




BOOK THREE

PREY FOR
Mercy

AE Rought

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Lyrical Press, Incorporated
17 Ludlow Street
Staten Island, New York 10312

Prey For Mercy
Copyright © May 2008, A.E. Rought
Editing by Emma Wayne Porter
Cover Art by Renee Rocco
ISBN: 978-0-9817144-0-0
www.lyricalpress.com

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First Lyrical Press, Inc. electronic publication: May 2008

PREY FOR MERCY

A.E. Rought

DEDICATION

For my sis

~PASSION FOR PAIN~

There is a desire
Smoldering in my blood,
A passion set ablaze
By temptation,
A hunger satiated
Not merely by flesh.
Pursuit is enticing,
Sweet in itself,
But it only delays the inevitable.

In the velvet shadows,
Beneath a limpid moon,
Lips will touch your skin,
Tender and soft,
Teasing until you succumb
And invite my attentions.

The pleasures I bring
Are consuming and cruel—
Passion for pain,
An equitable trade.
Your blood was my sustenance,
It was your fear that I craved.
A cry rings out,
But the end is the same—
You were only a victim
In this vampire's game.

~AE Rought

Prologue

Maine, 1807

Killing is easy, almost better than sex.

I learned that lesson the night I became a vampire.

Snow fell on All Hallow's Eve, and I hung limp, dripping blood from a vampire's embrace. He was dark and handsome, sophisticated; everything I thought I wanted and nothing I needed. His promises were as thin as the snow melting in my blood. Thoughts of betrayal mixed with the pain as Ambrose's arms opened and I spilled from his embrace, an empty sack of the woman he'd wooed and drained. I lay without dignity, hardly a stitch of clothing covering my body, as life left me on a pile of autumn leaves.

Immortality blossomed like a bloody rose within, but its beauty was squandered on me. Ambrose's parting kiss sweetened my first immortal breath, but vengeance was my only thought.

I stood, and vertigo spun within me. The steadfast trunk of a maple became my only support as a killer was born beneath my skin. Tears bled from my eyes and my jaws ached, cracking with the force of emerging fangs. Voices from every dwelling

rang in my ears, my vision became painfully acute, and my heart thumped erratically, a stilted echo of the other creatures around the village square. Air passed in greedy gulps through my throat and I wrapped my arms around the old tree until the dizziness faded.

My senses honed in on one target, one victim.

Barefoot on the cobblestone streets, I trailed Ambrose, following the scent of his arrogance. A thick holly hedge absorbed any noise, and its mild scent shielded me from Ambrose's senses as I watched my lover, my killer, on a moonlight promenade. My fingers wound among the branches, fingernails cutting through the twigs and my chin brushing the veil of October snow that dusted the leaves. He strolled with his precious human wife Celeste, while I, his scorned mistress, took to the shadows behind them.

Her heartbeat echoed in my ears, drummed on my vengeful soul. Her veins glowed with an ethereal light through her skin, a visible network of lovely lace pathways. My jaws ached to clamp against her flesh; saliva bubbled up, churning behind the cage of my new fangs.

In a noiseless leap, I cleared the bushes and landed cat-like on the ground before the couple.

The color drained from her face. Her blue eyes widened and Celeste's hand clenched tighter around Ambrose's arm. Those cerulean irises traced every move I made. "Darling." Her fingernails dug into his forearm. "I thought I asked you to kill her."

"I... I could not." Ambrose's aristocratic composure faltered. His eyes dropped from mine, and in that moment when he turned toward his wife, I lunged. Heel to her chest, I crushed Celeste to the ground, back-kicking her in the gut before launching at Ambrose's throat. He shifted his weight back, and flung his arms up in defense.

Ambrose was a lover, not a fighter, and I clawed my way through his

outstretched hands. Within his defensive guard, time froze. Eminent death yielded a bouquet of scents. Her rage and his fear mingled with my euphoria. His pupils widened, that bottom lip dropped. Perspiration slicked his skin. In a flurry, I slammed into his chest, crushing him back against a brick wall. Ambrose circled his hands around my throat, but I drove my thumbs into his eyes, and jabbed my long canines—his parting gifts—into his neck.

I did not drain him; I did not drink. I bit into his flesh and ripped the mouthful free. I spat his meat into Celeste's horrified face, and her scream danced in my veins, a dark bliss akin to orgasm. His body flopped beneath mine, sliding down the wall as his arms flailed and feet kicked. I straddled his hips, as I'd often done in clandestine corners, unbuttoned his jacket and blouse. Rather than stroking his pale skin, I dug my hands into his chest cavity and wrapped my fingers around his beating monster heart. His eyes rolled when I squeezed and blood gushed between my knuckles. A black grin stained my face as I wrenched the organ from his chest.

I found joy in his death, but her simpering voice fouled that thrill. "He should have killed you instead of giving you... giving you—"

"The gift that he refused to give you?" I finished her sentence and circled her, a wolf circling prey.

Celeste refused to answer, but the hollow expression in her eyes spoke volumes. A tear welled, trickled down to her painted lips. I added to her pain, which added to my pleasure. "One day, it will be your heart that is broken, but I will save you from an eternity of suffering with it. For now, you can wallow in your role as widow."

I left her then, a widow, a woman rejected by both her lover and his mistress.

Chapter 1

Maine, Present Day

Taking life was easier than living it. Since the night of my dark birth, I've reveled in my intimate relationship with death. The past two centuries are a blur of hunting in alleyways, war zones and high society for the climax of the kill. I've nestled my lips against the skin of princes and paupers, embraced the willing and the resentful. Palaces and frontier shacks have sheltered me.

I hate to admit that something is missing from my immortality, but it is.

A cold emptiness gnaws in my chest, a constant nettled pain that I cannot escape. Lovers have passed through my life, but none have warmed my heart quite the way their bodies warmed my bed. The black night provides little companionship. And worse yet, hackles long slack against my neck have begun to prickle and rise.

Someone impossibly darker than myself has taken to the shadows behind me.

For over ten years she has appeared and faded from my life, a jasmine-scented tide crashing on the shores of my slaughtering ground.

Her floral stench accosted my nose shortly after I settled in a coastal town to the north, one of my favorite human game preserves. Moonlight tainted the snow an eerie blue as the January ice floats drifted offshore, entrancing as they rode the ebb and flow of the moonlit waters. I sat on a weathered bench halfway down the dock,

plumes of breath rose before my eyes, my hands shook from the cold. The sleeves of my jacket were stiff, but warmed my hands. I curled my feet beneath me as I watched the slow dance between the bergs and waves. The chill finally seeped through my long overcoat, but the heat of another's glare warmed my back.

Not again.

My scalp crawled, my jaw muscles clenched. My fists curled into knots of frustration. And then, I drew in a deep, cold cleansing breath and shrugged off the uneasy feeling. No one had a right to unsettle my frame of mind. No one.

I decided to indulge in a little prowling—slaughter has always elevated my mood.

Eager to hunt, I jumped from the bench. My boots hit the slats of the dock, and there I hesitated, yards from shore and alone. I glanced around, searching for someone, anyone who would wear that floral poison. After a decade of following me she still hadn't the nerve to present herself, to attack me, to even confess her purpose.

The simple fact that she stalked me proved she was out of her mind.

No one was visible. But the oppressive sensation did not leave. She was a virus under my skin, invisible, and no amount of bloodletting purged her from my veins. A low growl escaped the barrier of my teeth, and then I walked off the pier with my coat open and flapping behind me in my haste for bed sports and bloodshed.

The street leading to my apartment snaked its way into the heart of town, but I made a path to Merchant's Row. Dingy little buildings squatted in a jagged line along the wharf, full of easy meals. My favorite flavor usually staggered from *The Weathered Vane*, a brightly lit tavern that belched loud music out of its windows and served liquor until well into the night. The patrons were of a different sort, usually the younger, hip crowd, whose sass and irreverence spiced their blood...and my meals.

I paused with the pitted brass door knob in my hand, wrapping my fingers around it and opening my mind. So many people had passed through the door this

night that I struggled for a clear vision of who might be inside. Hazy faces swum in my mind, a flash of blue eyes, a streak of dark hair. Impressions only, nothing clear.

Releasing the door knob, I entered the building to see what I could hunt up. In the coatroom, I freed my hair from its clip. The waves poured down my back, and a few ebony strands fell before my eyes. With the drop of a shoulder, my overcoat fell from my body, exposing my hunting clothes—tight, low rise denims, and a black leather bodice. From the pocket of my coat I withdrew a necklace and hung it so the pendant dusted my cleavage, winking like a beacon.

Heartbeats and half-heard thoughts bombarded me when I opened the swinging door into the tavern. Tables and chairs littered the floor between the door and the bar, as haphazard as the myriad images clogging my mind. The small dance floor opposite the bar was filled with clinched couples grinding against each other and the music. Sarcastic laughter bubbled up. These locals had no clue how to use rhythm.

But an intriguing energy flashed and waned on the far side of the bar, baiting me in toward the billiards tables.

Smoke and cologne hung heavy in the air, clogging my predator senses as I wound my way between tables toward the bar. The polished oak was smooth and warm against my stomach, a comfort in the chaos of sounds and smells. I ordered a double shot of bourbon and tossed the amber liquid back to burn down my throat. I raised my hand, signaled for a second, holding it while I leaned back against the bar and scoped the crowd for prey.

A young man, most likely in his late twenties, leaned over a pool table, lining up the eight ball shot. He was handsome with dark, intentionally mussed hair and snappy brown eyes. His jaw line was strong and square. When he smiled at his friend's joke, his teeth were smooth and square.

Mmm. Perfect target for my attentions.

The second glass of bourbon burned less and tasted better as I swallowed, and then I set the empty tumbler on the bar. I licked the firewater from my fangs and

sashayed toward the handsome man now leaving the billiard tables. But on the corner of the dance floor, that damned jasmine tide crashed on the shore of my tingling sinuses.

The come-and-go shadow which had followed me for a decade was here, in this bar—in *my* bar. The bottom dropped out of my gut, replaced with a savage, territorial blaze.

She dared to come here? Did she have any idea who she'd been following, or the bad things I could do to her? My nose followed the flowered scent of my stalker, but my gaze followed my target. He strolled with casual confidence up to a platinum blonde girl—every bit as beautiful as he was handsome, and reeking of jasmine perfume. Her ethereal features would lead some to confuse her for a creature heaven-sent, until they looked at her eyes. Her beauty skirted those eyes; hard and uncompromising, like polar ice.

Her face was somehow very familiar.

I parked my rear in a nearby seat, watching her fumble every attempt at stealing a kiss from him as I sought her face in my mind. After two centuries, the casualties of my bloody quest had blurred into a one expanse of flesh with hollow eyes.

But this girl's eyes were not hollow. When she turned and glared at me for my blatant voyeurism, those eyes were brilliant and blue—blue as the sky, blue as irises surrounding the fixed and dilated pupils of one of my victims ten years past. A smile flittered over my lips, and then died. He'd been a handsome, Cajun-flavored blonde from the bayous of Louisiana. He also had a young sister who'd watched from the shadows of a closet as I rode her brother like a prized stallion and then bled him dry.

Realization struck.

The person haunting me was the sister of that hot young Southern boy, and might well be Celeste, reborn to take another attempt at making me miserable.

Vengeance is a bitch!

The young man rebuffed her again, pushing her from him and picking up his

pool cue for another game with his friend. He stopped, face to face with the harpy. “I told you, the engagement is off.”

The blonde snatched up her purse and stormed away from the table. The predatory poison—Ambrose’s vampire venom—churned in my veins, goading me to confront the weaker female. I stood as she approached, blocking her path. Stopping her mad rush inches from me, she glared, her narrow irises rings of arctic blue. I contemplated remaining quiet, but the whiskey in my gut had other plans. “Aren’t you going to stay and watch the show?”

The ice from her glare poured out through her mouth. “I’ve watched enough of your brand of entertainment.” Her eyelids lowered a fraction, and her fine brows pinched together. “Your final curtain call is coming.”

If there was a doubt about her connection to Celeste, it died with those words. Her voice, her icy demeanor smacked of Ambrose’s bitter bride. That concept added to my delight. “Oh, come now, kitten, you should veil your threats. You don’t have what it takes to back up that one.”

She leaned closer, her jasmine perfume gagging me. “Don’t call me kitten. My name is Angel. And never underestimate a woman scorned.”

I swallowed a laugh. “What, no original retort? Run along little angel. I’ll tell you when you’ve reached womanhood.”

Her thin pink lips snapped shut. In one fluid motion, I sidestepped her and smacked her ass as I walked past. She spun around, eyes wide and hair flying out like a banshee’s. Her mouth moved, as if chewing on words, but nothing came out. I smiled, waved a farewell, and strolled to the billiards table where her man was drawing back on a solid ball. Her glare followed my hand, watching me reach into my pocket and pull out quarters to slap on the table.

“I get the winner.”

Her jaw dropped, but his rose in a grin. He winked. “We’ll see about that.”

Ooh, playful banter? My soul sang with his implied challenge. He was an

excellent choice of prey. I batted my eyelashes and leaned forward to allow him a generous peek down my top while I studied the shot he was lining up. His line of sight traveled from the cue ball, across the green felt to the flesh I exposed. I inhaled an exaggerated sigh, thrusting my breasts all but out of my top.

Take the bait, pretty boy.

He took a long look, then allowed his gaze to roam my body and face. The blonde, who still stood feet away, reached a boil. “Chase Rogers! Quit looking at that bitch!”

He threw her a silencing glare, and then looked back to me, a hint of mischief sparkling in his eyes. “So...” He sidestepped his pool cue, and leaned close enough for the warmth of his cheek to penetrate mine. “Do you have a name, or will ‘bitch’ do?”

“Call me Mercy.” I closed the distance between us, brushing my lips against his cheek and my breast against his arm.

Time froze. I lived within his heart beat, my mind and soul whirring. A feminine voice within argued against the monster in my blood. Chase’s body by mine, warm and alive, pumping precious blood through his veins. I should have craved his flesh, desired to cut open his vein and drink, but I was bewitched. He was handsome, engaging, spirited enough to ignore the shrew and flirt with me. Perhaps bed sports would be better than bloodshed?

“Mercy me...” Chase’s voice rang in my ears, but it was his touch that broke the spell. His fingers traced a warm path along my cheek bone.

“If you’re lucky.”

Chase’s eyes remained locked on mine but his hand dropped from my jaw, brushing against my breasts on the way back to his pool cue. He diverted his gaze to the white ball, drawing the stick in his hands back before striking the ball. Blue chalk scattered from the force of contact. The cue ball rocketed forward, clipping a solid orange ball on the side and sending it into the side pocket with a snap.

“Nice shot.” His friend’s shoulders sagged. “I didn’t think you’d make it.”

“I have to win.” Chase shot a glance at his friend, and then winked at me.

“Because Mercy gets the winner.”

Good answer!

Angel, who had been crossing and uncrossing her arms to the rhythm of her tapping foot, finally lost control. Sudden tears bled from her eyes, and she sputtered a string of expletives before she spun on her heel and stormed out.

Bye-bye, Celeste...

A wicked smile cut my cheeks, and I struggled to keep my fangs contained. Forays into public always held a risk of discovery, and I thought for a moment that Chase saw what I struggled to conceal. His eyes were wide with a dazed, “Did I really see that?” expression, but then he smiled.

There was little give-and-take between the two men. Chase damned near ran the table. His friend, whose name was Peter, only managed two shots, and one of them was a scratch. Peter retreated to the bar but returned with three beers. He handed one to Chase, kept one for himself, and offered one to me.

I shook my head. “Sorry, Peter, but I’m not fond of beer.”

Chase cocked an eyebrow. “Are you saying you don’t drink?”

Blood, yes, I thought, but beer, no. “I’m spoiled.” I sidled up to Chase, running my fingers up his arm, leaving a fingertip on his pulse point. “Bourbon’s about all I drink.”

“Ooh.” Chase’s eyes smoldered. “Sexy as hell and drinks the hard stuff. Where’ve you been all my life?”

Warmth from his lips bathed mine. His breath was my breath. “I could ask the same of you.”

“You keep that up...” His hand traced the curve of my ass. “And you’ll never get me to play pool.”

I purred and nipped his ear. Despite Pete's prying eyes I slid my hand down the fly of his jeans. "Oh, I'll get to play with you." I batted my bedroom eyes at him. "Don't worry about that."

Pete's gasp was audible, even at the pool table. Chase just smiled, and wrapped his fingers around my wrist. He brought my hand to his face, ran a fingertip along his bottom lip, and then kissed the back of my hand. "Your hands are cold, Mercy."

I pulled him tight to me, the pulse through the major arteries of his hips thumping against my pelvis. His scent enveloped me, his blood sang a siren's call. "How about you come back to my place and warm them up?"

"And not play pool?"

"I'm sure..." I kissed his lips. "We could find better forms of entertainment."

The pool cue clattered to the floor, the tip snapped off and rolled beneath a table but his gaze never left mine. "Pete, I'm taking off for the night."

Peter shrugged his shoulders, and sucked down half his beer. "It's better than me telling you two to get a room!"

Chase pulled away from me, his gaze shooting to the table and his friend. "You're all right with this? I mean... I don't want to ditch you."

Pete sucked down the rest of the beer. In a display of his obvious lack of manners, he belched loudly before pulling on his jacket, which sat rumpled on his seat. "Hell, if I had a beauty like that pressed up against me, I wouldn't be sticking around, either."

Peter smacked Chase's shoulder and then disappeared into the crowd. He stuck a hand up, and waved. "See ya around, Chase!"

Chase turned his dark eyes on me. "So, where do you live?"

I ran my fingers down his arm, and then ensnared his in mine, my fingernails tickling his palm. "Not far."

Winding through the empty spaces in the crowd I led Chase back to the

coatroom. I turned in my ticket and retrieved my coat. Yet when I turned to put it on, he took it and helped me into it. “Here, let me.”

Such a gentleman! When’s the last time I had one of those? Men weren’t men anymore, not the way they used to be. Chivalry was dead. Men were boys, and I had grown tired of dealing with children. Chase reinforced my quiet awe when he held the door open for me, too.

I think I could keep this one. My gaze ran over him like I wished my hands could. He caught my stare, and I smiled. Chase blushed, and the beast in my blood roared at the sight; he wouldn’t be able to blush for long. I traced a finger across the pink expanse of his cheek, savoring the warmth. The twitch was slight, but I felt it.

His eyebrows narrowed. “Are you cold?”

“Always.”

He ran a finger through the strands of my hair. “Maybe we can fix that.”

A stilted rhythm threatened my heart beat. In earlier years I might have considered it to be hope. It softened my resolve, and I squeezed his fingers. “That would be nice.”

Chapter 2

Rounding the corner of Johnson Street, I pulled him down a back alley and pressed him to the cinder block wall. A battle raged in me: a woman wanting compassion versus a vampire needing to be fed. Only my grip on his collar anchored the storm within.

My human mind triumphed. There was something different about Chase; his confidence intrigued me, his body delighted my feminine senses. He deserved full disclosure of my intentions, if not my body.

I focused my thoughts, stirring the vampire in me to rise, and all pretense of humanity was shed. With Ambrose's gift of white predator canines exposed, there was no longer a question who—or what—I might be. He needed to know that the woman he took home wasn't just some pretty girl with a penchant for dark haired men, but a vampire with more than desire running in her veins.

His eyes widened in shock when he saw the fangs I displayed. I awaited the musk of fear to rise from him, but my sinuses caught nothing but cologne on a cold breeze. His lips moved, and he mouthed the word, "Vampire?"

I nodded. Silence hung between us for an agonized moment. My secret was his—his life, in any form, was now mine.

His hand hovered in the air before me. Then, questions gone, his expression

changed, his eyes smoldering when he reached past the emotional intimacy barrier I hid behind. The warmth of his hand caressed my face, his thumb stroking the skin of my cheek. I surrendered to the fantasy of human passion when his lips met mine in a firm, eager kiss.

Good gods! He's not afraid...

That thought unsettled me, tainting the enjoyment of his kiss. I was accustomed to the predator-prey scenario, but it seemed as though the tables were turning—in more ways than one.

I wrenched away from him. Cold December air whipped down the alley and between us. “Chase, are you sure you want this?”

His irises blazed black passion when he stroked my cheek. “I want you, Mercy. No matter what secret or demons you hide.”

Brave boy. “You would bed down with a vampire? You might think differently if you end up bleeding to death.”

He countered my question with one of his own. “Were you born a vampire?”

Images of Ambrose and his blood betrayal blossomed in my mind. The pain, the loss swirled in me, washing out the damned bloodthirst. I choked back the lonely tide surging up my throat. “No. I was human, once.”

“And it is the human I want.” Chase brought his burning lips to mine, and I could not push him away. I enveloped him in my arms, tangling my fingers in his hair. Within, I fell for him, into him, plummeting back into the woman I used to be. His warm breath bathed my lips. “You will not kill me.”

I will not kill you. I surrendered, malleable in his embrace. Chase wrapped me in his arms, crushing me to his chest when he turned and pinned me to the wall. His hands ran a hot trail down my body, sending chills up my spine with their bold explorations. My eyes rolled in the simple pleasure of finding a man with both manners and sensuality.

His tongue wrapped mine in a sultry dance between the pillars of my fangs. Every nerve in my mouth tingled, and the base of my canines ached to bear down—I fought those vampire desires and delved into the human hunger rising like a bonfire within. He was warmth and passion—everything I had been missing in my immortality. I craved his warmth, needed to melt in the heat of his ardor.

The stairs passed beneath our feet in a rush after he took my hand in his. The world beyond our embrace blurred—I wasn't sure if I gave up control or he stole it from me. We slammed into the door of flat 12, his tongue on my neck, teeth grazing my jugular. His aggression might have frightened a lesser girl, but I drank it in, sweet as any blood. I fumbled for the keys in my pocket. The weight of our tangled bodies flung the door open and we tumbled through the door jamb and onto the floor.

He straddled my hips, pulling at the cinches of my bodice. Someone gasped in the hallway, and distracted Chase from removing the fabric barriers between us. Standing, he pulled me up into a heated embrace as he kicked the door shut. His eyes were nearly feral when I pulled away to look at the man who held me like no other. His voice was husky. "Come back here. I'm just getting warmed up."

So am I, I thought. For once, in centuries of night.

The heat of his desire intensified his musky cologne; the scent enveloped me when he threw his leather jacket to my sofa, and pulled away the white tank top beneath. Muscles rippled down his chest in a path that led down and behind the fly of his jeans. His gaze followed mine, stopping at his bulging zipper—the smile Chase gave me was crooked and naughty as hell.

My heart fluttered and its erratic pulse drummed in my ears. Lust flared within when he wrapped me in his corded arms by the frost covered window. His hand slid from my butt to my breast, which he fondled through the leather. I curled my fingers in his hair when he bit my neck again.

"Close the curtains." A mouthful of my corset laces muffled his words.

I gave him a pretentious pout. “I like the moonlight.”

“Well, if it’s all right by you...” With one more tug, the laces came loose and the form-fitting leather fell away.

The alabaster glow poured over my exposed curves. Chase stroked my skin where the moonbeams caressed it. “Mmm.” He licked a nipple lit by white light. “I like the moonlight, too.”

So glad you agree. Any further thought was derailed when he cloaked my tightened nipple in the warmth of his mouth. It felt better than I wanted, and my body twitched involuntarily. With one arm behind my back and his wet velvet tongue around the tip of my breast, Chase deftly used his free hand to undo the zipper of my denims.

The fabric piled at my feet, binding my ankles but Chase scooped me to his chest, leaving the useless garment on the floor. His heartbeat danced against my skin, surged along my veins, exciting the vampire I tried so hard to shove away. Bloodlust uncoiled like a serpent within, its venom mixing with the desire in my veins, sending my mind into a haze of sanguine and carnal hunger. I wanted him, wanted to feel him between my legs and feel his blood coursing down my throat.

His voice pierced my haze. “On your knees.”

Prisoner of the dual desires rampaging through me, I obeyed. Kneeling on the sofa I dug my claws in for grip and spread my knees when I tilted my butt up toward him. The heat of his pelvis surged through the skin of my buttocks, but it did not compare to the length he slid into me.

Groaning, I rocked back along his engorgement, savoring the slide and pull. My breasts rocked, and the fabric of the sofa rubbed my nipples, sending tingles through me to meet the ecstasy flooding up my spine. Chase ran his fingers through my hair, combing it back toward him until he had a handful, which he tugged when he spanked my right buttock. He rubbed the stinging cheek and pain turned to nettled bliss. I dug into the sofa until my claws ripped through the fabric.

Arching my spine, I rose to meet him, chest to back, digging my fingernails into his wrists. He winced, and I pulled up and off him before turning around and pulling his mouth to my breast.

Saddled against his pelvis, I pushed him to the floor. Rapture rose through my body when I slid down his shaft. I rode him with the waves of pleasure crashing through my body. My throat ran dry from panting. I licked the sweat from his neck and chest, but the salt only increased my thirst.

Exquisite torture bloomed between a rising orgasm and raging bloodlust. I moaned and clawed, twisting the rug beneath us into knots in my erotic bliss. The vampire in me screamed for his blood, and somehow, Chase knew. He brought his hand to my mouth, but I shook my head.

He would not take no for an answer. He pounded into me insistently and when my eyes rolled, he took the opportunity to force his palm onto my exposed fangs, and then squeezed his blood onto my tongue.

The sanguine ambrosia pushed my body over the edge. An orgasm gripped me, twisting my spine, curling my toes and screaming from my throat. Chase pulled my face to his neck, and every temptation I'd suffered flared, fueled by the aftershocks of pleasure rumbling through me. My jaws ached, mouth watered and body throbbed, but the human laying atop him refused. "No. I will not bite... I am a woman in your arms, not a vampire at your throat. I will not kill you."

I pulled my lover tighter to me, pressed my lips against his skin. His breath was moist on my cheek when he spoke. "I do not ask for death."

Neither did I. My heart ached. Immortality is not enough.

My mind flashed back to the moment when Ambrose could not contain himself, abandoning me to death and rebirth alone. I could not curse Chase with that loneliness.

I pushed away, scrambling back from him. His arms appeared as empty as I felt. Naked and cold without him beside me, I reached for a throw blanket on my sofa.

Wrapping the blanket around me, I stood and gathered his things. I shoved his clothes at him, but looked away. “Please leave. You do not want what I have to give you.”

His fingers brushed hollow promises on my cheek. “Mercy, please...”

My eyes fell to his feet, my bottom lip dropped as well. “Chase, I asked you to go.”

“You don’t want me to leave. I can feel it in you. You want to stay in my arms.”

My patience, my control, broke. Fingers curled into fists around the blanket I clutched. Fangs extended and brow furrowed, I turned on him. “I don’t want to condemn you to the hell I live in. Now, *leave!*”

His lips twitched as though he would offer me an argument, but then they stiffened and the passion faded from his eyes. His voice was flat, dead as I wished my heart was. “Fine. As you wish.”

In slow, deliberate movements, Chase pulled his clothes on and covered the physical beauty that had tempted me. The zipper of his leather jacket whispered in the dark apartment. He stood with his hand on the door knob, his eyes searching mine.

I gave him nothing, not a word, not a hint of hope. He needed to leave if he wanted to live.

The door swung inward, and then closed between us. The cold emptiness of the apartment crashed in on me. I should never have let him in, never allowed him to see the real me. I should have hidden the human and unleashed the vampire. Then the beast in me would be satiated and my heart would be safe. But now, shadows engulfed the apartment and my soul.

Chapter 3

The emptiness in Chase's absence grated on my nerves. I retreated to my shower in an attempt to warm my body and wash away the smell of his cologne. The warmth was fleeting; soap and water purged the evidence of our moonlight escapades, but could not remove him from my heart and mind.

I paced the confines of my flat, churlish and hungry—never a good combination.

The moon was on her downward path, and the choices of suitable prey would be slim at this hour. I pulled on the clothes still lying where Chase had dropped them, and left the flat. Moonlight bathed the streets and buildings a ghostly white, accentuating their hollow appearance. Snow and ice coated parked cars. Flurries fell and a snow devil whirled through an intersection, but not a living thing moved on Johnson Street or for two blocks further into the city.

Chase's cologne teased my sinuses on Lawson Boulevard. I drifted down the scent trail when I should have left well enough alone.

The scent intensified on the manicured, winding streets of Olde Towne, the upper-class neighborhood where even the pets were aloof. I found a tasteful two-story Victorian, with a light left burning on the second floor. The figure silhouetted in the window was familiar, and when he turned and looked out into the night, I knew it was Chase.

With a sharp exhaled breath, I released my human form, melting into the mists that swirled in my soul. The cold air penetrated and filtered through me. Chase's eyes passed over me again, but he could see nothing more than a dark cloud, a ragged bank of fog. Rolling out of his view, I passed into the concealment of a hedge and regained my solid form.

A faint floral aroma hung in the air, light enough to be confused for faded holly. Common sense would have driven me away, but that particular trait was throttled to silence by my bloodlust. I was baited forward to Chase's driveway by the sound of an idling car, and the hopes of a warm meal.

My hunger urged me past the lingering floral scent, up to the car. Chase's companion from the bar sat unconscious and slumped behind the wheel of a rusted, gray 1980s Monte Carlo. Easy, fast food.

I stopped at the driver's side door. Pete was not just unconscious, drunk as I assumed he would be. Pete was dead.

The metallic odor of wasted blood seeped through the door frame. The color had drained from his skin, spilling out in a bloody puddle in his lap and on the floor. His head was tilted at an unnatural angle, his eyes were fixed and dilated and two small puncture wounds darkened the ghostly pale skin of his throat.

Who would do such a thing?

My brain churned to make sense of the scene. I was the only vampire in the area. I would have sensed another vampire's presence. There was too much blood spilled for a true vampire bite—most of it would have been consumed. I knew in the short time I'd spent with Chase that he was not capable of such a crime. He had neither the teeth for it nor the temperament.

When I leaned closer I found a strand of hair, long and black, pinched in the seal of the window. It smelled of midnight and amber, but a false floral scent tainted my senses.

That floral scent... It wasn't holly. It was jasmine.

An ethereal face, lit by blue eyes and haloed by pale blond hair, came to mind. The earlier incarnation of Celeste would have taken his life without a second thought. But could Angel have done this? Was she vicious enough to kill Chase's friend and attempt to frame me for it? The look in her eyes after our verbal exchange told me she was certainly crazy enough.

I had no further time to wonder about her guilt in this; daybreak threatened in the east. There was no time left to explain to Chase that I wasn't involved.

Yellow light poured from his side door when he opened it and saw me standing beside his friend's car. The flutter of excitement died in my chest when I saw the horrified expression on his face. My gut plummeted, and my heart sank. My mouth worked on explanations but no words came out. Impotent tears suddenly burned my eyes, and I shook my head. "It... It wasn't me."

His eyes were hard, the passion we'd shared before was snuffed. Chase ran from the house, and up to passenger side of the car. "Oh my God! What did you do? He's dead!"

Dawn reared his head over the horizon. My skin tingled, my eyes stung. Self preservation forced me to flee the sunrise and Chase's wrath.

"I did not do it." With one last look at Chase, I dissolved into my mist form, and rolled like a coming storm through the town and back to my flat. The residents of Olde Towne might well talk of ghosts after this early morning and my wailing passage.

I knew that any accounts or claims of a vampire would die with the authorities. Reason did not lead to creatures stalking the night and living on blood. The girl had framed me to sway Chase. There would be no charges pressed by police.

Silence greeted me inside the apartment. Flesh and blood once more, I hurried through the flat, pulling the light-blocking blinds before I retreated to the bedroom and the shrouded bed on which I slept. I peeled away my twice-worn clothes and tossed them through the heavy curtains at the foot of the bed. I choked on the idea

that Angel, or Celeste, would try to frame me for a murder I didn't commit. The rage kept me from sleep, the sunlight kept me from feeding.

Eventually, I slipped into a fitful doze tortured by dreams of floral-scented angels bent on my destruction.

*

Sharp knocks echoed through my apartment, bouncing from the hard surfaces and piercing into my fevered brain. Muscles burned, guts clenched. My eyes rolled open, and I struggled for balance in a world swirled with vertigo.

I couldn't focus, couldn't think; instinct ruled my actions. Though the apartment was silent, those thuds continued in my skull. Pain throbbed from my fangs and encompassed my head. I pressed my palms to my temples to stifle the echoes, to counterbalance the pressure there.

And then the knocking started again.

Go away. Please go away.

Whoever knocked was clueless to their fate—only death waited behind this door.

I fell from my bed, claws tearing the carpeting as the beast within me took over and charged toward the door. Crouching in the hall, I prepared to launch at the intruder if they dared enter. Another heartbeat echoed in my mind, knuckles banged against the wood again, followed by a male voice. "Mercy! Are you in there? Mercy!"

Chase? My mind balked, fighting against my killer instincts. "Go away."

"What the hell is going on?" A large concussion rumbled through the apartment and plaster chipped and fell from above the door. "Let me in! We need to talk."

"I can't talk! I haven't fed. If you come in, you will die."

Desperate for blood, I ignored his repeated pleas and brought my wrist to my

mouth and bit down. The blood was thin. Hollow. It ran down my chin, dripped into the tattered fiber beneath my nails. Crawling toward the door, I whimpered, panting his name, begging him to leave.

The door shook once more. Plaster fell, nails shot from the door jamb. He bellowed on the other side. “*Mercy!*”

Balled in a whining mass on the other side, I curled my claws in my hair and shook my head. “Just go. Please, just go.”

A white envelope slid beneath the door and through the plaster dust mounded there. It skidded to a stop beside me; the stark white stood out in its bed of gray dust, and to my hyperactive senses it reeked of jasmine and musk. I scrambled back onto my knees and dragged the envelope closer. A mellow, soft thump filtered through the door and the voice following it was melancholy. “Read it. Find me there.”

Heavy footfalls echoed through the hall. With the temptation departing, I released the grip in my hair, and my limbs unfurled like a fist of broken fingers. Ripping the envelope open, I rolled up onto my knees; blood from my lips pattered on the handmade paper and seeped into the fibers of a formal invitation to a Winter Cotillion. The silver lettering shimmered over the crimson stain, and announced the introduction of the bay’s wealthiest brats. The *contredanse* was to be held that night, at the Olde Towne Yacht Club.

The envelope was addressed to Mr. Chase Rogers, in a frilly script that reeked of jasmine. *Angel...* My fingers convulsed around and through the paper like I wished they could around that spoiled girl’s neck.

I could throttle her later. There were more pressing needs, and feeding trumped everything.

Returning to my bedroom, I pulled on hunting clothes and left, leaping from the balcony to the street below. The type of prey at this point was negotiable—alive and healthy were the main criteria.

Drifting down a back alley of the industrial park, I found a parking lot security

guard who looked away from me too long. I swept up behind him, wrapped a hand over his mouth to muffle his cries, and an arm around his middle to brace him as I buried my fangs into his neck. Hot blood poured like manna down my throat and steam rose from the red liquid seeping from the corners of my mouth. His heels gouged the smooth snow when I dragged him back into the shadows behind the security shack.

My heart raced with renewed life. The tension left my muscles, the throbbing of my joints faded. His heartbeat slowed, but did not stop, his eyes rolled, rigidity left his body and I let him slump from my embrace to the ground. I spat a blood streaked puddle onto my fingers, and wiped the mess across my bite marks. The wounds would heal before he regained consciousness.

When he awoke, he would remember nothing.

Renewed, I tossed my hair over my shoulder and hurried through the shopping district close to the industrial park. Mannequins draped in this season's latest formal wear occupied the window of Boelyn's Boutique: glittering gowns, sweeping trains of satin and lace. If I was to infiltrate the Cotillion, I would have to dress the part. Many years had passed since I'd worn a formal dress. *Hmm. Sleek and black...*

After a shriek from the cashier and a resounding slap from me, I walked out of the store with a new outfit and shoes.

Chapter 4

The Yacht Club sparkled with artificial lights and Mercedes and Rolls Royce hood ornaments. The waste of money disgusted me. If I'd spent an eternity in the high society I escaped, I would still not live in such extravagance. It shocked me all the more that a conniving, vicious girl like Angel came from this stock.

Standing in the shadows outside a bank of windows, I assessed the crowd.

The room was a music box factory, filled with idyllic, molded figures spinning on unseen posts. Prim, proper waifs in tight bodices drifted across the floor, more curves in their dance patterns than in their bodies. Black suits cluttered one side, while skirts and up-dos filled the wall opposite. Chase Rogers, hair slicked back and hotter than hell, walked down the far staircase and into view. My heart skipped, my mood lifted despite the frigid temperatures and the egregious misunderstanding between us.

Angel appeared and suctioned herself to Chase's arm, a white satin leech with pin-straight hair. Her visual perfection rivaled her jasmine perfume's cloying sweetness. My blood boiled, pushing anger through my veins. A growl rose in my throat and escaped the gate of my fangs in a vaporous cloud. My hands itched to circle her throat.

Perfect Angel. Perfectly poisoned.

It was time to make my entrance, time to take another man from her life.

Lifting my arms, I rose from the ground, then stopped near the top of the outside wall. I leaned against the stone wall and released my human form to seep through as mist. A weeping sore opened high above the cotillion floor. The reflection in the plate glass window clearly showed the advance of my plasma form bleeding down the wall. The cold stone floor chilled me as I coalesced into a black puddle behind a marble column before solidifying into my human form.

The shimmering black surface flowed from the floor, riding my curves and creating a satin gown. The shimmering black fabric caressed my skin in a decadent embrace, lying in gathers atop my breasts. A smile stained my lips as dark as the satin gown. I twisted my hair into a bun, and tied the ends under. Confidence led as I stepped onto the dance floor.

Angel's recognition was immediate. Her eyes shadowed, her perfect manicured nails dug into Chase's arm. "What is *she* doing here?"

Chase didn't speak. His eyes widened, a half-smile warmed his lips. And Angel didn't miss it. She left his arm, stormed up to me, her white gown flapping like gull wings in a squall. Her voice rose slightly over a hiss. "You need an invitation to be here!"

"Oh? Then the one Chase delivered means nothing?" I batted my eyelids, a vapid expression on my face. I drifted past her, every bit as graceful as the debutantes the parents had placed on display.

A roguish smile softened his chiseled features. His arm was extended in invitation. "Mercy..."

My gloved hand rested on his elbow. "Chase."

His voice slipped into a husky timber. "Shall we dance?"

"We certainly shall."

Angel hissed under her breath, but the sound was drowned beneath the violin

strains from a grand romantic opening stanza. She looked so much like Celeste then; all she lacked was the strawberry blond waves and pin curls around her face. The one thing keeping this from being a replay of All Hollow's Eve of 1807 was the man at my side. Chase was not Ambrose—Chase was all passion and fire, Ambrose had been haughty ice.

I tossed a glance over my shoulder and waved to her as we took up the center of the dance floor. A sense of confidence came when I was wrapped in Chase's arms. I knew she would not cry "vampire" here. This was not the Puritan colonies of the 1600s, and she would be looked on as a fool. There was comfort in that and in Chase's arm when it slid around my waist, and he swept me onto the floor.

The surrender to his lead was easy. I maintained proper frame between us and kept my head as we danced the steps of a Viennese Waltz.

"Tell me, Mercy... What were you doing in my driveway so early this morning?"

Step and turn, a graceful glide. Hope and horror battled in me, but I gave him a sidelong glance. "I was not there to kill your friend."

The tension of his fingers heightened. "I don't think you hurt Pete."

I softened inside, and that familiar patter returned to my heartbeat. "You don't?"

"No." His arm was strong behind me when my head dipped close to the floor.

"It tears me up that someone hurt my friend, but I refuse to punish someone who did not do it."

I wanted to tell him Angel might be operating on past life vengeance. But would the scent of jasmine be enough, or only considered circumstantial evidence?

His voice was thick and dark. "I have my own suspicions about who hurt him, and why."

"I think it was—"

“I don’t want to talk about that now. There will be time to deal with it later.”

I nodded. “As you wish. Why do you think I was there?”

“The same reason you came up to me at *The Weathered Vane*.” He exuded that quiet confidence to which I was terribly attracted. “You can’t resist me.”

The tilt of my chin tipped a fraction farther from him. “Arrogance. If you knew the men I’d—”

He spun me away, my skirt flaring in a black plane, and then he drew me back to his dance embrace. “I’d hardly be impressed.” He held me tighter. “I know what you need, Mercy, and it’s not a title. Not a fat bank account...”

I broke frame, turning to level a heated gaze on him. “And you think you’re what I need?”

He didn’t speak, but his eyes said everything. *Yes, he does.*

Stunned into silence, I watched him watching me while we completed the dance. Chase took my hand, leading me from the dance floor and behind a screen that offered little privacy. He pulled me close, gaze locked on mine. “You are my match, Mercy. Search your heart. You know I am.”

“It doesn’t matter, Chase,” I argued when I wanted nothing more than to bury my lips against his. “Forces are set against us.”

“You mean Angel? She is a problem...”

“No, not just Angel.” I cut the skin of my palm with a fang, and he watched as the skin knit back together. “I am not human, Chase. I will not grow old with you, I cannot bear you children.”

“And what if I want none of that?”

“I am a vampire. You cannot separate me from my eternity, except by death.”

“What if I want to share in that eternity?”

“Then you are a fool.”

“Only for you, Mercy.”

I could not argue with him. I did not want to. He was a match to my passion, the only man to satiate my desires in decades; his confidence and manners bewitched me. The persistent odor of jasmine told me, however, that Angel would never rest, would never step aside. If Chase and I had any future, it could not happen in Angel's shadow.

"What of Angel?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and his gaze fell. "Our families want us married." He shot a glance over his shoulder and down the hall. "But, I think she has other plans entirely."

"What do you mean?"

"She's crazy, Mercy. Obsessed with getting revenge for the death of a man in her life, and she swears you are to blame."

Ambrose's in her first life, and her brother's in this...

I lifted his chin, forced him to focus on me instead of searching for her. "I am to blame."

His eyes widened.

"It's true, Chase. I am a cold blooded killer who has a stalker bent on revenge."

He shrugged. "Past is past."

"And any future with me is dark." I could not resist him any longer—I leaned in and kissed him. He was the only one to fill the years of loneliness, the only one to silence the misery gnawing in my chest. Then, as suddenly and passionately as I kissed him, I pulled away. "You do not want an eternity of bloodshed."

"Do not tell me what I do or don't want. You are passion and permanence, Mercy." Angel appeared in the hall then, tracking Chase like elusive prey. He pointed to her, speaking loud enough for her to hear. "She is what I don't want—a hollow façade of flesh, a gilded lily that has begun to rot."

Angel's perfection failed, and the rage she kept beneath her icy mask surfaced.

She balled her fists, her cheeks blushed red and she shrieked, an ice queen calling for her honor guard.

Yacht Club security goons packed the hall. Chase assumed the role of protector, forcing me behind him, walking backward until my back met the hard resistance of a closed door. He pivoted on his heel and kicked the door open, shoving me out into the cold. “Go, Mercy! I will find you.”

I hated leaving him there with those people. I could have fought, could have bled those guards dry. But I didn’t want to reveal my true identity, or cause Chase any more difficulties than his infatuation with me already had.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes, but then froze; I scrubbed them away as I stalked through the snow-covered private grounds of the club. To maintain the necessary humanity ruse, I hailed a cab at the end of the drive. The driver was polite, the car was clean and warm, and when he reached back to accept my money, I found his blood was warm as well. Pulling back and to the right against the security window, I snapped his bones and buried my fangs in his wrist.

When I’d taken my fill, I wiped his mind of the moment with a poisonous whisper in his ear. I put the appropriate bills in his hand for the fare and sizable tip, and then left the car. The poor man would never remember what happened, but his broken arm would have to be set.

Chapter 5

The apartment was cold and empty, much as the past two centuries of my life had been. Chase had silenced that hollow ache the moment he'd kissed me. Yet my nemesis from years past had reappeared and was once more entangled in my life and suffocating my romantic notions. In mirror fashion, history placed a man between us. I was the vampire, she was the human, and I had what she wanted. She'd already stooped to murder. What was left?

Don't ask what you don't want answered. Curling my fingernails inward into the meat of my palms, I used pain to focus my thoughts. *When I get my hands around her skinny neck...*

I am through playing games.

Whether or not Chase and I went on from this point, tonight would be the end of things with Angel. Pete's pale face and puddle of spilt blood surged to the fore in my mind. The motive was obvious, but something about that crime did not sit right.

I scanned the images in my mind. The smell of jasmine on the car. An easy victim, familiar to Chase and Angel. Those silly little fang marks... Was Pete a happenstance victim? Or was he practice?

It suddenly made sense. Angel wanted to be a vampire, and she was attempting to claim the gift Ambrose had denied her when she'd been Celeste.

Stupid girl.

I'd hardly kicked off my toe-cramping heels before the scent of musk eased under the door and someone knocked. The use of my vampire senses was overkill. I knew it was Chase.

The door eased open, and my handsome lover walked in. The sight of him in that tuxedo, with his hair slicked back and the feral look in his eyes was enough to reignite last night's lusty fire. "Welcome back, Chase."

"It's looks as though I am the one with no resistance." He stepped from the hall, encircling me with his arms. I succumbed, releasing my pent passions and kissing him while I tangled my fingers in his hair. The flavors of top shelf bourbon and Cuban cigars mingled with his breath, and I drank it in, licking it from his tongue. He groaned, squeezing me tighter. "Keep kissing me like that and last night is going to become a daily addiction."

I wanted him for days on end, wanted to test my immortality on pleasing his body, but that damned rational side of me pulled away. His lips were full, waiting for another kiss, but I shook my head. My finger on his lips, I extricated myself from his embrace. "Chase, we need to talk."

His gaze fell. "This is about Pete's death and Angel, right?"

A modicum of relief crept in to my mind. *So, he's made that connection, at least.* "Not just Pete and Angel—about me, and how Angel may tie in to my past and our future."

He tipped his head, those rugged features softened by a smile that could melt any woman. "Future?"

I couldn't believe the concept of a future slipped past my fangs when we hardly had a past. But, this man was persistent, and willing to sacrifice what could have been a socially beneficial relationship with Angel for a risky romantic one with me. I couldn't deny how he'd filled the emptiness in me, even for just that one night—he had reached further into me than any man before. The heart's truth is spoken when

the mind is otherwise occupied, and my brain-mouth filter was off at that moment. “The future isn’t set...”

“But you can’t deny there may be one.”

“No.” Taking his hand in mine, I led him to the davenport. “I won’t deny it, but we cannot focus on the future until the past is put to rest.”

“Put to rest?” His brow furrowed. “Mercy, what are you talking about?”

“Angel.”

His face pinched, his eyes strayed as though searching for meaning in his mind, but then he shook his head. “I... I don’t understand.”

“You believe in immortality. You believe in vampires. You hardly paused when I displayed my fangs.” He nodded, but had no less of a quizzical expression. “If you can accept that, then the concept of past lives should be easy for you.”

The expression on his face smoothed, and the resonance of his aura told me he understood. “Are you telling me that you believe Angel had a past life?”

I nodded. The twisted relationship between Ambrose and I rose in painful waves in my mind. Celeste’s perfect posture, perfect curls and wretched personality bloomed like a poisoned lily. My bottom lip sank, and a tear welled in my eye. I would have wiped it away, but Chase did before I could raise my hand to my face. “Is it that painful?”

“Heartbreak is never easy. Heartbreak, betrayal and unwanted immortality hurts like hell.” I wrapped my fingers tight in his, trying to draw comfort in that human contact. “That’s what I want to save you from.”

He reached for me, and though I craved his touch, I pushed his hands back. Thinking was difficult with his body pressed to mine. And I didn’t want to think—I wanted to wallow in his embrace, revel in his passion. “Let me show you.”

“Of course, Mercy. What do I need to do?”

“You need to see...” I rolled onto my knees beside him. My hand on his thigh

was more to pin him in place than to caress him. “Do you still offer your blood?”

“Anything. You can have—”

I placed a fingertip on his lips, pushed his chin up and away, baring his throat. I whispered an apology before placing my lips on his neck. He flinched, but then relaxed and in the absence of the tension I bit down, my fangs piercing his skin.

His arterial spray showered my throat with warm ambrosia, but regret gagged me. I swallowed his essence, and the renewed life force gave me an open conduit into his mind. Licking my healing saliva over his wounds, I delved into his mind, giving him my memories of Ambrose and Celeste in the same way I’d adjusted the memory of the cab driver earlier.

There was too much blood in my system, and I could not force myself to rest. I rose and paced the borders of the rug. Chase’s eyes remained closed, the lashes twitched in rapid eye movement. He shivered and I covered him with the blanket I’d wrapped in the night before.

He was reliving my memories, feeling what I’d felt, suffering what I had suffered... When Chase’s body went rigid I knew that he experienced my death and rebirth.

He groaned, and his eyes opened. They gazed unfocused at the ceiling as he panted. Wiping sweat from his face, I knelt at his feet, calling his name. “Chase? Chase, come on.”

“Oh my God.” He groaned again, and bent forward to rest his head on my shoulder. “How could he do that to you?”

“I have long since given up trying to find reason in anything he did.” My voice was flat.

“And her... Celeste looks so much like Angel.” He shuddered. “Now I understand what she meant when she blamed you for the death of a man in her life.”

I sat back, butt on my heels, and shook my head. “There’s more. I did not give

you all my memories.”

“More?” He wiped sweat from his forehead and shed his jacket.

“Yes. In Celeste’s life I took revenge on Ambrose, but in Angel’s life I simply took her brother out of greed. I used him and bled him dry. Angel was young then, and watched from the shadows of a closet. If I’d known she was there...”

“You wouldn’t have done what you did.” He patted my hand, a knowing expression in his eyes.

“That’s just it, Chase. I might have taken him regardless of who watched.” I stood and resumed my pacing. “After Ambrose’s betrayal, I lived by no code other than my own satisfaction. I took what I needed where and when I wanted. My only discretion was in keeping from being discovered as a vampire. I was far from perfect.”

“*He* was far from perfect, Mercy.” He yanked his loosened tie from his neck, and rubbed over the faded bite marks. “It is his blood in you.”

I shook my head. “It’s not just that. I was angry. I acted out my hurt on years’ worth of victims.”

He grabbed my hand, pulled me to him and onto his lap. “You’re not that woman anymore.”

“I’m not?” My mind flicked through the memories of the past two centuries. I leaned against him, playing with the buttons of his shirt. “I guess the human part of me has changed, come full circle... I’m who I might have been had Ambrose not destroyed me.”

“That’s what fascinates me about you.” The path his hand trailed down my arm was warmer than any contact Ambrose had ever given me. “The pain, the history... A tempered blade, made stronger and more beautiful by the fires you’ve been through. I knew there was more to you than just some gorgeous, headstrong woman who’s not afraid to take what she wants.”

Taking what I want... What I wanted was to feel like the woman Chase saw in me. “What I want is you.”

“You already have me.”

His eyes smoldered, his lips burned against mine as he pressed them apart. He circled me in his arms and his warmth, lifting me to his chest and cradling me against him.

The train of my gown trailed behind him as he carried me down the hall to my bedroom. His eyes searched mine; in his irises I saw his resistance to releasing me. Instead of putting me down and opening the door by hand, he held me tighter, lifting me until my face was sheltered by his shoulder. With a tilt of his hip, he kicked the door in.

My heart skipped a beat, and I clung to him, reveling in his cologne, his muscles... in him. We tumbled onto the bed, him on his rear and me on my knees beside him. I clawed the clothing from his body, leaving a pile of black twill and white silk on the floor beside the bedpost. He was Adonis in the nude, and he was mine.

The cleft between his rippled abdominal muscles beckoned, and crouching over him, the satin of my gown teasing his erection, I ran my tongue down his neck, past his navel. He twitched and moaned when the tips of my fangs grazed sensitive skin.

Tangling his fingers in the sheath of black hair lying over his abdomen, Chase tugged until I rose from his pelvis. With another tug, he pulled me to his mouth, and kissed me as he lifted his hip and tipped me over onto the mattress.

“You don’t need this anymore.” He ripped the spaghetti straps from my shoulders and curled his fingers into the layers of fabric over my breasts. The dress slid with a seductive caress off my body, leaving my nipples tight and every curve exposed. He licked moisture onto a fingertip, and teased a nipple until it tightened and I whimpered. Chase ran his fingers down my body. “This is so much better...”

“It would be better if your mouth were there...” My sentence trailed off into a

groan as he wrapped the tip of that breast in the moist heat of his mouth. My hips rose to meet his, the tip of his shaft teasing my ready flesh.

Chase pulled away, and reached down to the pile of clothes beside the bed. He grabbed a strip of silk, wrapping my wrists and then binding them to the pillar behind the pillows. He stroked the skin of my arms, leaning in to kiss me when he caressed my breasts. I writhed beneath him, pressing up with my hips. He pushed me back onto the bed, and shook a finger at me. “Not yet.”

I pouted and batted my bedroom eyes at him. “Please.”

“Not until I say.” He pulled away, pulling the sheets from beneath me and used them as loose bindings on my ankles. “There.” He admired his handiwork. “Now you are mine.”

In two hundred years, this was the first time anyone had put me into bondage. I loved it—loved giving complete control away. I closed my eyes and tipped my head back.

His hands were firm when he pushed my knees apart, and the hair on his thighs tickled when he settled between my legs. His hands slid from my knees to the apex of my thighs, spreading the wet velvet lips of my crease when he slid his tongue into my heat. My fingers convulsed in pleasure around the silk bindings and a moan escaped my throat. Knees falling to the sides, my hips rose and fell in rhythm with his tongue and the bliss riding through me.

Chase’s tongue danced, his finger plunged and the free hand slid up my stomach to tease my nipple. I groaned, head thrashing side to side as I fought against the orgasm he rushed me towards. The silk of my bindings cut into my wrists when I strained to reach him; the pain pushed my pleasure threshold higher. Blood soaked into the fabric, dripped onto my bed and the metallic scent riled the dark thirst in me.

“Like that?”

I could only groan in reply.

The heat and rapture disappeared when he pulled away, but in the momentary

chill, Chase rose in between my legs and into my silken heat. My eyes rolled, breathy pants escaped me. He arched over me, running his fingernails down my abdomen when he nipped the skin of my neck. The tingling tracks on my stomach added to the mix of pleasure and pain crashing through me. I surrendered to his will, bucked against him, pulling on my bindings to savor the sting. Orgasm was so close, every muscle in my body tensed for that release.

My bonds ripped from the pillar, and I kicked off the loose bindings on my ankles. With a twist of my ankle and tip of my hip, I pulled one leg beneath me, then the other and straddled Chase's lap. Pushing him down to the mattress, I eased down his rigid length. Chase's eyes rolled, his fingers twisted into knots in the bedding when he groaned.

The welts on my stomach smarted when I moved, intensifying every feeling. I gave him the same gift, running my claws down his abs. He twitched and breath hissed through his teeth. He opened his eyes in time to see me run my tongue on the bloody track. "Oh God." Tremors ran through him, and he hardened within me. "Do that again..."

I obliged, this time using my fangs on the muscle running across his shoulder. He groaned again, his breath coming in gasps. "Please, Mercy...bite..."

His blood was hot in my throat, but I would do no more than taste him. I licked the wounds and then rode his hardened shaft until an orgasm clenched every muscle in his body, and released the pleasure trapped in mine. I clawed my erotic euphoria across his chest and he shouted my name. He reached for me, and I collapsed against him. His blood soaked my skin and his hands stroked my curves and hair. Reaching down, I pulled the sheets over us and snuggled down next to him.

Chapter 6

I would have slept through the day, but our intimate moment was short-lived.

The silence was interrupted by a series of muffled concussions which spread across the outside wall of my flat. Chase sat up with start, tumbling me from his chest and flinging the sheets away. “What the hell is going on?”

Fingers over my lips, I motioned for him to be silent. I leaned closer to the outside wall. Ticking filtered through plaster and lath near the window frame. Chase gathered the top sheet and wrapped it around his waist, crouching near the end of the bed, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the window.

The ticking stopped. For a breath, silence returned, and then detonations rocked the apartment. Thrown backward from the force of the explosion, Chase landed atop the pillows and I collapsed at the end of the bed. Lights flickered, mortar and dust flew, wood cracked and glass shattered when the windows burst from their casings and crashed to the street outside. I flung my arms over my head, but shards of brittle plaster bit exposed skin and tore a gash in my scalp.

Chase’s voice cut through the din. “Mercy? Mercy are you all right?”

“I’ll live.”

Flames roared to life along the electric heaters, and frigid air rushed in the gaping holes. My apartment looked like a war zone, but I knew the true battle was

yet to come. This was a calculated move to piss me off and force me out into the open.

Rolling from the bed, I tumbled to the floor, smashing my knee on broken glass. I spat curses while I yanked jeans on and pulled a tank top over the blood drying on my breasts. An icy wind whipped down the street, sucking much of the dust out with it, but it did nothing to cool the anger rising in me. I squinted and saw a slim figure silhouetted in a dimly lit flat level with mine across the street. The person turned sideways, and the outline of a large weapon was visible over their shoulder.

Too close... A growl escaped my throat.

“What?” Chase jumped from the bed and peered in the direction which I looked. “What is it? Who did this?”

Hackles rose on the back of my neck. “Angel.”

He groped uselessly for clothes, but I pushed him back towards the bed. “Chase, you can’t go. You’ve been bitten and your strength is now mine.”

Refusing to listen, Chase slid his legs over the edge of the bed and tried to stand. His knees buckled and he crumpled to the floor. A frustrated snarl rattled from his throat, and glass shards cut into his knuckles when he pounded his fist into the floor. I bent to his side, hooking my hands underneath his arms and helping him back onto the edge of the bed. My heart hurt for him; his eyes were wide and I could smell his fear. His lips moved, but the word “why” wasn’t audible.

“This is why I didn’t want to bite you, Chase.” I placed a tender hand on his cheek. “The weakness will pass. There are spare clothes in the closet from...” I choked down my shame. “From one of the victims who came here. Find something to wear and go home. I’ll come to you when it’s safe.”

His expression was unreadable, and I didn’t have time to fathom his thoughts. Dawn would come, and it would come into whatever was left of my apartment. The gaping holes in my flat faced the east, and when the sun rose it would shine into and through my apartment. There would be no safe quarter for vampires. I could only

thank whatever god had turned from me—if I'd surrendered to my vampire tendencies, the morning light would have found Chase dead to life, and reborn as a vampire.

“Where are you going, Mercy?”

My scalp smarted as I twisted my hair into a tight braid. “To finish this.”

I glanced at Chase, locking gazes until that muscle along his lip twitched. I turned from him then, retrieved my jacket and forced the bedroom door open. His voice followed after me through the hallway.

My living room was a disaster. Bits of ash fluttered in the air, drifting on gusts rushing through the massive holes where the slider doors and adjacent window used to be. A fire raged along the inside wall, creeping across the rug toward the lone solid table. Pieces of furniture lay in a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, and snow drifted through holes in the curtains.

When I stepped into the large open area, shots rang out from the flat across the street. Tufts of fabric exploded in the air, ripped loose by bullets tearing through the upturned davenport. I dove for cover, rolling behind the armchair, and scrambling through the front door. The windows of the stairwell shattered, and rounds ricocheted off the metal stair railing.

White hot pain tore through my arm when a bullet drilled my bicep, a through-and-through shot that rendered my arm useless. A howl of rage ripped from my throat as I slammed against the wall of the first floor landing.

Blood smeared the white expanse, dripped from my fingers to stain the carpeting. I drove my fist into the entrance wound, staunching some of the blood flow while the burning pain of regeneration enveloped my arm and shoulder joint. The muscle twitched and jerked; the skin stretched and tightened. Then, as suddenly as the bullet had ripped through, the pain was gone.

I flexed my fingers, and then made use of the scant cover provided by the outside wall beside the front door. I slid down the hall and into the bowels of the

first floor until the handle of the emergency exit struck my hip. Reaching up, I disconnected the alarm attached to the door, then slipped out into the side alley. Dust drifted in the air, but the sound of gunfire or police sirens was absent. I crouched behind the dumpster, and assessed the building across the street.

It had been vacant the past five years, but now faint light burned on the floor level with the gaping holes of my apartment. Regeneration after the bullet wound drained my extra energy, and I didn't dare risk a phase shift into mists. Keeping low, I ran for the concealment of a vehicle on the main street, and then ran across the street and under a metal awning beneath the lit windows.

The lock had been pried loose and hung from a single screw; the door swung open into a foyer that reeked of jasmine and dust. The dry air itched in my throat and I choked down the urge to cough. I didn't want to alert anyone to my presence, and I didn't want to take in more of that floral scent than necessary.

A foot path trailed through the layer of gray on the tiles, into the hall and up the stairs. I scanned the room for traps or surveillance cameras—it was clear. As I passed through the foyer and into the hall, a great sense of unease quivered through me. The path was deceptively clear, as though left that way intentionally.

It was the first time in my entire existence that I wished I had a gun. Angel would be easily dispatched with a little lead. And she obviously had no problem with firearms or explosives. I was honor bound to my fangs.

I charged up the empty stairwell, counting the landings until I arrived on the proper floor. The hall was dead quiet but my heartbeat echoed in my ears. Pausing only a moment outside of the door to inhale, I kicked down the wood panel. It landed with an empty thud against the hard flooring within.

Teeth bared, I stepped through the portal. Nothing stirred. The room was large, designed like a medieval torture chamber with racks against the walls and barbed whips and chains littering the tables scattered throughout the expanse. Industrial utility lights stood in a haphazard pattern, their power cords snaking across the

floor.

A wooden framework sat near the east wall, center stage. Tables littered with instruments of pain flanked it, supporting actors in some sadistic play. It paid the room no heed, however, facing the thick, black velvet curtains shrouding the windows with an air of anticipation.

Those curtains had been drawn back to dramatic and fatal effect on some recent dawn. Artificial light bathed that stage's latest attraction, reflecting from the fangs of a vampire corpse bound to the rack, an actor in a twisted requiem.

“What the hell?”

“Yes, yes,” an airy, feminine voice simpered from the shadows beside me, “it is hell...for vampires.”

Chapter 7

I spun to face Angel. She appeared every bit the ethereal creature I knew that she wasn't. Her blue eyes, once rimmed in tears, were now icy; her clothes were nearly identical to mine, except for the tactical belt loaded with gadgets like Batgirl from hell.

“Angel.”

She shook her head, but then an odd expression clouded her face. “I used to be known by a different name...”

That knowledge made her more dangerous. Jealousy was a wicked motivator. She had reason enough to hate me in this life. The memories of my affair with her husband, Ambrose, of her husband's betrayal and death at my hands would only enrage the unbalanced girl.

She advanced, unsnapping a loop on her belt while I backed into the middle of the room, nearer the weapons she'd laid out like instruments for an inquisition. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction—or honor—of dying beneath my fangs. This fight would be woman to woman, not vampire and prey.

She ran the whip through her fingers, stroking the leather against her skin while her mouth worked on words she couldn't articulate. She lashed the whip side to side and then forward, catching a table leg and, with a jerk, tipped it over and sent the

tools clattering out of my reach. The table crashed atop one of the lamps on the floor, sparks flying from the cord.

“I can smell your blood, Mercy.” Her eyes rolled closed, she tipped her head back, and sniffed the air. “You’re injured. You vampires have a stink when you’re too weak to change, and I can’t have you picking up a weapon and evening the odds, can I?” Facing forward, she pulled up the whip, a maniacal gleam in her eyes. “Odd twist of fate is it not, that you and I end up at the same ends of a relationship? First you take Ambrose, my husband, and now Chase, my fiancé.”

I circled off to the right as she shifted the weight on her hip, knee bent forward and muscles in her arm tensed. She lashed the whip, and though I tried to catch it, the resulting strike fell on my cheek, splitting it to the bone. “Your blood for my broken heart!”

She raised the handle again, but this time, I caught the end in my hand and yanked it from her grip.

“Take the whip.” She shrugged, releasing a handgun from another holster on her belt. “I could shoot you through your black heart...” Her free hand balled into a fist and thumped against her chest. “And it wouldn’t do any fucking good. You would just regenerate.”

How does she know about regeneration?

“Yes, Mercy. Wipe the surprised look off your face. I know all about your vampire powers.” She swung the gun in a pointing gesture aimed at the shriveled body bound and facing the coming dawn. Her voice slipped misty and reminiscent. “My first victim... We had a special relationship. I learned so much from him. He bled, he healed. He begged, I denied. He even bit me, but in the end, the dawn was my ultimate weapon. You cannot stop the sun. And you will share his fate.”

“You’re crazy, Angel!” I leaned back, bracing my weight over my hips, ready for anything. “Do you really think you can kill me?”

“Call me Celeste.” Then, she leapt on me, fists flying. Every line of her body

had changed from tender virgin to hardened hunter. I tumbled backward, landed hard on the bare floor, and then shoved her from me. She sprawled across the floor, spitting dust and blood from a split lip.

I rolled to a standing position, facing her as she struggled to rise. “Well, Celeste...you choose the wrong vampire to fuck with!”

Grabbing a table for support, she hauled herself up. “No, you are the right vampire. Everything I’ve done is because of you! Do you know what it’s like to live with two different lives in your head?” She groped across the table and then flung a blade at me. “Since you murdered my brother Christopher, Celeste’s memories have been mine.”

“Poor little confused girl.” I curled my legs beneath me, and then launched off from the floor to ram my shoulder into her gut.

Angel came down hard, her limbs askew and tangled in coils of twine from the table top she struck on her way to the floor. She shouted and swore, grunting as she drove her fist into my gut. I pinned her down with a knee in the throat, but she pushed me off. We struggled with the cording until I had one of her wrists wrapped, and she had managed to slip a loop under my left knee. When I braced myself to rise again, she jerked her wrist and pulled the rope beneath me, pulling me off my feet.

Another table of torture tools came down when my shoulder hit it. I crashed to the floor, pain throbbing through my shoulder and neck. Angel took advantage, pouncing on my chest to pin one arm between her leg and the table. She grabbed up a blade with a handle like a crucifix and drove it into my chest, puncturing a lung. Pain exploded in my chest, blazed out along my left arm. Wheezing, I swung my free hand in a slash against her face, but she twisted like a serpent on a staff and wrapped that hand in the twine.

Trapped, I squirmed and bucked my hips. A knee connected with her back as she struggled to tie the bindings on my wrist, but she stood, avoiding my knees as she bound my left hand to a stretching rack positioned before the window.

I wrenched and pulled, kicked and struggled until the blade dislodged from my chest. No matter how I thrashed I could not undo the lashing around my wrist, anchoring me in the direct path of the sun.

In her arrogance, or perhaps wicked intent, Angel removed her weight from my arm, and leaned close to gloat. “Not so tough now, are you, Vampire?”

“Call me Mercy,” I snarled as I swung my free limb from underneath her foot and wrapped my hand around her neck. She blinked once as I jerked her head close and sank my fangs into her neck.

Her blood gushed like hot honey down my throat and I gulped as much as I was able to, sucking hard against her soft skin. A guttural sound escaped her throat, one I mistook for submittal to eminent death. But instead, Angel wrapped her hands around my throat, choking me as she wrenched my mouth from her flesh. Blood poured from her wound, wasted as it ran down her oxford blouse.

Angel rose to her feet and kicked me hard in the side of the head. Consciousness deserted me.

When I came to, pain clogged every sense, rage clouded every emotion. Angel had dragged my limp form directly in front of the windows, and left me propped up and loosely bound. The dawn was coming; already my eyes stung with the natural light. I squeezed my eyes shut again, and pretended to be still unconscious as I began to silently work at the knot that bound my hands. Angel raved, pacing back and forth.

“My husband, taken from me, twice by you. First his heart, and then his life! My brother taken by you!” She punctuated each phrase with vicious kicks to my ribs. “It was ten years ago, in a Louisiana bayou. Do you even remember?”

She didn't wait for me to answer. “I saw it all, Mercy!” Angel launched another kick at the hole left behind by her knife, then started to pace. “Each life. My lovers, my social standing... Everything you took from me... Vengeance became my goal, my breath, and my sustenance!”

She paused in her pacing, drawing close to stroke my cheek. “But then, I saw you. Beautiful, untamed, taking whatever you wanted. Your life was so much easier than mine. I was jealous of you, and it sickened me.

“And then I thought, ‘what better way to kill vampires than to become one?’ I could hunt you on your own terms. Use your powers against you all!” Then, her breath fetid and damp on my face, she slapped the cheek the whip had cut, and sent pain rocketing through my skull.

“Wake up, Mercy! I want you to witness this.”

My eyes snapped open, and the weak sunlight burned them. The exposed skin of my face and chest began to burn, but my hands were nearly free. I glared at Angel. “You're mad!”

Proving her lack of sanity, she put a hand on my jaw and pushed my head away. She bit into my neck.

“Damn you!” I struggled against her grip and my bonds; then, the bonds slipped free. “Do you have any idea how nasty a human bite is?”

“You won't have to worry.” Her voice was thick with my blood in her throat. “You're gonna die, and I'll be a vampire.” Her eyes were wild. She was so focused on my throat that she had not paid attention to the rope I slipped over her wrist.

“No, Angel.” I wrenched the rope tight to the sound of her cracking bones. Sidestepping an errant swing, I shoved her into my place on the rack. “You are going to die!”

The sun burst through the cloud layer, burning in its beauty. Both of us writhed in pain, and then Angel screeched as she pulled against her bonds. I covered my face with my arm, which burned, smoking and stinging, while I kicked the lever on the winch. The wrack dragged her body from the floor, and she dangled in the full sunlight.

My skin burned, and my eyes watered. Using the last of my strength, I dove for the heavy velvet curtains, ripping them from the wall as I wrapped myself in their

plush protective layers. I rolled from the sunlight bathing Angel.

Through a small slit I watched as her body convulsed in her human death, and then began to flare and snap as her newborn vampire flesh caught fire. Her pale hair glowed in a halo of flames, and her eyes flared as the sunlight burned through her. The blush on her cheeks turned to singed flesh, and then her body burst into an unrecognizable ball of flames.

Chapter 8

Fire reduced Angel's perfection to skeletal remains.

The winds of time claimed Celeste's spirit.

And death was relieving me of Ambrose's curse.

I rolled from my velvet cocoon, dragging the thick death shroud over me as I slunk into the shadows of the far corner. My muscles burned, every limb ached, and broken bones did not heal. Only the vampire legacy in my veins kept life within my body, but even that faded as I watched the sun burn a slow semi-circle across the dust on the floor.

Sirens screeched in the streets below, and echoed with the heartbeat in my brain. From my vantage point I watched search lights flashing in the gutted apartment I used to call home but—by some blessing or sick twist of fate—the authorities did not come into Angel's loft, my tomb. The blasts had destabilized the building, the remaining residents had been evacuated, and I could only hope Chase had escaped the flat before the fires destroyed everything.

His survival would be tainted by memories of me, but not by the vampire poison I carried. I was at least able to save him from the fate he rushed toward.

The lights deserted the apartment, they ceased to flash in the street below, and when the sun was at its zenith, the emergency crews taped off the building. An

uneasy quiet settled over the area, and into me. I did not want to die, not after finally finding someone to share my immortality. Yet, ironically, neither did I want to curse him with it. Blood loss destroyed rational thought, and I clung to Chase's image as my eyes slipped closed.

Oh, Chase...

The pain faded, and my heartbeat slowed. My breaths shrank, the field of my blurry vision narrowed until the black death of sleep embraced me.

*

Hell smelled like musk.

Hell's fingers were gentle.

Hell's voice was soft and strained by tears when it called my name.

The renewed pain reminded me much of the life I'd left behind, but then I opened my eyes and found I'd not died and gone to hell. I was in heaven, and Chase Rogers was there to greet me.

"Mercy... Mercy, come back to me." There were no tears in heaven, and I was not dead. Chase's tears splashed on my face when he knelt on the dusty floor of Angel's torture chamber, and called my name.

"You survived?"

A smile flirted with his lips, but then fell away. The tears returned. "Yes, I survived." His fingers hovered over the wound on my cheek. "My God, what did she do to you?"

He pulled the fabric from me, and the scent of burnt flesh wafted up. Chase gagged and covered his mouth and nose with his elbow. "Oh, Mercy..."

"Chase, stop." My voiced was dry, raspy, alien in the room.

"No, Mercy." He knelt and snaked an arm under me. "We need to get you out of here."

“There is no ‘we.’” I hung limp on his arm. “I’m dying.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“It would take too much blood. I’ve taken too much from you already.” I gasped for breath. “I’m not worth your life.”

Chase bit his lip, his eyes were dark and they coursed over my face as he rested my body on the pile of velvet. The storm in his eyes passed, and he left me then. The cacophony of his anger rang in my skull when he kicked over tables, tossed weapons on what I thought was his path out of this tomb. *I don’t want him to see me like this...* I closed my eyes, and accepted the death I felt embracing me.

Firm fingers lifted my chin, the heavy scent of metal rushed into my sinuses and warmth bathed my face, ran over my lips. “Take it, Mercy. Take it, or we both die.”

My eyelids parted; blood rained down from a deep angular cut running up Chase’s wrist. My agony, the act that I had tried to avoid, was thrust upon me.

Sweet, stupid, self-sacrificing man. There was no surviving a cut like that.

I locked gazes with him; a melancholy expression shadowed his eyes. He forced the cut onto my lips, and his hot blood poured down my throat. I could hardly swallow, and gagged on the force of it pushing into my gullet. The parched tissues of my throat and mouth absorbed the blood, the fluid soaked through my stomach and into my lungs and heart. Regeneration tingled along my skin while my heart raced, pushing the healing essence throughout my body. My brain buzzed in my skull, and cool air rushed into my lungs.

Chase slumped over. Chills wracked his body as he lay atop me, but I pushed him off and scrambled to a kneeling position. The blade he’d used to cut his wrist bit into my knee—a bitter irony to find the crucifix blade to have cut us both. I flung that knife as far as possible. The handle broke the large pane of the last window. The glass shattered and the knife was no more.

Wrapping Chase’s forearm in my hand, I stemmed the feeble blood flow. He winced, rolled onto his side, eyes looking up at me. I wiped his blood from my

mouth, and then stroked his hair back from his face. “You precious, chivalrous fool.”

His voice was weak, breathy. “Mercy me...”

Tears ran from the corners of my eyes. “I don’t have a choice anymore, do I?”

He shook his head, but his eyes glided out of focus. “Chase?” Panic welled up in me. The life of the one man to touch my heart in two centuries leaked through my fingers. Sinking my fangs into my wrist, I cut the vessels and released my potent poison. “Come on, Chase. Wake up!”

His eyes rolled back, but then he blinked and those dark irises focused on mine. My heart soared. “There you are. Now stay with me.”

I sucked blood from my vein, and retained it behind my fangs and over my tongue. Gazing in his human eyes one last time, I kissed him, pressing his lips open and pouring the life altering fluid into his mouth. His jaw closed with a nudge of my palm, and then I wiped the red trickling from the corner of his mouth.

He panted, an aerosol of blood plumed from his lips. Chase’s eyes twitched and his jaws locked. I curled my legs beneath his head, buffering him from the thrashing I knew was to come. Leaning over him, I pressed him to the floor when the tremors started. His legs thumped, hands and arms flailed, and then his entire body convulsed. But then all movement ceased.

Chase Rogers died to life.

His vampire birth was fascinating to witness. The transformation flowed down him in a visible wave; his body changed, became soft and permeable like the plasma-mist form, and then hardened back to his human form of sexy muscle and rugged jaw line. The emergence of his fangs filled out lips that beckoned to be kissed, and when he opened his eyes, they shone with the mystic knowledge carried by the vampire strain.

He rose to a sitting position, eyes wide as he examined the world with new vampire sight. One hand and then the other lifted before his face, he turned them,

flexed his fingers and watched claws extend and retract. He looked at each arm, each leg, and then patted his torso, and probed the muscles of his back.

Chase stood, and the fresh power resonated from him. I could not deny his outstretched hand, and crumpled willingly to his chest when he pulled me into an embrace. Though I'd lived as a vampire for ages of night, being in his arms both terrified and thrilled me. The depth of his untapped dark magick, the essential masculine power it awoke in him was tangible, and Ambrose's paled in comparison.

Chase kissed my forehead as he stroked the length of my hair. Gazes locked, he leaned in and devoured me in a passionate kiss. Breathless, I clung to him.

The dark never felt so right, the evening shadows never given such an intimate kiss.

I stroked his cheek. "You know I would not have given you my blood, if you had not shed all of your own."

"I do." He smiled and those wide white canines set my heart to pounding. "Why do you think I did it?"

I rested my head against his chest. "In honesty, I do not know, Chase. Why would you choose an eternity of bloodshed and darkness with a woman you hardly know?"

"My life has never been what I wanted. I hated every moment of snobbery, loathed every high society function. There was never peace, never passion, just keeping up the façade."

"And what of Angel? You were engaged, once."

His smile was almost painful to see. "She was everything I thought I ever wanted. And nothing I needed."

Exactly what Ambrose was in my life. I kissed him quickly, nipping his lip for the bliss of commingled blood. "Now that is something I understand."

He licked the blood from his lip. His expression smoldered when he returned

the favor, cutting my bottom lip and spreading the sanguine ambrosia in my mouth with his tongue. Groaning, he released me, taking my hand and leading me toward the door.

“So what are we going to do now?” He pushed open the door. “Your flat is destroyed. The authorities will eventually find Angel, and then the hunt will be on.”

“I have a safe house.” Chase stopped, turned with a shocked expression. I gave him a crooked grin. “I know what I’m doing, Chase. I haven’t survived this long without learning a few tricks.”

“I guess I have a lot of learning to do.” He opened the door, and scanned the hallway for witnesses. “It’s clear. We can make it to my car without being seen.”

“We can’t take your car.” I tugged on his hand. “They’ll be looking for it once they realize you’re missing.”

We stopped at *The Weathered Vane*, ducking into the back alley and the utility room, where I climbed the shelves and retrieved my emergency travel bag. Our immortality required start-up capital, and I needed clean clothes—that and more was in my duffle bag.

A suburban with blacked-out windows sat parked in the far corner of the parking lot, Chase surprised me with jimmying the lock and hotwiring the vehicle. Putting down the alley, we eased the nose into traffic and I climbed behind the back seat to change clothes.

Dressed once more in girly clothes that I considered urban camouflage, I dropped into the seat next to Chase. He rolled an eye at me and then snorted. “What are you wearing?”

I looked at the pale, embroidered jeans and screen printed t-shirt. “Camouflage. Don’t you like it?”

His smile was crooked, and I had the distinct impression he silently laughed at my ultra-feminine attire. “No one would expect me to dress like this. Besides, when we reach the hideaway, you’ll need new clothes, too.”

“Where is this hideaway of yours?”

“Somewhere warm. Somewhere far from here.”

I looked back through the window at the shrinking lights of the frozen town. A bittersweet sense of nostalgia rose in me. I’d lived and died there in the 1800s, and returned there throughout the last two centuries. But, with Chase by my side, and my nemesis in ashes behind us, I’d probably never return—and I was okay with that.

Looking at Chase, I knew I finally had what I’d been missing in my immortality.

Epilogue

Louisiana, ten years later

Moonlight danced on the black waters. The bayou sand was warm between my toes, and the scent of the neighbor's crawfish boil drifted over the privacy fence. Somewhere a radio played a Cajun melody, lively with stringed instruments and fattened by a brass horn. The sultry summer air kissed my skin and danced in breezes through my hair. Cotton skirts swished around my ankles as I walked to the shore.

Chase rose from the water's surface, his hair slicked, eyes dark and piercing. Shimmering water cascaded down his muscles, ran in rivulets along the cleft that guided my eyes to the waistline of his swim trunks. His cheeks were pink, even in the moonlight, and I knew he'd taken more than a little flirtation from the redhead at the beach party.

I had to smile. Chase had come to thoroughly enjoy his enigmatic abilities, and often baited a girl back for us to share.

He wrapped his wet arms around me, and kissed me, grazing my neck with the tips of his fangs. I didn't need his husky voice to make me melt. "Hello, my lover."

"Why don't you put those fangs to better use?"

His dark eyes bored into my soul. I was molten and weak, lust crashing through

me like high tide. “Take me...”

He didn't reply, but scooped my legs with his free arm and carried me to the bungalow. The door, swollen with summer moisture, creaked on its hinges and slammed shut behind us. Candlelight shone from the nooks and crannies of a cozy, somewhat Caribbean décor.

The trap door to our daylight sanctuary was hidden in the hallway. Chase pulled the handle, and the door opened, releasing the scent of musk and incense into the hall. The scent infused my sinuses, tingling, teasing, riling my desires. My fingers convulsed, nails digging tighter into his shoulder. Spiral stairs led to a large bedchamber. Here was our true home, where we lived through the sunlight hours, and made love deep into the dawn. Plush rugs softened his footfalls, and the satin bedding embraced us when we fell atop it.

Chase knelt beside me, and removed my blouse button by button. The cool air sent goose bumps across my skin and tightened my nipples. His lips and fangs enveloped an areola in biting pleasure when he curled his fingers in the fabric circling my waist. My hips elevated to ease the passage of my skirt; Chase retraced the garment's path up my legs with his tongue while he hooked his arms beneath my knees.

He slid down onto his stomach and between my legs. Curling my fingers in his hair, I guided his mouth to where I needed it to be.

He spoke in hedonic tones to my ready flesh, dancing his tongue in my wet velvet walls and sending pleasure through me. He doubled my bliss when his tongue retreated and he replaced it with two fingers. The plunge and pull with a little twist at the end drove me wild, and Chase used the trick deftly to get me writhing and panting. My moans were not enough; he was bent on my orgasm. His tongue stroked little circles on one nipple while he used a rhythmic motion to bring me to the threshold of complete euphoria.

When my muscles clenched and hips quivered against his hand, he moved his

mouth to the inside, uppermost point of my thigh, kissing the skin before sinking his fangs in. My fingers clenched to fists in his hair as pleasure and pain collided within and an orgasm surged through me.

Chase crawled up my body, straddling my hips, his damp swim trunks sending chills through me. He noticed the prickled skin of my arms. “Sorry, love.” He stripped the damp shorts away, pitching them into a hamper in the corner. I settled beneath the covers and he joined me, his chest pressed to my back, his arm warm and heavy when he wrapped it around me and pulled me to him.

Everything felt right in his arms. Even the vampire strain in my blood no longer felt like a curse. It was a blessing, giving me an eternity with Chase. I was so grateful for him, for his sacrifice which allowed us infinity together.

That truth in my heart needed to be spoken. “Chase?”

“Yes, Mercy?”

“Thank you.”

He brushed my hair away and kissed the nape of my neck. “For what?”

“For being you, and being mine. Immortality, without you, is not enough.”

He hugged me tighter, then reached up and blew out the single candle lighting the room. “I should be the one saying thanks. My life before you was empty—I did not truly live until I died to be with you.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AE Rought is a multi-published author, with works published under two different names. When writing as AE, the stories explore passion and pain in their many shades, through the genres of fantasy and the paranormal. Look for witches and magick, fangs and fur, and heart stopping emotions.

AE's blog: <http://aerought.blogspot.com>

AE's website: <http://www.aerought.com>

AE's email: aerought@gmail.com



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