" she screeched.

"The were was injured. I'm allowed to substitute. Face it, Cuba. You couldn't stand to lose, so you used your...demonic power to spirit the pair out of here."

She turned to look into the audience. Oz knew who she was looking for and waved.

Cuba snarled, "He did it. He's trying to wreck things for me."

"He sat next to me the whole time." The voice belonged to Jardine.

Oh, this gets more and more interesting.

"You've lost control," Sobel said. "I said I'd keep quiet about the attacks and the police, but—"

More noises of alarm from the crowd and Oz realized Sobel had outplayed Cuba. He'd been waiting for this opportunity.

"The attacks are unconnected with Lam Hall," she said.

"A man was nearly mauled to death outside your gates. A barmaid was killed in town, and one of your familia remains a suspect. You ran from your last place because one of your familia went rogue, and you still don't have him under control. You're not fit to be a member of the club, let alone in charge."

Cuba gasped as her arms were pulled behind her back. Two of her guys, Oz noticed. Around him, several members of the audience were quietly making their way out. Oz wondered how many would stand by her.

"You didn't ask permission to live here," Sobel said. "This is *my* city, *my* territory. You just walked right in without showing any respect."

Oops. Oz tried not to grin.

"My familia—"

"Many of them were working for me. Now they will all work for me."

Oz could almost see the wheels turning and cogs clicking inside Cuba's brain. Sobel was probably behind the attacks. She'd lost. She dropped to her knees at Sobel's feet.

"Forgive me."

Well, lost temporarily, Oz thought. Knowing Cuba she'd already be plotting something, probably how to suck a vampire. He wondered if Sobel would fall for her charms.

Sobel pulled Cuba to her feet and wrapped an arm around her. Oz wanted to watch, but the pipes were calling.

Chapter Twenty-three

The moment Keir entered the corridor, Rhyl shifted in his grasp, opened his eyes, and snarled. *Sorry*. Keir let him partly drop, socked him hard in the jaw to knock him out, and scooped him up again. When they burst into the medical room, Bill jumped to his feet.

Piper wriggled out of Reed's arms. "I'm okay now. My head's clear again."

Keir put Rhyl on the table. "We need Plasmix."

To the vet's credit, he didn't hesitate. He yanked several bags out of the fridge and tossed them to Keir. As Rhyl stirred, Keir slapped a bag on his fangs.

"Let me feed him. Put some clothes on," Piper said.

"I'll watch him." Reed loomed over the vamp.

"Your neck." Bill reached toward Keir with a wipe.

"It'll be fine." Keir pulled on his pants and shoved his feet into his shoes. He didn't bother fastening his shirt.

By the third bag, Rhyl had calmed. He lifted Piper's hand and kissed her fingers, then grabbed another bag.

"We have to leave right now," Keir said. "Bill, get out. There's going to be trouble."

"Spare pants in that cupboard," the vet said as he gathered his things and fled.

Reed threw a pair of pants to Piper, and she helped an uncooperative Rhyl get them on.

"Hurry," Keir snapped as she pulled up the zipper.

Rhyl tossed another empty bag aside. "Must she?" He gave Piper a loopy grin.

"Fuck, he's blood drunk." Keir groaned.

He grabbed Rhyl's arm and yanked him out of the room. As the four of them emerged onto the corridor, the shouting in the arena grew louder.

"Run," Keir said and kept Rhyl upright and moving forward.

He expected them to be confronted before they got out, but the way to the exit was clear. Keir didn't intend to go back through the hall, but to leave the building as soon as possible and circle back to the garage block.

"Where are we going?" Reed asked.

"To get a car." Beyond that Keir had no idea. For the time being Reed would have to stay with them. They couldn't go back to Piper's apartment, so Keir had to think of somewhere else.

"There's someone...behind us," Piper panted.

Keir pushed open the outer door, and they poured out into the night, Rhyl now managing to run on his own. Keir saw nothing handy to use to block the exit so ran on. They reached the garage, and Keir slammed to a halt. *Oh fuck*. This was all he needed.

"Dad," Reed gasped.

Coben Sparks stood with several pack members around him. He opened his arms, and Reed ran into them. *Fucking cavalry and a brother with a short memory*. Keir stalked forward.

"Are you all right?" their father asked, ruffling Reed's hair.

"Yes, but Keir—"

"She didn't...touch you?" dear old Dad interrupted.

Keir clenched his jaw and pulled Rhyl by the elbow toward the garage. *Fine for Cuba to touch* me, *but not your precious Reed*.

"No, but Keir—" Reed tried again.

Keir knew Reed was wasting his time, and Keir wasn't going to waste his talking to a guy he didn't give a fuck about. Keir cast his gaze over the vehicles and pointed out a BMW to Piper. "Check there's keys in the ignition, and get Rhyl in the back. Then grab the keys from the other vehicles."

As Keir walked past his brother, he cuffed his head. "Next time do as you're told."

Reed stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out Rhyl's fish. Keir wrapped his fingers around it.

"See, it brought you luck," Reed said.

"You're right. Take care, kit. I'll come and see you soon."

Keir froze as his father put his hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"Keir. Son. I'm sorry." He moved round to stare Keir in the face.

Keir's jaw clenched tight. Sorry for what? Not believing me, not helping me, for letting Cuba use me?

His father tugged him to one side. "I'd heard about the fight club, came to see an event," he whispered. "I lost a lot of money. She made a deal. I was angry with you. I'm sorry."

Too fucking late. "I'd get out of here if I were you. Cuba's not going to be happy."

"Come with us. We want you back," his father said.

Us. We. Not you, Keir thought. He shrugged off his father's arm and stalked to the car.

"Keir. Your place is with your pack," his father called. "That should be where your loyalty lies."

"My loyalty belongs to those who show it to me," Keir said and got in the driver's seat.

As he sped down the drive toward the road, he looked in the mirror and saw the pack members watching. Behind them stood Oz.

"Are you okay?" Piper asked.

"Yeah. Are you?"

"I'm all right," Rhyl said. "Piper's lovely."

"Do you have any money or credit cards?" Keir asked.

"No purse," Piper said.

Keir bit his lip. "Any thoughts as to where we could hide for a while?"

"Do Bad Things?" She yawned.

"Hey, don't you dare go to sleep," Rhyl said.

"I haven't slept for so long," Piper whined.

Rhyl sniggered. "Then I'll have to find a way to keep you awake."

A moment later Piper giggled, and Keir smiled. He was beyond tired, but thinking about getting Piper naked between them kept sleep at bay. How safe would the tattoo parlor be? Between the three of them, safe enough, Keir decided.

He dropped Rhyl and Piper outside the parlor and drove the BMW to a payand-display car park on Lucy Tower Street and didn't pay and display. He ran back to Do Bad Things to find Hendrick just leaving.

"Thanks," Keir said.

"Piper's a good kid. She says you're okay, that you aren't involved in these attacks."

"No."

"Don't mess her around."

"Never."

Except Keir wanted to mess her around—in a good way. He bolted the door and turned to find Piper and Rhyl sitting on the floor eating fish and chips. Well, Rhyl was feeding Piper chips and staring at her mouth as she chewed.

"Hendrick got them for us from around the corner," Piper said. "Eat while they're hot. He said we can sleep upstairs."

Keir sat next to her and opened the white paper parcel. His stomach rumbled when he smelled the vinegar and the large battered fish.

"This belongs to you," Keir said and handed the little wooden fish to Rhyl.

Rhyl gave him a quizzical stare.

"When you disappeared from Piper's apartment, I took it. I thought..." He didn't want to finish the sentence—he'd wanted the fish in case that was all he had left of Rhyl.

Rhyl stroked the fish with his thumb and handed it to Piper. "Keep it safe and it will keep *you* safe."

Keir thought a gun firing silver bullets would be more useful but kept quiet and ate instead.

A short time later, he screwed up the paper and sighed.

"Wow, I've never seen anyone inhale food before," Piper said. "Apart from Rhyl. You two have so much in common."

She picked up another chip, and Keir watched as she bit down on it and chewed. *Oh yeah*, *I can see the fascination*.

"Hurry up," Rhyl whispered. "I can't wait much longer."

"What for? Oh." Piper laughed. "We do need to talk."

"We can talk later," Rhyl said. "Once you're lying safe between us."

"Not sure about the safe," Keir muttered.

"While I'm eating, you two can make upstairs comfortable since we're going to be sleeping there," Piper said.

"Not sure about the sleeping." Keir smiled.

Piper rolled her eyes. "Take the padded tops off the tables down here and put them in the spare room upstairs. Hendrick reminded me that there are no windows, but the fire escape leads from that room, so we have a way out if anyone comes."

Rhyl followed Keir into Piper's treatment room.

Rhyl caught hold of Keir's arm. "I am so sorry. They gave me something that made my head spin. Drugged the blood, I guess."

"How did Sobel know about you, find you? I was supposed to be fighting a werebear, and I looked across the ring and saw you."

"I don't know. They snatched me from Piper's apartment and held me in a cellar. I injured a shifter—I think maybe the one who was supposed to be fighting you—so I had to do it instead. They gave me enough blood to make me hungry, enough to make me fight for more. I sort of knew it was you, and I still couldn't help myself. If it's any consolation, I suspect I was trying to get blood rather than kill you."

"Except you'd have killed me to get it."

Rhyl let his hand fall. "Yeah."

Keir put his arms around Rhyl and hugged him. He felt the moment Rhyl knew he'd been forgiven, the tension leeching from his shoulders. Rhyl pulled his head back to look at him.

"You didn't fight back," Rhyl said. "You only defended yourself."

Keir jerked from his arms and yanked the pad off the table. "Yeah, well, I figured she'd be better off with you."

"What?" Rhyl gasped.

Keir lowered his voice. "I'm fucked-up enough without screwing up her life as well. I've never had a relationship that's lasted. I don't know how to make things last. I'll cheat on her, let her down. I don't want her love."

A muscle ticked in Rhyl's cheek. "You stupid, selfish wanker. What about me?"

Keir blinked. "What about you?"

"Don't I figure into this? Ever think about what I want?"

Keir's fingers tightened on the pad.

"I want you, and I want her. We're a team," Rhyl said.

"We've only known one another a few days," Keir snapped. "And she forgets us as soon as she falls asleep."

Rhyl's eyes darkened. "I don't care what...handicap Piper has. Even if she was a werepuma, I'd still want her."

Keir felt pinned in place by Rhyl's glare.

"What did you feel when you first saw her?" Rhyl asked. "And don't open your mouth if you're going to lie."

"That she was sweet," Keir whispered.

"More than that, coward. I knew the second I touched her that she was the one. Mine. My mate forever and ever. Yet vampires are like shifters in that we don't share mates. When we find the one, we're bonded for life. So explain why the moment I saw you, I knew I needed you in my life as well."

Keir tightened his jaw.

"I thought you had a stronger spine. We can help her. We can be her memory. If you won't, I will." He turned to walk out of the room and then turned back to stare straight at Keir. "In case you can't feel it, can't see it, and need to hear the words—I love you."

Rhyl stalked out, and Keir's head dropped. I am so fucked.

Piper knew something was wrong; she just wasn't sure what. Rhyl emerged from a treatment room scowling. Keir followed a moment later, his face pale, his shoulders down. Panic bubbled inside her. They *had* to love one another, because when Oz came to take her away—and she was certain that would happen—Piper needed to know the guys had each other. Plus—no way was she having this last night spoiled.

Keir carried the pad upstairs, and Rhyl emerged from the other room with a couple of blankets and pillows. He smiled at Piper. "Okay, angel?"

She grinned. I am a half angel. Piper cleared up the fish-and-chip papers and followed the guys upstairs.

"Wait one second," Rhyl said from inside the room.

Piper stripped off her clothes, left her notebook on the top of the pile and clutched the fish in her hand.

"Okay. Come in," Rhyl called.

She gasped when she opened the door. They'd found tea lights somewhere and placed them all over the room. Furniture had been pushed aside and the padded tops laid together on the floor and covered with blankets and pillows.

"Wow," Piper said, looking around.

"Wow," chorused Keir and Rhyl.

They were staring at her. Buck naked, they looked like a set of naughty twins, and Piper couldn't wait to play with them. Heat unfurled low in her belly, and her nipples tightened. She put the fish down, facing away, smiled and walked into their arms.

As if they'd choreographed the move, Keir slid behind her and Rhyl stepped in front. The rigid length of Keir's erection pressed into her butt as his fingers moved over her hips. Rhyl put his hands on Keir's shoulders, bent his head to brush his lips across Piper's, and she moaned. Another gentle sweep and she moaned again. Rhyl laughed.

Keir nuzzled her neck as Rhyl explored every inch of her mouth. She loved his taste, loved the feel of his body against her, all hard and male. With the press of an equally hard male at her back, Piper could do nothing but melt between them. Her heart gathered speed like a train as both men rubbed themselves against her. She had one hand on Rhyl's butt and the other angled back to reach Keir's, stroking firm flesh, smiling when they flinched as her fingers teased the crease of their backsides.

Then they swapped positions so that Keir stood in front of her. Emotion swirled in his eyes as he trailed his fingers along the line of her jaw before caressing her bottom lip with his thumb.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

As Rhyl licked her neck, Keir's mouth swooped down on hers and took possession. Keir was forceful where Rhyl had been gentle, and Piper returned what he gave, her tongue dueling with his while the muscles of her pussy began to contract in a slow rise and fall.

Rhyl used his teeth and lips to tease the place where her neck joined her shoulder. His hands slid over her hips to slip between her and Keir, and Piper could feel Rhyl touching Keir's cock, wrapping it in his fingers, and then pressing the wet head against her belly.

Piper ran out of air, and Keir pulled back, breathing heavily. She leaned against Rhyl's chest, one of his hands keeping her in place while he used the other to caress Keir's cock. His shaft was rigid, rising straight up, parallel to his belly. Rhyl made a fist around the base and squeezed, then dragged his hand to the tip and back down until a bead of precum formed at the slit. Piper watched in

fascination as the swollen veins that traced Keir's cock throbbed under the pressure.

"Oh God," Keir moaned. "I need a distraction."

When Rhyl's hand settled around Keir's cockhead and tightened, Keir reached for Piper's nipple and squeezed it between his fingers. She whimpered and scooped up the bead of Keir's precum and smeared it around his nipple, the hard nub sliding under her touch.

"I can't—"

Two of her fingers shut him up. Keir's eyes closed, and Piper watched the muscles of his belly contract and relax as he sucked. When she pulled out of his mouth and dropped her hand to grasp his cock above Rhyl's fingers, Keir shuddered. A thick string of precum dripped from the head.

"Enough," Keir gasped, and Rhyl pulled her hand away with his. Keir gave a sigh of relief, and his lips curved in a smile. "You do sometimes do as you're told," he muttered, his eyes half-closed.

Rhyl cupped her breasts, kneading her nipples with his thumbs, and she groaned.

He lowered her to the floor, and Keir followed them down.

They laid her on her back, and both men had their mouths around her breasts, hands caressing her belly. Piper's overloaded brain switched off to everything except what they were doing. Nothing else mattered. On sensory overload, every touch, every lick, every nip sent pulses of electricity shooting through her until she was a tangled knot of jangling nerves. They licked wet paths to her hips and bit down gently while they spread her legs wide. All the time, their fingers toyed with her breasts. They didn't echo the other's actions. They worked in harmony as if they knew what the other intended to do before they did it. Her pleasure was doubled, as was her torment. Piper threaded her fingers through their hair, struggling to draw air into her lungs.

Two mouths blew on her clit, and she squeaked.

"All pink and pretty," Rhyl whispered.

"And wet, wet," Keir murmured. "You smell divine."

The insides of her thighs were soaked with her cream. Oh no, am I dripping?

"Who gets first taste?" Rhyl asked.

Piper didn't care, so long as they made her come—fast. And hard. And more than once. A lot more than once.

"Well?" Rhyl asked.

She lifted her head and looked at the faces staring at her. "You're asking *me*? I can barely remember *my* name, let alone yours."

Piper dropped back, and they laughed. The rush of air over her clit made her hips twitch, but they pushed down, kept her where they wanted.

"Take turns." She gulped.

It was Keir's head that dropped between her legs, her fingers still twisted in his hair. *Oh God, his tongue*. Hot, long, and slightly rough, he fluttered it over her clit until Piper's jerky cries merged into a trembling moan. Then Rhyl's tongue circled and pressed as the muscles in her core contracted and relaxed.

Now Keir and Rhyl. Her legs pushed wide, they shifted position, shifted her so they could both tease her. A tongue pushed in and out of her pussy as another tongue teased her clit, and Piper sprinted faster and faster to shoot over the finish line, where she collapsed and fell apart. Her eyes were screwed so tight she could see lights flashing, and her body shook with the intensity of the orgasm. She released a long sigh as she began the slide into downtime bliss.

Bliss disturbed. Her eyes snapped open. Keir's fingers were stroking in and out of her pussy, her muscles rippling to keep them inside her.

"I can't, I can't—Oh maybe I can," she said.

Keir chuckled. Rhyl lay on his side, stroking his balls, and Piper beckoned with one finger. He leaned over and used his wet cockhead to paint her lips. When she reached for his shaft, he pulled back.

"If you touch me, I'll come in an instant. Hands by your sides or pull Keir's hair."

Piper put the fingers of one hand in Keir's hair and laid the other hand over Rhyl's thigh. His muscles quivered when she stroked his skin.

He tsk-tsked. "No higher."

Piper opened her mouth wide, and Rhyl's eyes glazed over. She loved that she had this power. Forget any other sort. To be able to drive a guy wild with a look? Wasn't that the best thing ever? She ran her tongue all the way around her open mouth, and Rhyl let out a strangled groan.

When Rhyl's cock hovered within reach, Piper licked the rounded head. The silky-textured precum made her mouth water. Her tongue rode the ridge of his cock, and she gently sucked while Rhyl gasped. Not able to use her hand to pull him deeper, Piper lifted and lowered her head, tightening her mouth as she dropped down. Rhyl's eyes darkened as he stared at her.

Keir's wet finger pressed on her anus, and Piper moaned around Rhyl's cockhead. It was almost impossible to concentrate on what she was doing to Rhyl while Keir's fingers, tongue, and nose played tag between her legs. Even the brush of his hair sent frissons of pleasure fluttering through her. He pressed and teased the resistant hole until his slippery finger pushed through the restrictive muscle to slide deep inside her. As he pulled and pushed his fingers in and out of both entrances to her body, Piper's heart began the countdown for takeoff. Rhyl withdrew from her mouth and trailed his wet cock over her face, tracing the line of her jaw, the curve of her cheekbone.

"Oh God. God." Piper gulped each word.

Maybe Oz wouldn't come for her. Piper didn't want to give this up, give them up. Each time her muscles clenched, the vibrations rippled through her. Tighter and tighter until her body jerked, her back arched, and she broke.

Can't breathe.

Can't move.

Piper heard herself scream.

The guys cuddled her as she came down, planting gentle kisses on her cheeks.

"You're perfect," Keir whispered.

"And ours," Rhyl added.

Piper looked from one to the other. "I wish we could stay like this. I wish this never had to end."

It was what Rhyl wished for too, but he worried the shifter would slip away while he slept. Something was eating at Keir, and until he'd opened his heart, he'd never be theirs.

"I like making you come," Keir said. He ran his hand over the top of her chest. "You go all pink and rosy."

"I like watching you come," she whispered. "Both of you."

Rhyl *loved* watching and making them come. Did they *both* have a problem admitting being in love? He reached for Keir's cock and rubbed the rounded head between his finger and thumb. A tease with his nail and Keir sucked in a breath.

"Can we torture Keir now?" Piper asked.

"Hey, what we did to you wasn't torture," Keir said.

"Then you won't mind if we do the same to you." Rhyl moved over Piper to flip Keir onto his back.

Keir's cock looked dark and angry, much like his own. Rhyl had a feeling the pair of them had been playing some unspoken game of I'm Not Going to Come First. Before Rhyl could lower his head to lick the glistening cockhead, Piper beat him to it.

"Dear God," Keir muttered.

"Doesn't she have the sweetest mouth?" Rhyl whispered. "All soft and hot." He leaned over Keir and kissed Piper, running his tongue over hers before pulling back to nibble her lip. "You taste perfect."

"Fish and chips and vinegar?" Piper asked and wrapped her lips around Keir's cock.

Rhyl smiled. "Never eat anything else."

"Ahem? Can we add a couple of things to that list?" Keir nodded toward his cock, half buried in Piper's mouth.

Rhyl slid down so his face was opposite Piper's, Keir's shaft between them. She let Keir's cock out of her mouth with a gentle *pop*, and Rhyl trailed the tip of his tongue from Keir's balls up to the head. Piper stared into his eyes and copied him.

"Oh fuck, fuck, fuck," Keir groaned.

They licked in opposite directions. They licked in the same direction. They shared Keir's precum, swapping the silken drops from one mouth to another until Piper stole it. She gave it to Keir, and when Rhyl saw the shifter's balls draw up, he wrapped his hand around the base of Keir's cock and pressed down. While Piper was busy at Keir's mouth, Rhyl deep throated his cock. One long swallow to take him to the back of his throat. One advantage of being a vampire—breathing wasn't an issue, and Rhyl only did it out of habit to fit in. He used his tongue to tease Keir as he tightened and relaxed his mouth around Keir's cock.

"That is so hot," Piper whispered.

Whether her fingering her clit was conscious or not, Rhyl's reaction matched Keir's. Their fists clenched so tight their knuckles turned white.

"My balls," Keir groaned.

Rhyl couldn't wait any longer. His cock was desperate to find a warm, safe home. He wanted to fuck Keir and for Keir to fuck Piper. Only Keir was such an alpha. It worried Rhyl. He couldn't always be the sub. They had to share the lead. He raised his head from Keir's cock and looked into his eyes, not wanting to voice the question.

"Fuck me," Keir said, and Rhyl's heart somersaulted with joy.

He grabbed the lotion he'd found in one of the treatment rooms and tipped Keir onto his side. Keir lifted and bent his upper leg to give Rhyl better access and turned his head to look up at him. Rhyl tipped up the bottle over his palm and squeezed. Keir's eyes were so dark, framed by thick lashes. Rhyl could have stared at him forever.

"I think that's enough," Piper said.

Rhyl glanced at his overflowing palm and laughed. He slapped the handful of lotion on Keir's butt and was rewarded with a yelped "that's fucking cold."

"I'll warm it up."

Rhyl plastered himself against Keir's butt and rubbed his hips into the gloopy liquid. Piper came up behind him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"That is so sexy," she whispered and bit his ear.

The shudder of delight that ripped through Rhyl's body almost made him come. He dragged himself under control but knew he wouldn't last long. Rhyl angled his cock back to press against the dark, starry pucker of Keir's anus, and when he felt Keir inhale, he pushed. The ring of muscles relaxed to let him in, and then it was a long, slow glide until he was buried deep with Piper panting on his neck.

"Oh fuck," Keir whispered. "Piper, come here. Get your back against my chest."

Rhyl wasn't going to wait; his cock wouldn't let him. He withdrew from Keir and then thrust back inside him. When Keir flexed the muscles of his ass, the sensation was exquisite. As Rhyl rocked into him, he watched Keir position Piper. He lifted her leg, and when Rhyl thrust forward, Keir slid his cock into Piper's pussy.

Piper groaned and turned her head to kiss Keir. Rhyl dropped his head and kissed them both. *Mine*. They might not want to admit it, but it was true. He pulled back and pushed harder into Keir's ass, his action shoving Keir into Piper. Rhyl quivered with excitement. It was like he was fucking her as well.

It took Keir a moment, but he began to thrust his ass back into Rhyl so the shunt into Piper was even harder. Keir held her tight—one hand between her legs—and Rhyl slid his hands over Keir's shoulders to hers. Orgasm boiled in his groin. Shock waves of ecstasy rolled from his head, down his spine to his balls. Rhyl powered faster and harder, felt the moment the switch tripped to release his cum, and then he was spurting into Keir, knowing Keir was emptying his balls into Piper.

Rhyl shuddered with the strength of the spasms. He felt as though his whole body was emptying, and in a way it was. He poured every ounce of his love into his actions and pulled both Keir and Piper into his arms. He would not let them go. Ever.

Chapter Twenty-four

Piper looked at the two men sleeping on either side of her and smiled. She was exhausted, drifting in a haze of sensual delight, but determined not to risk closing her eyes. They didn't even stir when she wiped them down with warm towels, though Keir arched into her touch and purred deep in his throat, and she had to swallow her laugh.

She wished she *could* laugh, but danger still threatened her and the guys. Oz would come for her. He wanted Malin's power. Now that Oz knew she had it, he wouldn't let her go. It wouldn't be hard for him to figure out where she was. There hadn't been any point in trying to hide. Piper wasn't sure if anyone else would be looking for Keir and Rhyl, though with the monitor off his ankle, Keir could run. But when Oz came, Piper had to make sure the guys didn't get hurt trying to protect her.

How long did she have? Piper didn't know, but she wasn't going to waste it. It took her a while to find them, but she brought the box of chalks upstairs and began work on the wall. Not that Piper thought there was much chance of fooling a demon, but she wouldn't go without a fight.

When she'd finished, she went to the main door of the room and stared at the wall opposite. Had it been worth the effort? She'd have to wait and see. Piper blew out all but a few of the tea lights and lay down at Rhyl's side.

He wrapped his arm around her. "What have you been doing?" He sniffed. "You smell...talcum powder?"

Keir stirred and opened his eyes. Rhyl pulled him into the embrace.

"Did you sleep?" Keir asked her.

Piper shook her head. "Not tired," she lied. Oh God, don't let this be the last time I lie with them.

"Those dark rings say otherwise," Keir whispered.

Piper squeezed his fingers. "I'm okay."

"I have never been happier," Rhyl said in a quiet voice. "I love you both."

Piper snuggled closer, the lump in her throat threatening to choke her. "I love you both too."

Keir edged away, and Rhyl yanked him back. "What's wrong with you?"

"Don't love me," Keir said, his face tense.

Rhyl frowned. "Why not?"

"Because I'll let you down. It's what I do."

"You're wrong," Piper said. "Did you let Rhyl down when you knew Oz was looking for him?"

"Who's Oz?" Rhyl stroked her head.

"Demon of lust. He came here looking for some power left after Malin died," Keir said.

Rhyl sat up so fast Piper's head dropped to the blanket. "Malin's dead?"

Keir nodded. Piper had forgotten Rhyl didn't know.

"Dead." Rhyl's shoulders slumped. "I feel cheated. I wanted to kill him slowly and painfully for what he did to me and my brother."

She hated the fact that Malin was her father, that she could be related to someone so evil.

"Oz thought you had the power," Keir said to Rhyl. "He wanted me to track you."

"You didn't give Rhyl up." Piper pushed herself upright. "You went to get Plasmix when he needed it. You came back with more Plasmix. You went looking for him after he was snatched. How is any of that letting him down?"

Rhyl looked into Keir's eyes. "What is it?"

Keir pressed his lips together and shook his head.

"Something to do with your father?" Rhyl asked.

Piper thought Rhyl was right. From the exchange at Lam Hall, it was clear there were issues between them.

"I let my brother down. I let myself down," Keir whispered. "I killed my stepmother."

Oh good grief. Piper forced herself not to recoil, but her heart ached. What had he done?

Rhyl glanced at her and then took Keir's hand and stroked it with his thumb. "An accident?"

Keir wrenched free and snorted. "I strangled her. I didn't start intending to kill her, but once my hands were around her throat, I remember not wanting to stop. By the time I did want to stop, it was too late." His jaw twitched.

How badly she must have hurt him. Piper bit her lip so she didn't cry. What kind of hell had Keir been living in? Oh God, we've all had our own kind of hell to deal with. Piper might have had a heavenly childhood, but she couldn't even remember it.

"What did she do to you?" Piper whispered and moved over Rhyl to lie on Keir's other side and press herself against him. Rhyl lay down again.

"Doesn't matter," Keir muttered.

"Of course it matters. We care about you, and she hurt you," Piper said.

"People are always hurting me," he snapped. "You don't strangle people because they hurt you."

"That depends," Rhyl said. "Malin made me watch while he raped my brother. He made my brother watch while he raped me. He threatened to kill some poor innocent if we didn't accept his sexual perversions. This was a guy we'd willingly fucked when we met him. We trusted him. After he threw me away, I spent a long time planning how to kill him. It's amazing how inventive fury can make you. What did your stepmother do?"

Keir stared straight at him. "She crawled into my bed and put her mouth around my dick when I was too small to stop her. She threatened to tell my father if I didn't fuck her. Threatened to fuck my brother if I didn't come to her bed willingly. I-I had to pretend. I thought I was saving Reed, and then she started with him. When I threatened her, the bitch accused me of being jealous. She wouldn't shut up. Said she'd keep fucking Reed and there was nothing I could do about it. My hands were somehow around her neck, and I squeezed and squeezed until she did shut up."

Piper had pressed herself as close to him as she could, but Keir was rigid with repressed emotion. Even his voice was low and strained.

"Reed had tried to speak out for me before, but this time he didn't. I'd killed our stepmother—his mother. All our father saw was that I'd continued fucking my stepmother after promising it was over, and when she threatened to tell, I killed her. He made some arrangement and sent me to fight for a demon until my marque was complete. Turns out, he'd been to the fight club and lost money he didn't have. So he offered me instead. Idiot that I am, I thought if I survived the completion of my marque, I could leave. That was never the plan. He thought I'd die."

"Your father knows the truth now," Piper said.

"Yeah, and when he didn't suggest coming to rescue me, Reed came on his own."

Rhyl stroked his cheek. "The pack wants you back."

"They can go fuck themselves. I don't need them. I don't need anyone."

"But we need you," Rhyl whispered. "We love you and want you. You leave, and it will destroy us. Please, Keir. We need you with us."

Keir's eyes opened wider. "Even—"

"Even though you've a tendency to cough up hair balls," Rhyl said.

Keir's lips twitched.

"Plus, there's one thing I'm curious about. Can you lick your balls?" Rhyl asked, and Keir clouted him.

Piper tucked herself tighter behind Keir and put her chin on his shoulder. Oh God, Rhyl has convinced Keir we are a three, and I might be about to leave them a two.

"You don't want to hurt Malin's family, do you?" she asked Rhyl, her heart pattering like hail on a tin roof.

"I don't hold others responsible for the actions of an individual," Rhyl said and then frowned. "Why?"

"Guess who my father is?"

"Van Helsing?" Keir asked.

Rhyl raised his eyebrows.

Piper took a deep breath. "I didn't know until last night. I wasn't holding out on you. Oz said...Malin raped my mother."

"Oh Christ," Rhyl whispered.

"She kept me with her for fourteen years and then had to give me up. Neither of us was allowed to remember the other, except Oz thinks something went wrong and that's why I can't remember from day to day. He said now that I know the truth, it might not happen anymore." *Maybe*.

Rhyl lifted her between them and kissed her. "I never thought I'd ever have anything to thank Malin for, but now I see I was wrong."

"You're part demon? What's the other part?" Keir asked.

Piper grinned. "Angel."

"Holy shit," Keir gasped.

"Holy fuck," Rhyl blurted at the same time.

Keir gaped at her. "I thought you'd made some sort of deal with Oz and persuaded him to slow time, but you're the one with the power. Oh fuck, it's you Oz wants."

"Explain," Rhyl said, his gaze flicking between them.

"Until a few days ago," Piper said, "I was just normal—well, apart from the memory thing, and then I flew over Arthington Manor and felt something happen. Not much happens in my life—I can't afford to let it—but I knew I needed to go there. So after I'd landed, I drove to Arthington. I found Rhyl, and I also found my power."

"Though you didn't know you had it," Keir said.

"No. Well, yes, a bit. I was faster, I could hear better, see better. Remember I managed to jump out of the path of that car? And I didn't hurt myself when I fell from the trunk of the other car? That's not normal. Then a few hours ago, I learned that after she'd been raped, my mother took part of Malin's power and added some of her own and gave it to me. Malin's death triggered something, maybe released the part I was supposed to get, and I discovered accidentally, when Oz was annoying me, that I could slow down time."

"That's how you got into the ring without causing a riot," Keir said. "You really *are* an angel."

"I think I like being a bit of both." She trailed her fingers up Keir's cock. "Naughty and nice. Only I do have a problem. I did sort of make a deal with Oz."

Keir groaned. "And don't think that groan was because you're stroking the best bit of my body. Making a deal with a demon can never be a good thing. Oz is very, very dangerous."

The door swung open, and a fan of light spread across the floor. "Did someone call? We made a deal, and I'm here to collect."

Piper clenched her fists. Rhyl and Keir scrambled to their feet and pushed Piper behind them. She caught hold of their arms and edged between them. Oz looked her up and down and whistled.

"Oh, you and I could have made some sexy magic, sweetheart."

"What's this deal?" Rhyl asked.

"If I saved you and Keir, then she could have one last night with you before I took her to hell to retrieve the power she's stolen."

"And brought me back again," Piper added.

Oz smiled, and she saw the truth in his eyes.

"He won't bring you back." Keir tightened his grip on her arm.

"Only you didn't save them. I did," Piper said. "So the deal's off."

Oz glared. "Not so fast. If I hadn't made you remember you had a power, you wouldn't have been able to save them."

Piper's heart pounded. That was true. "It doesn't change the fact that you didn't keep them safe; I did."

"You told me not to. I offered to save one, and you told me to do nothing."

She felt Rhyl and Keir press against her, their arms holding her tight. Piper felt as desperate as them. She had one trick, but how could she hope to fool a demon?

"Tell you what," Piper said. "See those doors? Choose the one that takes us out of here, and I'll come with you."

"No," Rhyl snapped and stepped toward Oz.

Piper pulled him back. "It's okay. Let him choose."

"Why the fuck should I? I could kill these two and take you anyway," Oz said with a smile.

"You said I had to go to hell willingly. I won't unless you choose correctly." She gestured to the wall, to two doors.

"Piper," Rhyl said. "Don't—"

She put her finger against his lips.

"The left," Oz said.

Piper nodded. "Open it."

He frowned. "What's the trick? You going to slow time so they can get away?"

She shook her head. "They wouldn't go without me."

Oz stepped toward the door on the left and at the last moment grabbed the handle of the one on the right. Well, tried to, Piper corrected.

"What?" Oz gasped and reached for the handle of the other and touched nothing. He turned and glared. "There *is* no fucking door."

Keir laughed.

"Yes, there is." Piper wrapped her hand around a nonexistent shelf carrying a nonexistent vase of flowers and pushed down. The emergency exit opened, and the sound and smell of the night flooded in.

She'd chalked over the real door and created the illusion of the other two but was still surprised she'd fooled him.

"A cheap trick. Okay, so you won't come willingly. I'll just drag you. That power has to come back to hell." Oz paced in front of them. "The power isn't yours. You can't keep it. Slowing time is big, really big. You can't hang on to something like that."

Piper wasn't sure she wanted to. "I didn't steal it," she muttered.

"Course you did," Oz snapped.

"Can't you just take it from her?" Rhyl asked.

Oz stopped pacing. "If I do it here, on this plane, it might kill her. That's why I'm taking her to hell. The portal's open and waiting."

Both guys stepped in front of her again.

Oz shook his head. "I don't need to lift a single finger to destroy you both. Your courage is touching but futile. I was sent here to do a job, to retrieve power left behind when Malin was destroyed. I can't go back without it, without Piper."

"You'll take her over our dead bodies," Rhyl snapped.

"Probably," Oz said.

Despair welled in Piper's heart. She'd done her best, but she wouldn't let the guys die trying to help her. Could she slow time again and save them? Let Oz take her. Piper was filled with a deep sadness that her mother's gift had led to—*Oh my God*. Hope rose again to burst on her face in a broad smile.

Piper wriggled between her bristling guys. "I'm quite willing to let you have the power that belonged to Malin, but you have to leave the power my mother gave me. That wasn't included. The two parts are entwined to make a whole. Know who gave me what?"

As realization sank in, Oz's face began to turn color, brown to red to deep purple. He ran his hands over his head, scratched his hair, and exhaled noisily. The color faded again, back to tanned flesh.

Piper wondered if he'd been feeling for horns.

"Way to go, Piper." Rhyl slung his arm over her shoulder.

"Very clever, but how did you know your mother gave you power too?" Oz asked.

"I know what you found inside my head last night. I said I didn't, but I lied. Blame the demon side of me."

He gave a short laugh. "You still have to come with me. That sort of power is not allowed at your level, halfling."

Piper hadn't thought he'd just give up.

"Is there some sort of punishment for dragging an angel into hell when she's done nothing wrong?" Keir asked.

Oz sighed. "Probably, even though she's only half an angel. But Piper is right. I can't split the power. The boss is not going to be happy, but I have a feeling that she'd make his life very difficult if I took her back."

If? Piper dared to hope. "I'd be so sweet, he'd choke," she said.

"You really are something special," Oz said. "In fact, the three of you are the most enticing trio I've ever seen." He drew closer to Rhyl. "Ever tasted pure demon blood? You think you've had great orgasms? Suck and fuck me, and you'll feel like your head's going to explode. I can make you believe you're in the sun. I could rock your world. What do you say?"

Rhyl smiled. "Won't work, demon. I've tasted the blood of an angel and demon. Mixed with a proud cat, there *is* nothing better. My head already explodes when these two make me come. I'm happy and want nothing more than them in my life."

Oz sighed. "Oh fuck. I do hope I haven't lost my touch. What about you, Keir? Like me to stay for one hour or a thousand? I daresay these two won't be able to give you *everything* you need, but you know that I can. I have the touch, and you love the feel, the bite, the pain. I can take you to the edge and keep you there. Will they do that for you?"

"Yes, they will," Keir said quietly.

Oz inclined his head in a bow. "Seems I'll have to make do with Cuba. She's pathetically eager to please at the moment. I'm a bit hurt that she's more frightened of Sobel than she is of me."

"You're taking her back to hell? I thought that was where she wanted to go," Keir said.

"It is, but I figure she's done enough damage on this side. She brings out the worst in people."

"What happened after we'd gone?" Piper asked.

"Turns out Sobel was pissed off that she settled in his territory without asking permission. His vampires and shifters wormed their way into her familia and started causing trouble. Jardine killed the barmaid and attacked Neil. Frick carried out the attacks in the previous location."

"Fucking hell." Keir exhaled noisily.

"Are they being punished?" Piper asked.

Oz laughed. "Cuba seems to have implanted Sobel with the suggestion that the pair fight each other in the ring. I might come back to watch. But not Cuba. She's going to have to start at the bottom again. Well, better get going. She's waiting at the portal."

"Where is it, as a matter of interest?" Piper asked.

"Burger King." Oz grinned. "I've an order for twenty flame-grilled burgers to go. The boss might take pity on me if I take him a strawberry shake." He turned at the door. "You know, I could stay for a while. Spice things up. Four has to be better than three. Think of the possibilities. We—"

"No," they said together.

Oz stepped outside, and Piper closed the door. She turned to face the guys.

"You were amazing," Rhyl said.

Keir sighed. "I am so turned on by an intelligent, bossy female."

"We have a future." Rhyl pulled Piper and Keir into his arms.

"I'll settle for a present." Keir dropped to his knees and pressed his face against Piper's belly.

"Two hours before the sun's up," Rhyl said.

"Nowhere near long enough," Keir muttered.

He pulled Piper down, and Rhyl came with her so she was sandwiched between them.

"I love you so much," Rhyl whispered. "You"—he kissed Keir—"and you." He kissed Piper.

Tears sprang into her eyes. She'd almost lost this, lost them. "I love you, Rhyl, and I love you, Keir." She smiled. "I like saying that. I love you. I love you."

Keir groaned. "Mine," he gasped.

"Yep, we're yours," Rhyl said.

Piper pushed Keir onto his back and straddled him. "Except I'm in charge."

Rhyl tucked up behind her, his cock pressing into her back. "Except when I'm in charge."

Keir laughed as he lifted Piper onto his rigid shaft and pulled her down. "She's got us both under her thumb."

Piper groaned at the thick invasion of his cock. She tightened her muscles around him, and Keir sucked in a breath.

"Yes yes yes. You feel so perfect." Keir lifted her by the waist until only the tip of his cock remained inside her, and then slowly pulled her down. They groaned together. "So perfect. I'm not sure I can do that again without spurting inside you. Lie flat for a minute while I talk persuasively to my balls. You know what a charmer I am. Won't take more than an hour."

She chuckled. "Funny guy."

"Am I?" His face lit up.

"Hilarious," she said and lowered her face to kiss him. Keir's fingers drew patterns on her hips as he nibbled around her mouth. When Rhyl leaned over and licked all the way down her spine, Piper jerked.

"Oh God, don't move," Keir gasped.

Rhyl didn't stop at her butt. He licked down the crease, flicking his tongue against her skin like a snake. Keir's breathing changed, his fingers began to dig into her hips, and she guessed Rhyl was licking his balls. Piper smiled as she plunged her tongue into Keir's mouth while he panted and moaned. When Rhyl teased her anus with his tongue, pressing and circling, she echoed the movements in Keir's mouth.

Keir's hands were flat on her backside, spreading her cheeks to hold her in place. Piper's stomach tightened with expectation. Rhyl opened her up with slippery fingers and pushed his tongue inside her. *This is my naughty side*. Which sin was this? Lust? Piper really wanted this. Gluttony? She didn't want it to stop. She tried to move her hips, to get Keir to move his cock, but he pinned her with a growl.

Rhyl pulled back, and Piper was about to mourn the loss when she felt the cold drip of liquid slither down the crease of her butt, followed by the press of Rhyl's cockhead.

"I love you," Rhyl whispered as he pushed against her.

Piper's heart pounded as Rhyl kept up the pressure, his hips rocking into her as he slowly penetrated her tight passage. Keir's tongue gently stroked hers, and the contrast between the painful-sweet invasion of Rhyl's thick cock and the delicate thrust of Keir's inventive tongue flipped her into sudden orgasm. Her chest tightened, her muscles spasmed, and both guys groaned.

Keir slid his hands to her breasts and squeezed as Rhyl slipped the rest of the way inside her.

"Oh God," Rhyl gasped. "Don't do that clenching thing again without warning me."

Piper gave a choked laugh.

"Don't do that either," Keir said.

She tightened all her muscles, and they growled.

"Hold still," Keir pleaded.

"Too late for still," Rhyl said and began to drive into her.

Keir picked up the rhythm, sliding her body up his cock as Rhyl filled her, then driving her down as Rhyl withdrew. The room filled with the sounds of them fucking—their alternating moans, the slap and suck of wet flesh, and Piper's increasingly breathy cries.

She could feel the guys getting close to coming, their cocks swelling inside her. Keir struggled to keep his eyes open, the strain on his face a testament to desperation warring with desire. He pulled Piper down, pressed his mouth against her neck, and nipped her. Orgasm roared through her again as Keir erupted inside

her, his hot semen flooding her pussy. She felt Rhyl on her back, his mouth on the side of her throat, and Piper gasped as his fangs pierced her flesh.

They continued to rock into her, and Piper's body moved up a gear, her climax ebbing and flowing as they moved faster, harder, deeper. Keir lifted her from his mouth, and Piper watched his gaze shift to Rhyl. He nodded once, and Rhyl licked her neck and moved to one side to bite down on Keir's throat. Impossibly, she felt both guys come again, their cocks jerking inside her, and Piper's body contracted to caress them.

I wish this could go on forever. Piper cried out in ecstasy as lightning-fast pulses of energy flashed into her core. Her chest felt so tight she thought she might be having a heart attack, and in a way she was. She loved them so much.

"Oh Christ," Keir cried. "My back. What the fuck?"

Mine too. Piper's lower back pulsed as she continued to come. Keir rolled them so they lay on their sides. Their cocks stayed inside her.

One last explosion into bliss that they somehow managed to achieve together and Piper was carried away on hot waves of pleasure.

"Look," Keir whispered. "What the hell is happening?"

He withdrew from her and lifted her off Rhyl.

Their tattoos were shifting, rippling, dancing. Keir trailed his fingers through the smoky ribbons rising from Rhyl's back. Rhyl pulled Piper tight in the middle, and the black lines and curls seemed to shift between them, move in the air to merge and blend on their skin.

"Trueblood bondmarks," Rhyl said. "We're meant to be together."

"Forever," Keir added.

Piper could feel the world sliding away. Exhausted and sated, she could no longer hold on to consciousness. *No, no.* But even as she fought it, her eyes fluttered closed.

"Remember me," Piper whispered.

* * *

She heard voices.

"When is she going to wake up?"

"I don't know."

"How long is she going to sleep? Do you think she's okay? Should we wake her?"

"Keir, one more question and I'll thump you. I don't know any better than you."

"Do you think—Sorry."

She opened her eyes to find two gorgeous guys staring down at her.

"Are you okay? Do you remember us? Are you going to panic? Ouch. What did you do that for, Rhyl?"

"I told you I'd thump you if you asked another question. I counted three." She smiled.

"Do you remember us?" they asked together.

"You're the guys I love."

Their faces lit up in smiles.

"Bill and Eric," Piper said.

And they pounced.

Epilogue

Keir stared at Rhyl, who was watching him through the driver's mirror. The little wooden fish dangled from a chain beneath.

"When are you going to say it?" Rhyl asked.

"When the moment's right." Keir began to chew his nail.

Rhyl sighed. "How many right moments do you need? You had a perfect—"

"I'll know. Shut up. She's on her way back from the restroom."

Keir swung open the back door. Rhyl's turn to drive, and Keir's turn for Piper. Piper had used some of her money to buy a silver Jaguar from Neil. He was back at work, scarred but alive, and Keir was grateful for that.

"Put your seat belts on," Rhyl said.

"Yes, dad," Keir and Piper chorused.

Keir put an arm around her shoulder and another up her skirt. Piper groaned when his fingers brushed her panties. The smell of her arousal sent him hard in an instant. Could they fuck in the backseat while they still wore their belts?

"No, you can't," Rhyl said. "We tried."

"You said—" Keir began.

"I promised I wouldn't read your mind. I just know how it works. Same as mine."

Keir slipped a finger under the edge of the thin cotton and found Piper's clit.

"One, two," Keir counted. By fifteen, she'd come. "I won," Keir said in a smug voice.

"How many times did I make you come, Piper?" Rhyl asked.

"Seven. And Keir? If you even think about trying to beat that, I'll get out and walk," she said.

Keir laughed and pulled her closer. "After I've finished with you, no way will you be able to walk."

"I don't want to arrive looking ravaged," Piper said with a groan. "There's only so much repair work I can do in a motorway service-station restroom."

Keir settled back against Piper and rubbed his face against her hair. He was trying to hide his nerves. They were on their way to meet Rhyl's parents. Everyone liked Piper, but would they like him? The three of them were hardly a traditional

package. Keir imagined Rhyl introducing them. This is Piper—she's an angel. This is our cat—he scratches. Keir tensed.

Rhyl had used the vampire search engine, Gurgle, to look for information on his brother and found a cryptic Web site that not only told him Dominic was alive, but that he was looking for Rhyl. In a flurry of e-mails, the twins had filled each other in on what had happened since they'd been separated. Mostly. Keir knew Rhyl hadn't wanted to dwell on his years underground.

Dominic wanted to surprise their parents, and he was the one who'd arranged this family reunion. They already had a celebration planned. Their father, Syren, had been elected leader of the Vampire High Council. Times were changing, and the Truebloods were no longer under threat. Not that life was easy for any vampire, but at least Rhyl and his family no longer had to hide from their own kind.

Keir had been jealous of Rhyl's joy until Piper had taken him to one side and made him see sense.

"Are we there yet?" Piper asked.

"Nearly," Rhyl replied.

Rhyl loved his mum and dad. He had all sorts of stories about the things they did up until the time he and his twin had to leave home. Keir had tried to recall happy memories of his own and couldn't. But then neither could Piper.

"What are you thinking?" Piper asked.

This was a chance to say it. *Spit it out*. "I was wondering what Rhyl's family are going to say when they see him." *Coward*.

Keir stroked her hand, drawing patterns on her skin. Piper could remember everything day to day now, but she had no knowledge of her childhood years. Keir bet they were happy ones.

"Thought any more about where you'd like to live?" Rhyl asked.

They'd decided to leave Lincoln. Hendrick had promised to ship the contents of Piper's apartment once they settled on somewhere, but he was looking for another place to live as well. Keir had warned him not to try and duplicate the special ink, but the guy had a greedy gleam in his eye.

"Take the next exit," said the sat nav.

Rhyl turned off the motorway. "Yippee."

"Think he's excited?" Piper asked.

Keir laughed.

Dominic had told Rhyl exactly when to arrive at Pevenhurst Castle to make sure all the family was there. Keir was surprised Rhyl and his twin hadn't wanted to meet up before tonight.

By the time they pulled up outside Rhyl's parents' home, Keir felt ill. Piper squeezed his fingers. "Cheer up. There'll be food."

Rhyl jumped out of the car, dashed toward the entrance, and then stopped and ran back. "Sorry." He reached out to stroke first Keir's cheek and then Piper's.

"Rhyl."

Keir looked at the owner of the voice standing on the steps leading up to the doors. Not identical, but obviously twins. Rhyl still hadn't turned. He looked terrified.

"Rhyl?" Dominic said again.

He walked up and put his chin on Rhyl's shoulder, wrapped his arms around his brother, and held tight. Keir felt Piper's fingers clutch his more tightly. Rhyl finally turned, and the brothers embraced. Keir missed Reed then, wondered how he was doing, and knew that one day he'd go and find out, make sure he was content.

Dominic ran his fingers over Rhyl's face and smiled. "You're happy."

"So are you," Rhyl said.

"You'll meet the reason why inside. Introduce me."

Rhyl turned and stepped between Piper and Keir. He put his arms over their shoulders. "The one in the creased dress is Piper. The good-looking guy who creased her dress is Keir. They are my life."

Dominic pulled Piper forward and wrapped his arms around her. When the vampire kissed her, Keir's fingernails sank into his palms, and he felt the wetness of blood.

Dominic laughed, let her go, and embraced Keir. He put his mouth next to his ear. "I see exactly what my brother loves in you, my friend. Welcome to the family."

Rhyl pulled Dominic off. "If you've quite done mauling *my* lifemates, perhaps you'd like to introduce me to yours so I can do the same."

The two vampires tussled as they went up the steps into the castle, and Piper pulled Keir after them.

"Everyone's in the ballroom," Dominic said.

Music and laughter grew louder. The place was magnificent—full of old paintings, antique furniture, and crystal chandeliers. Keir's family had little money; they'd spent what they made—spent what Keir made, and now he knew where most of it had gone. Gambling.

Keir had thought Rhyl would laugh when he'd said that he was a carpenter and designed and built furniture, but he hadn't. He'd made Keir draw some of the items he'd made, and told him he wanted to see the real thing. Piper said she wanted to sit on one of his chairs. Naked. Recline on one of his tables. Naked. That was incentive enough. He'd already bought the wood.

"Ready?" Piper asked as Dominic approached large double doors. "Think they'll like us?"

Keir knew then that she was just as nervous. He'd been too wrapped up in his own issues to notice. *Stupid*.

He kissed her cheek. "Angel, you'll knock them dead. Oh wait, they're already dead."

Her peal of laughter made him smile, and then the doors swung open.

Piper clung like a leech to Keir's hand. If he let her go, she'd kick him. The brightly lit room seemed to be full of people, and they were all staring at her, Rhyl, and Keir.

"Rhyl!" a woman shrieked and rushed straight at him.

"His mother," Piper whispered.

Keir hugged her closer. He knew what she was wishing, and she knew what he was wishing too. Mothers that loved them; instead his stepmother was dead by his hand, and her mother had no memory of her. A man came up and hugged Rhyl, and Piper guessed it was his father. A little disconcerting the pair seemed so young, but then Piper supposed she'd not age either—well, not in the normal way.

It was his mother who pulled Rhyl over to them. His father followed.

"This is Keir. This is Piper. My mother, Alicia. My father, Syren," Rhyl said. "At the point of death, Piper saved my life. And Keir offered his life to save mine."

Both vampires embraced them. His mother's eyes were wet with tears. "Thank you for bringing my son home. Thank you for making him happy."

"They need to work harder on that last bit," Rhyl said. "I don't get breakfast in bed, and they answer back."

"You do so get breakfast in bed," Piper snipped and felt her face flood with heat.

Rhyl's father stared at him as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes. "I'm sorry, Rhyl. I couldn't feel you. I didn't want to believe you'd gone, but Malin had some sort of ward over his property that hid you. It was only when Holly killed him that I had the sense you were still alive, and yet I still couldn't locate you."

He took Rhyl's face in his hands. "Then when your bondmarks merged, I knew one day you'd be coming home to us."

Rhyl smiled. "And no hiding anymore. Congratulations on your appointment to the High Council."

Syren nodded. "I'm looking forward to making some changes."

"You might want to take a look at a bunch of fight clubs. A vampire called Sobel in particular," Keir said.

"We'll talk later. Now, come and meet everyone."

Keir and Rhyl followed as Syren led Piper to the first couple.

"Rhyl, this is your eldest brother, Alek, and his wife, Jo."

"She's only half werewolf, but she's the alpha of her pack," Alek said, embracing each of them. "And pregnant. So don't squeeze too hard."

"All those children are theirs." Syren gestured toward a group standing watching a guy juggle six balls.

"All of them?" Piper whispered.

"First I had triplets—three boys. Then I had twins—two more boys," Jo said.

Alek patted her stomach. "If one of these isn't a girl—"

"You're going to have your tubes tied," Jo snapped.

Alek paled. Jo bent her head to Piper's ear. "A boy and a girl this time. I'm keeping him in suspense." Jo glanced at Keir. "That's the thing about shifters; they're incredibly fertile. I only had to look at Alek, and I got pregnant. You do know the pill doesn't protect you against weres?"

Oh God. Is that why—

Syren tugged her on. "This is my second son, Luka. His delightful wife, Chloe, and their son, James Bond."

The boy tugged Syren's arm. "No, it's not, Grandpa."

Syren raised his eyebrows. "What is it this week?"

"Indiana Jones."

Piper bit her lip. Keir and Rhyl laughed.

"Blame his parents. His real name is something unmentionable." Syren shuddered.

Luka lifted Piper's hand and kissed it. "Pleased to meet you. And you, Keir. Rhyl, I can't believe Mum and Dad managed to keep you a secret for so long." Luka hugged his brother. "Dominic told us what you did, what happened to you. I'm proud to have you as my brother." He glanced at Piper. "And what are you? Not a were, not a vamp, but something."

"Something special," Keir said and kissed her cheek.

Luka smiled. "I can see that."

"This is our daughter, Erin," Alicia said as a couple walked hand in hand across the room toward them. The guy had been juggling. "Her husband, Felix. They used to live here. The castle belonged to Felix's family for centuries. They'll live here again one day."

"Two more brothers and a sister," Erin said and threw her arms around each of them. "Any of you tried BASE jumping?"

"Please don't say yes," Felix said quickly. "If she wasn't already dead, I'd swear she had a death wish. What was it last week? Free diving. If I wasn't already dead, she'd scare me to death."

There were all so lovely, so friendly, so...in pairs. Piper felt a little uncomfortable. Did Rhyl's parents mind, approve, tolerate the idea of them being a threesome?

"Done the rounds?" Dominic asked, coming up behind his mother.

"Not met me yet," said another gorgeous female with a huge belly.

Piper tried to straighten her dress.

"I'm Jo's half sister, Holly. We didn't know about each other until a little while ago. Amazing we both ended up with Markov brothers. Bad luck really. Ouch."

Dominic had nipped her ear.

"Hey, if you want me to do my party trick at dawn, be nice," Holly said.

"And this is Jay," Dominic said and kissed the guy standing next to him.

Piper's heart fluttered, and she glanced at Keir. He was grinning.

"You didn't tell me you were three," Rhyl said.

"You didn't ask." Dominic laughed. "We've partners who've things in common."

Jay slung his arm over Keir's shoulder. "Hey, pretty soon we're going to outnumber the vamps. I'm a wolf. What about you?"

"Puma," Keir said.

"Oh the kids are going to love you," Holly said. "They're getting fed up with Jay running off with their ball."

"Very funny, Holly." Jay growled.

"Go and play," Holly said. "I want to talk to Piper."

Piper reluctantly took her hand from Keir's and let Holly lead her across the room to a couch.

"You're part demon," Holly said. "Malin was your father."

Piper nodded.

"I'm sorry I had to—"

"No. Don't be sorry," Piper said. "I'm lucky I never knew him. I just worry that part of me came from him."

Holly smiled. "No need to worry. I can tell you're a good person. I'm a third demon, a third faerie, and a third werewolf."

Piper gaped at her and then at her stomach.

"Yep, I'm wondering too. What else are you?"

"My mother was an angel."

"Was?"

Piper sighed. "Probably is. I don't know. She doesn't remember me."

"I had a friend who was half fae, half angel. She chose to go back to heaven."

The noise in the room faded away. "I could go and see my mother?" Piper whispered.

"Yes, but you couldn't come back."

Piper glanced across the room toward Rhyl. He immediately turned to look at her and smiled. She sought out Keir, who was on the floor with three little boys on top of him. His gaze shifted to her.

I love you. He mouthed the words and then looked so shocked Piper laughed. She turned to Holly. "I'm where I want to be. My guys are the best."

"Apart from mine," Holly said.

Piper grinned.

Keir ran across the room and swept Piper to her feet and into the arms of Rhyl. She stood between them and sighed.

"He nearly said it," Rhyl whispered.

"I know," Piper whispered back.

Keir scowled. "Nearly said what?"

"Those words lingering in your head and fluttering on your lips," Rhyl said. "For Christ's sake, say them."

Keir took a deep breath. "I love you." His voice was so faint the words could hardly be heard.

"Louder," Rhyl said.

Keir sighed. "I love you."

Rhyl clasped his chin. "Again, with passion."

He rolled his eyes. "I love you."

"Better, but louder."

Keir sucked in his cheeks. "I love you."

"Louder," Rhyl said.

"I love you." Keir shouted so loud everyone went quiet.

Then things went on as though nothing had happened, but inside Piper, the life that had waited for just the right moment began to grow.



Loose Id Titles by Barbara Elsborg

The TRUEBLOOD Series

The Consolation Prize
Falling for You
Lightning in a Bottle
The Misfits
Fight to Remember

Barbara Elsborg

Barbara Elsborg lives in West Yorkshire in the north of England. She always wanted to be a spy, but having confessed to everyone without them even resorting to torture, she decided it was not for her. Vulcanology scorched her feet. A morbid fear of sharks put paid to marine biology. So instead, she spent several years successfully selling cyanide.

After dragging up two rotten, ungrateful children and frustrating her sexy, devoted, wonderful husband (who can now stop twisting her arm) she finally has time to conduct an affair with an electrifying, plugged-in male: her laptop.

Her books feature quirky heroines and bad boys, and she hopes they are as much fun to read as they were to write.

Find out more about Barbara at http://www.barbaraelsborg.com.