

Trish never asked to be the human queen of a vampire Collective. She enjoyed her life as a wedding planner and the long-term fiancée to a prominent doctor. Even so, she can't deny the sudden thrill of sharing sexual power with hundreds of hungry night creatures turns her on.

Even more exciting than the exhibitionist appeal of her royal duties is king of the neighboring Collective. Remy becomes her mate and partner in harnessing the ritual power needed to overthrow a common foe. Little does she know the pleasure she experiences with him is just the first of many delights she will share with him and Damien, her dark-haired goth-child of an assistant.

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High Heels and Bloodsuckers

By

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Dedication

To Marisha, for believing in me when no one else did.

Chapter One

Oft moans filled Trish's foggy head long before she realized they came from people other than just her. Her eyes opened a slit to see bodies pressed around her. Naked, warm, caressing bodies writhed en mass, and she acted as the focal point around which the strangers gathered.

Alluring sounds of awe, she realized, accompanied the moans. Her admirers examined her with hushed reverence. The scent of so many bodies filled her nostrils. She struggled to focus on faces, but the faces were a blur of brilliant eyes and lust-filled gazes. Her eyes fluttered and she fell back into unconsciousness.

The wind rustled the grass around Trish. Oblivious to the glowing skyline stretched out beyond the cliff where she sat, Trish stared at the toe of her designer-labeled pumps. My favorite shoes and now they're ruined. What was I thinking? She scraped mud from the toe then twisted her foot to see where the skin fell away from the heel.

She swallowed back a lump in her throat.

She looked up, confused. *Good question*. Trish picked leaves and debris out of her shoulderlength auburn hair and took inventory—black sweater layered over a black silk shirt over a black camisole, black slacks, and red snakeskin heels. *What the hell? I never wear black in the spring*. She seldom wore black at all except for the must-have little black dress that she updated seasonally for cocktail parties.

Trish frantically searched her memory for a correlation between sitting at the edge of a mountainside rest area now and her last clear recollection of standing outside the St. James Methodist Church swatting a mosquito. Mosquitoes weren't uncommon in the spring, but this one had seemed bigger than most, and the bite still stung.

There wasn't a connection—not one she could come up with anyway.

The last she remembered the midday sun had glared down on her. She had been wearing a conservative beige suit with a flared skirt and white sling backs. The red heels had been in the trunk, just back from the cobbler who had repaired a broken heel.

Trish had owned the red snakeskins forever and couldn't part with them over something like a broken heel. They defined who she was—or at

least wanted to be. The sling backs were work shoes, must haves for a wedding planner. Misplacing them was no big loss. She had a dozen pairs just like them in her closet at home.

But all this black? Sheesh, what was I thinking?

She watched the moon glow in a half sphere over the distant skyline. Any other day, she might have found tranquility in the sight. Now she confusion. She looked found more headlights zigzagged up the hillside. waning daylight, she could just make out a sports car-Russell's foreign red sports car-Trish's inspiration for the snakeskin purchase. At least she hoped it was Russell. She didn't remember calling him, but she found herself stranded and he was the closest thing she had to a knight in shining armor. If only he wouldn't show up angry, but what were the chances of that? Anything she did to disrupt his schedule angered him these days.

Trish stood and brushed the dirt off the seat of her skintight denim and Lycra blend pants. She didn't need to see the tag to know. A lifelong love of shopping had taught her to identify just about any fabric by touch. Definitely not her doing. Her tastes ran more toward natural fibers like cotton, silk and wool. The more she thought about it, the less she recalled about the origins of her unlikely attire. She rubbed the swollen and tender

mosquito bite on her neck. Her mother would have something in the medicine cabinet to put on it. That was one of the many advantages to living at home. Mom ran an organized household and believed in stocking more than either Trish or she would ever need. More often than not, perishables ended up in the trash with expired dates.

The wind whipped her hair and the grass. Leaves blew around her in a mini-tornado. Trish made a futile attempt to tame her hair, knowing Russell would not approve. He had very definite ideas about how she should look, and windblown chic did not apply. Once, he had shown up to her door for a date and refused to be seen with her because he had deemed her lipstick hooker red, and embarrassing.

She was right. He didn't approve of her current appearance. As soon as the car stopped beside her, he looked her up and down. His lips curled down in his normal grimace. Trish pretended not to notice or care. She had ten years invested in their relationship, for gosh sake. If she let every little grimace or snide comment stand in the way of her long-term plans, she would have left Russell years ago. Besides, he wasn't always that way. The more responsibility he took on, the more demanding he became.

He was a real catch—a man's man with a brilliant future ahead of him. She intended to play

an intricate part of that future as his wife and the mother of his children. She almost smiled at the thought of children. She knew she would be a good mother.

"Well, are you going to get in or just stand there?" Russell asked. "You've already pulled me away from the Knicks game."

Trish quickly climbed in next to her blondhaired, blue-eyed fiancé. "Sorry, I didn't know who else to call."

"What are you doing here anyway?"

Staring out the window, Trish noted the passing hillside cemetery not far from the rest area. A large stone mausoleum was the centerpiece to a host of smaller ornate tombstones—nothing like the modern cemeteries where all the headstones were set flush to the ground. "I don't know."

"How could you not know? I suppose you don't know where you left your car either, do you?"

"I-I don't remember," Trish said timidly, eyes brimming with tears. She hugged herself and tried to stop the steady pounding inside her brain.

"Oh please, don't start the waterworks. It was just a question. I don't really care where it is. It's your car. I was making small talk for Christ's sake." He reached over and flipped on the radio. The game blared through the car, cutting off

further discussion.

Trish sobbed under her breath, determined not to upset Russell any more even though she was falling apart inside. All of a sudden, she was cold, so cold. The kind of cold she had only felt once before, when her father died. She had a hole in her memory, and it was killing her. What happened to me? Was I assaulted? Kidnapped? Where's my car? How did I call Russell? I don't have my purse or cell phone. Tears streamed down her face. She wiped at them and tried not to sniffle.

Russell shot her a look of irritation mixed with concern. "Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine. Just tired and confused."

"Are you sure?"

Trish nodded.

"Then how about letting up on the tears? Save them for something important." He patted her leg and shifted gears, leaving his hand resting on the gearshift.

Full dark descended on them before they reached Russell's home.

Russell glanced her way and asked again. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Trish managed a nod.

He entered the condo before her, at her request, and shut the door, leaving her to fall apart in the car. When she regained her composure, she went in to find him in front of the entertainment center she had bought him, watching the game.

Now she looked into his face, silently pleading her case, but knowing he would have his way. Knowing she would always do whatever it took to make him happy, to make him stay with her. He could have any woman he wanted, and if she gave him even the smallest opening, he would find one of those women and leave her out in the cold.

His pants lay open, his cock exposed and waiting for her.

"Honey, just a little," Russell pleaded.

She loved the way his blond hair fell over his brow as he looked down at her. However, she didn't like the way his hand pressed the back of her head, urging her closer. She would never tell him that, though. She never told him what she wanted.

"Remember our rule," he said.

How could Trish forget? They had dated for a decade, and he had always set the rules. Not everyone got engaged to their college sweetheart, then a med student and now a doctor. If she forgot, he gently reminded her that performance on demand was a condition of their impending marriage. Of course, how impending was still open for discussion. She didn't push setting a date and he never mentioned it. She wanted to press the issue, but no time seemed to be the right time. In exchange, he provided her with a steady flow of wedding clients and the prestige she so

desperately sought. If she were totally honest with herself, he enjoyed an active role in the more elite social circles, which provided her with a place to wear the designer fashions that she adored. In some ways, he was her trophy fiancé.

Slowly, she went to work, mouthing him almost to the point of gagging as she always did when it wasn't her idea. She had learned long ago to work through the revulsion and concentrate on bringing him to a quick climax.

With half of his length in her mouth, she slowly worked her way farther down, her hands cupping his sac, holding it firmly, keeping her lips locked around him. Trish took a deep breath as she slid up to the head. The odor of his body, of his sexual need, triggered something within her, some longing, some basic instinct that was foreign to her, as if it belonged to someone else. She felt like the apex for the longing of a thousand starving souls. Trish salivated, suddenly feeling her own need kick in, and with it, the first drops of moisture soaked through her silky white panties. At least, the last she recalled, her panties were white. She scooted closer to his chair, wanting her body to touch his, but not wanting to free him from her mouth long enough to change positions.

Russell's breath echoed in her ears. Her tongue pressed against him as he pulsated. Too soon. She slowed her rhythm, concentrating on the very tip until she tasted the first drop of his seed. That singular salty taste reminded her of something forgotten. Something so important that she desperately sought more, somehow knowing it had to do with the missing links in her memory. She devoured him, determined to draw from him her lost memories.

She felt hands on her naked body—everywhere, waist, breasts, the length of her legs. Her hair, fanned out around her. Hands tweaked her nipples, cupped the heat between her legs, molding her body into a melting pot of hunger. The press of people kept coming forward, worshipping her gently with eager hands and faces brimming with longing. Trish felt panic tickle the back of her throat, but a deep voice filled her head with reassurances until she relaxed.

Stay calm, my queen, they only want to touch you, to be near you. Through you, the Collective will find strength again. When you feed, they feed. When you writhe in the arms of passion, they too, will feel the heat of desire and through it, they will find ecstasy.

Know them, my queen. Know them and love them as they love you.

Trish looked up into the most exquisite blue eyes. Lost there, the hands touching her became his. Heat puddled deep within her, and she welcomed it. Not often had Russell taken the time to tease her into such a moistened state. Bottled lubricant saved time. She lay wrapped in the

stranger's arms, his legs stretched down each side of her. She tried to turn around, to see more of this man with the hypnotic eyes and soothing cadence, but he stopped her.

No, tonight you belong to them. Tomorrow, you will return to your old life, and I will come to you again. When I come, I will take you to your new home. With your people around you to witness your decision, witnessed by visitors from neighboring kingdoms, you will choose a king. Choose me and we will rule side by side. I will make you happy and teach you the ways of our people. We will leisurely explore each other under the moonlight anywhere in the world, but for now, you must give the people what they want. Show them you accept them as your own.

Everywhere she looked, faces eagerly searched hers for recognition, reassurance. Hands fondled her, so many hands, so many sensations as they stroked her legs and coddled her breasts, running thumbs over pebble-hard nipples. Hands combed through her hair and slid between her legs, spreading her juices over her thighs. Once the initial shock subsided, Trish melted into the group embrace, consumed by the passion. Her own hands reached out to cover the hands kneading her breasts. She thrilled as the warm heat spread through her until she felt like she would explode. The intensity of their welcome overshadowed everything she had ever known.

"Stop, Trish, stop!" Russell begged as he tried

to push Trish from him. Trish held on with more strength than she knew she possessed.

Trish worked furiously over his determined to return to the vision, to feel so much a part of a group, and to the arms of the stranger where she felt safe and loved. Her mouth felt fuller. She gulped down the liquid that she suddenly realized filled it. The first taste, coppery and warm, reminded her she had tasted similar. The hunger flowing through her cried out for more, more response from her captive, a more passionate response from Trish. The hunger wanted the deep throb within her to explode into a mind-blowing orgasm. Still she held back, afraid to let go for fear she might lose the memories now returning to her.

Russell struggled to get away from her. He cried out.

The memories skipped forward or backward. Trish didn't know for sure. Trish's lips locked to the side of an old woman's neck. An exotic tonic slid down her throat, warm and rich, holding the tang of life. As she drank, the same deep voice that had comforted her during her earlier vision seeped through her consciousness.

And written in the Book of Dreams, the flying bloodsucker shall choose one to replace the aged. Once bitten, she shall come to us, seeking the blood of her predecessor. She will be strong, sure, and capable. Under her rule, the Collective will once again become a

power with which to reckon.

The old woman drooped in Trish's grasp, her life force almost depleted under the hunger of the new vampire queen—under Trish's hunger.

From blood to blood the power passes. The rule of one ends as the reign of another begins.

Russell's slowed heartbeat echoed through Trish's head, but he no longer cried out. Not even a whimper reminded her he was there-real-as much a part of Trish's reality as the visions. The full consequences of her actions, the fact she was no longer involved in just a sexual act, rather feeding her people with his blood, had yet to trigger in her brain. She, out of the instinct instilled in her when she took the life force of the old queen, fed like a starved woman. Centuries told her to feed, to fill the emptiness within, and her body listened. With her mouth, she sucked blood. With her body, she felt the sensuality that came with intimacy, the intimacy she had so often shared with Russell and the newfound intimacy of her people. She writhed, pressing against him, contorting into a position in which she could keep her hold on him and seduce him with her body.

Thump...thump... Slow and uneven, Russell's heartbeat echoed.

Patricia, my queen, you must stop feeding now. Our laws forbid the killing of an innocent, the deep voice of the man with the striking blue eyes echoed through her head. Trish would forever recognize

his voice.

No, I have to feed. I need to know more. Let me feed, Trish silently pleaded.

You love this man. Would you have him die? Stop or he is a dead man. Do you hear me? Stop! Pull away now! he demanded. If you kill him, you break Collective law. It frees your subjects to do the same. I cannot allow it. Many innocent lives would be taken.

A mysterious metaphysical hand grabbed Trish, and she hurtled from Russell's lap. She landed across the room. Her head banged into the big screen TV. A basketball player in a yellow and black uniform made a basket over her head. The crowd cheered. In her head, the connection with the clinging hands of the men and women severed. She sat there alone, staring at Russell lying lifelessly in the chair across from her. Blood smeared his groin. Trish tasted the same on the corner of her mouth. Her eyeteeth receded as she fought to regain the breath knocked out of her by the abrupt trip across the room.

She blinked back tears while she slowly got to her knees and crawled back to Russell. A quick check of his pulse assured her he still lived. Relieved, Trish rested her head against his leg.

It's real, isn't it? I'm a vampire. On cue, the scent of Russell's fresh wound whiffed through her senses, arousing her anew. She salivated and squeezed her knees together, fighting the urge to attack him again with her mouth, teeth, and body.

Usually she enjoyed touching Russell, the feel of his strong hands on her skin, but now...now she felt a sense of urgency that bordered on a newfound addiction to the purely animalistic musk of sexual arousal. Determination to digest the last few hours of her life struggled to the surface through the ever-rising fever burning through her.

Her mind raced from one event to the next and back again, putting everything in sequence, and then she came to Russell. My God, I almost killed him. I would have. How could I turn lovemaking into...into something so...sick? Tears rolled down her cheeks again, and this time they wouldn't stop. She sobbed, aching with the decision she knew she had to make. As her eyelids grew heavy, she came to the obvious decision. I can't be with him. It's too dangerous. Even if he would understand, I can't risk his life.

Trish awoke in her own bed. A lace canopy draped down in virgin white panels. The air smelled of fresh lavender. The setting sun glowed outside the windows. Kip, Trish's toy poodle, lay by her side with his head skillfully situated beneath her outstretched hand.

Trish blinked then stretched. *A dream. It was all a dream.* A grin of relief warmed her face as she sat up. Abruptly the grin fell. A vase of red roses and her red snakeskin heels—in pristine condition—

rested on the trunk at the foot of her bed. She reached out tentatively for the deep blue note card tucked into the roses, as if she expected the roses to attack.

While Kip stared at her with big black eyes, Trish flipped over the card addressed to her. The writing on the back was unfamiliar—large and scrolling. An image of the stranger in her dreams flashed before her.

My dearest,

I thought you would be more comfortable in your own bed. Your mother is a charming woman, very understanding. I told her you fell ill at the wedding reception and only now felt well enough to come home. I hope you approve.

I resolved the situation with Russell. He will not remember anything from your visit. I urge you to consider severing the relationship. He is not worthy of your attention.

Your loving servant,

Eric

The note fluttered out of her hand as the voice in her head, the man holding her during the quasi-dream and the name Eric all culminated into one. He was the one who had prevented her from killing Russell. He was the one who had talked her through the ritual that had brought her to this point. Now apparently he was destined to lead her into the next phase of her life.

She didn't want to follow him, yet what choice

did she have? She didn't know anything about being a vampire. Hell, if you had asked her if vampires were real before waking up on that hillside, she would have thought it a big joke.

She didn't realize she was holding her breath until her lungs felt ready to burst. She stared from the note to the roses to the heels. She thought about Russell and the missing time. Nothing made sense anymore. Hopefully Eric would provide the clarity and guidance she needed.

Chapter Two

ip yipped and Trish hushed him. Her mother was asleep and did not need to know that the supposedly still under-the-weather Trish was up painting her toenails at two in the morning. But when Kip wiggled off the bed and beat a path back and forth between her bed and the closed door a few times, Trish got the message. Kip did not normally bark unless he wanted something, like a potty break.

"You would want to go out now." She loved her dog but noticed how he most needed her attention when other things occupied her. She supposed raising children would be no different.

She did the undignified heel walk, known by all women who wanted to protect wet toenail polish from an untimely run-in with carpet fibers out her bedroom door, down the hall and through the living room to the kitchen. She unlocked and opened the door leading to the fenced-in

backyard. A very dashing and smiling Eric greeted her.

Kip yelped.

Trish yelped then swallowed and made several attempts at speech before succeeding. "What are you doing here?"

"Good evening, Patricia. I thought we should talk. Is this a good time?" Eric looked around her to scan the kitchen.

"I don't want to talk. I want whatever has happened to me and you to go away." Trish felt the strain of her own stubbornness press against the inside of her skull. As hard as she had tried over the last twenty-four hours to believe the orgy and the horrible scene at Russell's were just bad dreams, she couldn't. That Eric stood before her with his broad shoulders filling her mother's doorway only reaffirmed the truth.

"We should. If not tonight, then when?" Eric asked. When she didn't answer, he continued, "I'm sure you have questions for me."

Now that he mentioned it, she did. "Come in, but be quiet. My mother is sleeping, and I don't want to explain you to her." Trish stepped aside and let him in. Kip took the opportunity to make a break for the backyard.

Eric seemed to fill her mother's simple kitchen. Although he wasn't a huge man, he exuded an air of distinction and a demand for attention that was hard to ignore. In some ways, he reminded Trish of Russell—not in looks, but in the way he radiated confidence, even when standing still.

She motioned for him to sit then went about making two hot chocolates in a bid for time. What should she ask? Did she really want to know any more than she already did? This was one time when she really did think ignorance was bliss. Eventually she could stall no more without seeming rude, so she sat a steaming cup in front of Eric and one in front of her customary place at the table across from where he sat. The heat from the cup stung her hands as she held on to it.

Eric waited long after the silence had grown uncomfortable.

Trish finally took a deep breath and let it out slowly. None of this was going away, including the man who sat across from her.

"I'm a vampire, aren't I?" Trish asked. "I bit Russell and enjoyed it. But how? I don't feel dead."

Eric sighed. "You are not dead, Patricia."

"I don't understand," Trish said. "By definition a vampire is dead, right?"

"Let me start at the beginning. The majority of all vampires live under the laws of the Council, which has divided the world into Collectives." Eric held his pointer finger parallel to his thumb. "Think of vampire Collectives as tiny states or territories within the bounds of human countries. A king or a queen runs each Collective. This leader is always chosen from the living through the bite of a common mosquito that has been magically empowered with this one task."

"I understand that part. The ceremony—with the old queen—some of this was covered then I think." Her memories were still foggy, but this she remembered. "I don't understand how I can be alive and still be sensitive to daylight, not to mention that little blood-thirst thing I did. I don't even like steak tartare."

Eric nodded as if pacifying a distraught child. "Once bitten by the mosquito you collapsed. As anticipated the wedding guests called for an ambulance, once they could not revive you. Our living servants monitored the emergency frequency and intercepted the ambulance. Instead of taking you to the hospital, they took you to the Stalworth Collective lodge—about four hours away.

"I believe you recall what happened then."

Trish felt the blood rush to her face. She remembered all right. She remembered the ritual blooding of the old queen. A vividly, she remembered the mass of writhing individuals stroking her naked body. Although her sexual experience before that night had been pretty conservative, she recalled melting into the arms of

strangers and feeling the hunger build.

She took a sip of the hot chocolate in front of her. "Don't I have a choice in all this?"

Eric sat up straighter. "You have one of the biggest decisions of all to make! It is up to you to select a mate." With a charismatic grin, Eric said, "I recommend me. I was the past queen's second for fifty years, and I know more about Collective operations than anyone. I am also attractive, an excellent lover and exceedingly attracted to you." His gaze travelled over Trish, stopping at the full mounds of her breasts.

Trish fought the urge to cross her arms. She kept telling herself that he had seen her breasts before, and much more, when he held her while the strangers—the vampires—had welcomed her as queen. Even so there was something about him she did not quite trust.

She would pay good money if her subconscious agreed. Instead Eric was the latest in a long line of fantasy men to occupy her dreams. She had spent the day asleep in this world while her dream world revolved around making love to Eric. God if he was as good in person as in her imagination—

"What about your queen's mate. Can't he take over as the leader?"

"She. Her mate was a female, and she lost her life in a house fire two years ago. Vampires possess amazing healing abilities, but not even a vampire can survive incineration."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry."

"It was a tragic loss for all of us. The Collective has experienced a power drain ever since. I wouldn't be surprised if the queen hadn't died in spirit with her mate." Eric looked at his hands as if just now noticing the shine of his fingernails.

"Regardless her mate was little more than a pampered concubine. Totally unsuited for leadership. But you, my dear Patricia, you reek of regal ability. Combine that with your obvious passionate nature and I can see spending an eternity with you. Me ruling the Collective and you the beautiful jewel by my side and seductive slave in my bed."

"Passionate nature? Me? But I'm not—"

Eric's gaze darted from his hands to her face. "You forget, Patricia. I've seen you when you lower your shields. I saw how you responded to the Collective. How you enjoyed their hands on your body and how you eventually reciprocated."

Trish's flesh heated. Never had anyone spoken to her so. She had been credited with many attributes, but never passion. And yet passion wasn't the issue. The issue was how this lifealtering event affected her long-term goals.

"So how does this work?" she asked. "Do we hold secret meetings twice a month? Can I keep

my day job—I mean once I can stay awake during the day?" Her heartbeat jumped. "I will be able to function during the day again, won't I?"

"Of course! This sensitivity to the daylight will fade as you adjust to your newly inherited powers. You are still a mortal woman.

"However I don't recommend staying here. Ruling a Collective is a full-time job. Besides, look at what almost happened to poor Russell. You wouldn't want that to happen again—or worse—to happen to your mother." Eric shook his head, his look prompting her to think twice about her request.

"Goodness, no, but won't I gain control over my-my craving?" Her mind flashed back to Russell's blood-smeared groin and she shuddered.

"Do you really want to take a chance with the lives of your loved ones or your clients?" Eric asked while shaking his head.

Give up her job and dreams of a future with Russell? Worse—give up her life with her mother, her only living relative? How could she? Her mind reeled. Too much change too quickly. She felt like she had entered a wind tunnel and couldn't find her way out the other side. Perhaps she could survive by doing it Eric's way until she could get a grip on all the changes. At the very least, doing it his way would give her a chance to discover an out for the mess she'd had forced upon her.

Later, after she could breathe again without worrying what she might do next, she would be angry. She would think about the crime committed against her, but right now she needed to go with the flow.

"How do I explain my disappearance?" Trish asked.

A Cheshire cat grin lit up Eric's face. "I thought you would see it my way. I've already handled Russell. When he awoke from his near-fatal encounter, I used my hypnotic powers to replace the truth. He thinks he broke up with you over sexual differences."

"Sexual differences? What sexual differences? I've kept him happy for ten years. Couldn't you have come up with something else?"

"Hypnosis only works if the party is already predisposed to the idea. Most men want more from their relationships than they are willing to admit to their partners. He is no different."

"And my mother? What do I tell her?"

"She already believes you met me through Russell. Tell her I've offered you a job as the manager of my mountain lodge. With your organization skills, it's a natural match. Since the lodge is several hours away, she will understand your need to move. We can use massive overtime to explain away infrequent visits home until you have acclimated to your daylight sensitivity."

The way Eric explained things, it all seemed so simple. She had nothing left to do but hand her clients off to another wedding planner, pack and mourn the death of her dreams of life with Russell.

Eric stood and walked toward the door. "I know you must be full of questions for me. Unfortunately the evening wanes. I must get back to the lodge. I will return in what? Three days? That should be enough time to put matters in order, I think."

Stunned, Trish watched him leave then scooped up Kip who had slipped back into the house as Eric left. She held him close to her and rubbed his ear. "Ready for an adventure, little guy?"

Chapter Three

"paby, Eric is here," her mom's muffled voice seeped through the door into Trish's room.

So soon? Trish looked around at the hundreds of fabric samples, wedding invitations and vacation brochures scattered around where she sat crosslegged in the middle of her pink-carpeted floor. Her job as a wedding planner had given her ample opportunity to collect samples of all her favorite details from other people's weddings. Ever since her engagement to Russell, almost eight years ago, she had scrapbooked wedding ideas. She held an antique white fabric sample, a souvenir of the Compton and Henderson wedding. To her right, topping the stack of wedding invitations, an embossed rose-patterned invitation in the palest of pinks reminded her that only last week Trish had decided on a printer. It was all for nothing now. Russell was history, due to a little vampiric faux pas that had almost cost him his life. Now Trish was the brand-spanking-new vampire queen with no hope of a traditional wedding.

For that matter, her career as a wedding planner was gone, too. The demand for after-five weddings was slim. And although she could still function during the twilight hours, she doubted she would ever see noon again. Her mother had said she had tried to wake her several times during the past three days but to no avail.

Trish got up, smoothed imagined wrinkles from her black slacks and straightened the lay of her off-the-shoulder black sweater. Black during the spring. I'll never get used to it, but a vampire queen must look the part.

She threw two more piles of samples into the already overflowing trash and picked up the overnight bag from her lacy white canopied bed. She sadly fingered the row of stuffed animals lined up at the head of her bed and looked around the room one last time. Moving out of her mother's house felt strange. This was the only home she had known in all her thirty-two years. She had seldom even slept at Russell's place. He did not sleep well when he shared a bed.

When Trish entered the living room, Eric and her mother looked up from the photo album they had been looking and laughing at. One look into Eric's smiling face and Trish's heart skipped a beat. Dark hair, chiseled features, and broad shoulders made him attractive, but it was his brilliant blue eyes that left her breathless. She

could have easily fallen into them and lived happily ever after if her heart had not belonged to Russell for so long. Now, with her break with Russell so fresh, she felt guilty for finding another man attractive.

Trish didn't realize she was staring until her mother said her name again.

"Baby, are you all right?" Mrs. Penobscot had always called her Baby, and Trish didn't think anything of it until she saw Eric's bemused look. Now she reddened in embarrassment.

"I'm fine."

"Your mother was showing me some of your baby photos. You were an adorable child, as I knew you would be." Eric's voice was silk, warm, and smooth, sliding over her senses.

Trish struggled not to squirm at his compliment. She wasn't sure why. She knew she was an attractive woman with shoulder-length auburn hair, blue eyes, creamy skin, and as her mother liked to remind her, wonderful bone structure. A high metabolism meant she never had to watch her weight, and aerobics three times a week kept her fit. She took pride in the fact she could still fit into the same jeans she had worn in high school. No one she knew could say the same.

Do vampires need aerobics? I mean, if they don't age and if injuries heal quickly and cut hair grows back overnight, wouldn't their bodies always revert back to the same condition they were in when they died? At least those were vampire characteristics she'd picked up from the few horror movies she had watched and Eric's brief visit three nights prior. Trish kept busy digging through her purse for nothing. She preferred busywork to standing in the middle of the floor looking stupid while she silently questioned her new...condition. But I'm not dead, am I? And I don't subsist on blood and I can still see my reflection in the mirror. She looked up into the mirror over the sofa table.

Behind her, her mother jabbered away. Eric made polite responses, but he no longer focused on the pictures. Rather he watched Trish with the open longing of a lover too long apart from his better half.

No, my queen, you are not dead. A queen is chosen from the living. Her blood mixes with that of the old queen, giving you the powers of the Collective. It will make you crave the blood, but no Stalworth vampire is restricted to a blood diet unless he chooses it. It is an old wives' tale, as is the missing reflection.

All will be explained to you. Just give it time. No one wants to overwhelm you with too much, too soon. Eric's voice embraced Trish's psyche, soothing her as it had before.

Although he still sat across the room on the sofa next to her mother, Trish felt Eric's body pressed against her back, his arms mirroring hers. She could almost smell his cologne and feel his breath on her hair. She closed her eyes and held on to the edge of the table as his hands stroked her arms.

I want you so much, I can barely stand it. Make me your king and we will be together forever.

She felt the sensation of his lips touching her collarbone then the tip of his tongue flicked her skin, tasting her as she wanted to taste him. Suddenly her temples throbbed and her eyeteeth elongated until it was hard to keep her mouth closed over them, but she had to. Her mother was here. More importantly Trish did not know if she would hurt Eric as she had hurt Russell.

You want me. I know you want me. If we didn't need to leave now to be back at the Collective before morning, I would make you mine. Eric's voice washed over her, cajoling her so effectively that for a split second, she considered giving in to the sweet arousal flaming low in her body. She blinked twice and dismissed her urges as she had so often since puberty.

After a few deep breaths and a tear-filled goodbye to her mother, Trish and Eric rode in his Italian sports car up the side of the same mountain where she had awakened with a bad case of amnesia and poor fashion sense. Naturally the car was black. All the questions she had thought to ask earlier left her head as Trish fell into a funk, thinking about everything she had been forced to give up—Russell, friends, her mother and her job. She'd never asked to be queen. It had been thrust upon her, and now she felt like a loose cannon, apt

to go off and suck someone dry at the drop of a hat. Never mind she had only taken blood the one time. Once was too much for someone like Trish, who would not hurt a fly unless it stood between her and the last pair of upscale high heels on the sale table at Macy's. She'd do almost anything for a new pair of shoes, especially if they were on sale.

"Are you all right?" Eric asked.

"Why does everyone keep asking me if I'm all right? I'm not all right. I'm a Godforsaken vampire! All I wanted was to marry a doctor and have two point five kids, a housekeeper, and a closet full of expensive shoes. Is that so much to ask?" Tears brimmed in her eyes, but she didn't know if they were tears of grief or anger.

"You can still have those things."

"Russell won't have anything to do with me now."

"Russell isn't the only doctor in the world."

"He's the doctor I want."

"Why? From what I saw, he treated you like a second-class citizen." Under his breath, he muttered, "Asshole deserved what he got."

"What did you say?" Trish's emotions were becoming less conflicted by the moment.

"I said he's an asshole and didn't deserve you."

"That isn't your call to make. You're judging him on one night. I've known him for ten years." Trish shrugged. "He's just under a lot of pressure right now. Besides, I irritate him when I get emotional."

"Right."

"Now what do you mean by that?" Trish knew she was looking for a fight, but she couldn't stop herself. She'd given up her family, her job, and most of her shoe collection, at least temporarily. She was in no mood to defend her choice of men.

"Nothing. Let's just drop it. It's a moot issue anyway."

"Fine," Trish snapped.

"Fine."

They rode the rest of the way to the secluded mountain lodge in silence, Eric keeping his eyes on the road, Trish staring out the window into the dark, which did not appear so dark now that she had vampire vision. She could see everything as if it was noon rather than after midnight and as if she was standing still instead of speeding up the mountainside.

By the time they arrived at the lodge, the sun created a soft glow on the horizon and Trish's eyelids drooped.

Roughly hewn of logs and the size of a four star hotel, her new home would have impressed her on a good day. Right then Trish didn't care. It could have been a bat cave as long as she had a place to lie down.

"I'd show you around, but it's late. The others

have already retired and we should follow suit before the sun rises," Eric said.

"Just show me where I sleep."

"Very well."

While the outside of the lodge was rustic, the mahogany-paneled interior screamed of luxury and money. Red carpets covered the floors and masterpiece portraits in gilded frames decorated the walls. Skillfully arranged fresh flowers in crystal vases adorned surfaces throughout the building. Eric led her through the huge entryway and upstairs to a suite at the far end of the lodge. He opened the door and said, "I hope this will suffice. The former queen found it comfortable."

Russell's entire condominium would have fit in the room. Glass from floor to ceiling made up the wall opposite the door. The room was elegantly furnished with two couches and an assortment of tables and side chairs. Had she not been so tired, Trish would have given the room more than a brief scan. A huge mirror hung to the left. Trish assumed the double doors to the right led to the bedroom. While she took in the view of the mountainside and the creeping sunrise, Eric touched a switch located beside the door and deep blue velvet drapes slid out of the walls to cover the windows.

Eric grinned at her. "Just a precaution. Your mother said the morning light doesn't bother you

much, but it does those of us who are undead. All the rooms are similarly equipped."

Trish nodded toward the double doors. "The bedroom's through there?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Good night—or morning. Whatever..." Trish said brusquely as she carried her overnight bag toward the doors. She was too tired for amenities. She just needed to lie down and sleep before she fell down.

She opened the door and flung the bag into a chair. Her clutch purse landed somewhere behind the chair. Trish didn't miss a step on her way to the king-size bed. The flats on her feet flew to the floor as she collapsed onto the bed, dead to the world, not knowing or caring whether Eric had left. As a rookie to the vampire scene, Trish found that daylight acted like the ultimate sleeping aid.

Trish didn't know when the dream started. One minute the sweet bliss of unconsciousness engulfed her. The next she lay in the arms of a man, his naked limbs entwined with hers. Bare flesh touched bare flesh while their bodies created the perfect spoon. His breathing echoed hers. She tensed, trying to get her bearings in the darkened room. The sheets were soft. They smelled of soap. He smelled of soap. She turned her head, wanting to see who held her. The slightest move and he

responded, pressing against her. His hand slid up to cup her breast, gently squeezing the sensitive mound of flesh. Her nipple hardened instinctively and she moaned. The man rolled her onto her back. Ah, Eric. It's only a dream. Trish relaxed. Eric had visited her dreams and fantasies since the incident with Russell. iust different as manifestations of many attractive men had since she had hit puberty. As a lucid dreamer Trish was fortunate to remember many of her dreams and to be able to call upon them at will for a little light entertainment.

His lips found hers, and she eagerly responded, loving the feel of him as he slid on top of her, his body pressing down on hers. Tenderly, he kissed her. His hands traveled over her, awakening within her the fires of passion she knew were there but seldom experienced. Where his hands touched, soon his mouth followed, leaving a moist trail down the side of her neck, nibbling at her collarbone and lower until he could suck one of her already nub-hard nipples into his mouth. His tongue circled the puckered flesh until pleasure akin to pain made her arch beneath him. She wrapped her fingers in his hair, holding him to her. He fondled her free breast, tweaking her nipple until it became a matching beacon of exquisite pleasure bordering on pain to the one he so thoroughly mouthed.

Never had Russell spent so much time attending to her. With him, it had always been what he needed, what he wanted. Trish had only been with one man—Russell. She had read, had heard it could be different but to experience it, to lie back and close her eyes, attuning every fiber of her being to the warm sensation Eric so expertly drew from her was heaven. For the first time she understood why so many women were addicted to sex, needed it as much as a man, and she wanted more.

Fluidly, she used her newfound strength to roll their bodies over until she was on top. His face reflected her passion. Lips parted, kissable, he waited for her to initiate the next move. She willingly did. Wanton lust filled her eyes as she looked down into his.

Trish kissed him, letting her tongue play in his mouth before she left a trail of kisses across his jaw. Her body moved slowly over his, grinding into him, setting the rhythm that he soon matched. Eric's hands lay comfortably against her hips, urging her without hindering her movements.

Trish felt all-powerful when sucking on Eric's earlobe brought about his moan, almost a growl. Trish smelled the blood pumping through him. His pulse echoed through her head. Her body moved faster and she pressed harder against the length of him as if to absorb him. She felt her

eyeteeth expand, filling her mouth, urging her to taste him as he lifted her hips and slid into her. She fought the need to draw blood. She was still coherent enough to remember what had happened with Russell, but the feel of Eric inside her soon grew to be too much. She pressed her teeth to his neck.

"Yes, yes. Feed. Feed," he begged, his hand going to the back of Trish's head, pressing her to him while his body moved with her ever faster. Frantically she reached for more. Needing more. Finding more as she sated her thirst with her body and mouth.

Waves of pleasure rolled through her. Every nerve twisted into a tight bundle of energy ready to burst forth like a star gone supernova. She reveled in the intensity while shifting beneath Eric until his cock pressed against g-spot. Her nerves unraveled in a screaming mass of sensation. Trish threw back her head and cried out, her hips bucking over him, grinding, thrusting.

Eric cried out but held her to him, riding out wave after wave until Trish finally rested on top of him, sated, breath uneven.

Hours later, Trish awoke. Although the drapes remained closed, blocking out all indication of day or night, she knew it was late into the night. Beside her Eric slept with a sheet draped across his bare midsection. The rest of him glowed an almost ghostly white against the rich blue of the silk sheets.

Her eyes widened as she saw the crimson marks on his neck. *It wasn't a dream!*

"You-you...I didn't..." Trish stuttered as she slid off her side of the bed, taking the sheet with her, leaving Eric nude and beautiful against the dark backdrop of the bedding.

Instantly his eyes opened, and he popped up in bed. His hand went to the neck wounds. Eric flashed Trish a Cheshire cat smile as she continued to back up until the back of her knees came in contact with the edge of a chair and she fell backward into it.

"Good evening, lover," Eric said.

Disbelief in the obvious left her grasping for something to say. "Lover? It was real?"

"Very. Didn't it feel real?"

"I thought it was a dream. I didn't know." Trish searched for words that weren't forthcoming. "I wouldn't have... I mean, I don't sleep around." She shrank back into the chair as she spoke. Her temples throbbed. Her face flamed. Her thoughts went everywhere. She felt used, yet, how could she say he had taken advantage of her? She had been an all-too-willing participant. And yet it wasn't supposed to have happened like that. She should have fought back. She should have

remained loyal to Russell. "No. No. It's not supposed to be this way. I love Russell! Do you hear me?"

Confusion written on his face, Eric eased his way to the edge of the bed, toward her. Trish looked for a place to run—run from him, run from what she had done and what she felt.

"Trish," Eric growled.

She spotted her bag on the chair next to the door. Eric's car keys lay next to it.

"You did nothing wrong," Eric said.

She looked at him sitting on the edge of the bed. His manhood hung limp between his legs, reminding Trish how good he had felt inside her, how she'd wrapped her pussy around him and ridden him like the wanton woman she only allowed herself to be in her dreams. But it shouldn't have felt good. I love Russell. How could I let him...how could he... I thought it was a dream.

Her eyes darted around the room, anywhere to avoid looking at Eric.

"Trish." Eric's voice contained a hint of warning as she sat forward and gathered the sheet around her. "Don't do it."

Trish saw the sinewy muscles in his arms and neck bulge as his body tensed, and she instinctively knew she had to go now. With speed she didn't realize she possessed, she had the keys and overnight bag clutched in her hands to the point of pain. She threw open the door and

stormed through the dark sitting room, stubbing her toe on a table as she made a sharp turn to the exit.

"Damn," she cursed under her breath.

"Trish! Don't go!"

Eric's footsteps echoed hers as Trish took the stairs two at a time. In the main hall, Trish felt as if people were staring at her. They were but blurs as she flew by. She didn't slow down to open the door but pushed through it, hearing it fling outward and land in the yard beyond her. She blinked back tears of shame and struggled on.

"Trish, don't run!"

Eric tore behind her, but she outpaced him. Had she stopped to think about it, it might have occurred to her that the former queen's abilities had passed on to her, making her faster and stronger than Eric, but she didn't take the time. She had to run and run she did.

The car remained parked where they had left it upon arriving. She was in it and turning the key when Eric reached her, his naked body slamming into the side of the car. Trish screamed, shifted the car into gear and sped off.

Fifty miles down the road, Trish finally slowed down. Tears streaked her face and shoulders and created a dark splotch at the top of her makeshift attire. She took a deep breath and looked down. Dark blue in spring. At least it isn't black. Without

warning, she started giggling. The giggles turned into a heartfelt laugh. The tears kept falling, but for some reason beyond her comprehension, they were tears of laughter now.

A strange sense of pride seeped over her. She'd run for her life and still managed to hang on to the sheet. *Top that, Superman*.

Chapter Four

Hickory Creek loomed in front of Trish as sunrise crept over the horizon behind her. The needle on the gas gauge had been resting on empty for the last half hour. Trish shook her head hard, trying to shake away the urge to sleep for just a little longer, at least until she could find a motel.

The city limits sign reported a population of 653. Trish held out little hope for a Holiday Inn, but any place would be better than sleeping like the dead in a cramped high-end sports car while wearing only a sheet as protection from the local criminal element. On the seat next to her, her overnight bag lay open. Her prized red snakeskin heels rested on top of the jumbled mess she had made while digging through the bag one-handed and steering with the other. The mad money and spare credit card she kept tucked behind the mirror of her cosmetics case meant she'd have a place to sleep, and tonight she would find something more appropriate to wear with the

heels, makeup and lacy red panties. The knot in the sheet kept slipping loose, more than once while she was within viewing distance of a very grateful trucker.

The far edge of the city limits came into view before Trish spotted the series of rustic cabins that made up the Green Acres Travel Lodge. Rustic was the kind way of saying the white paint had peeled and curled up to resemble the roughly hewn logs once used to create log cabins. Trish pulled off the blacktop and flinched as the white gravel kicked up against the undercarriage. She was still angry with Eric, but no one with a soul could put even the tiniest ding on a classic automobile, like the one she drove, without remorse.

A man's voice boomed in the motel room. "You're Patricia Penobscot?"

Trish scampered to the far edge of the bed, holding the bedcovers up as a shield. *Shit. I've been caught with my pants down twice in two days.* More than her pants, actually. She still had not purchased any clothes and her one pair of clean panties lay next to her red heels on the dresser.

"Who are you?" Her voice came out as little more than a squeak. She eyed the bearded stranger whose appearance screamed mountain man to her while considering her options. It didn't take long. As she saw it, there weren't any. He sat between her and the door, and she had no doubts that he could bench press two of her without breaking a sweat. Her super speed and vampire strength were still too new to her for her to think about confronting him.

"I'm Remy. This is my territory." His face remained emotionless.

"I don't understand."

"Eric said you're the new queen of the Stalworth territory. Macon vamps hunt here."

Confused, Trish fought for an answer. "I'm not here to hunt. Just passing through. All I need to do is gas up the car and purchase a few things then I'll be on my way."

"Tradition says you ask before you pass this way."

"I didn't know." Relieved to know Remy wasn't a rapist or murderer, Trish attempted a smile. "I haven't attended any vampire etiquette classes yet."

"Eric said you'd had a misunderstanding." Remy leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "He said he'd be beholden if I'd hold you here 'til he arrives."

Trish sat forward, forgetting her grip on the covers. They fell into a bunch below her bare breasts. "Eric's coming here?"

"Should be here in an hour or so, I expect."

Remy let his gaze travel down to Trish's breasts, but then returned to her face.

Startled into action, Trish tossed the covers to one side and threw her legs over the side of the bed. She started to get up before she remembered her naked state. She frantically grabbed at the covers as blood rushed to her face. Until a few days ago, Russell had been the only man to ever see her naked. If her dreams were really memories, as Eric had assured her, since her induction into the local vampire Collective, she'd been pawed by an orgy of adoring followers, fucked Eric, and now she had flashed a stranger. She would be humiliated later, when she was safely away from all the freaky madness.

"I've got to get out of here so if you'll excuse me..."

"That's Eric's car out front?" Remy asked.

"I'm borrowing it."

"Eric says you stole it."

"Fine, then I'll walk." Fumbling with the sheet, Trish stumbled to the dresser, grabbed up her things on her way to the closet-sized bathroom and sat them on the counter.

Staring at her reflection in the water-stained mirror, Trish tried to collect her thoughts. How had Remy known she was here? The car. It had to be the car. She should have known she couldn't hide with such a conspicuous vehicle, and now it

looked like Remy wasn't going to let her leave with the car. She could either walk out of here or catch a bus, provided a bus went through Hickory Creek.

Her stomach growled, reminding her she had not eaten in more than forty-eight hours, unless she counted the blood transfusion she'd taken from Eric the previous evening. Trish chose not to. She doubted this *fine establishment* offered room service but thought Remy might be compassionate enough to let her eat before Eric arrived to haul her back to the lodge.

She yelled through the thin bathroom door. "Remy? I've not eaten in a couple of days. Do you think I could get a burger before Eric shows up? I could also use some clothes. I left rather abruptly."

No answer, but she heard the outer door open and close.

Relieved to be rid of her captor, she finally could see an option open to her other than just going peaceably back to the lodge to serve as Eric's concubine, as he had referred to the former queen's lover. Sure he had repeatedly made it clear he wanted to fill the role of her mate, but she never, ever agreed.

She slipped on her panties and the heels, brushed her teeth then took out her cuticle scissors. James Bond had his handy-dandy spy tools. She had her overnight bag. She unwrapped

the sheet then eyed the fabric for design possibilities. Using the cuticle scissors to snip the fabric, she proceeded to rip off the excess length, rewrapped the fabric around her body, took another measurement and ripped off some of the width. This time, when she wrapped the sheet around her, she could easily knot it into a homemade sarong that was semi-attractive and, at the very least, respectable enough to get her in and out of a store where she could buy some real clothes.

She ran a comb through her hair, put on some red lipstick and shoved everything but the car keys back into the bag. Eric's car would have to do until she could get to a used car lot that accepted credit cards. Fortunately, living with her mom freed up most of her paycheck to apply against her credit card. If she went for dependable rather than sharp, she should be able to buy a car with the card and still have enough credit left to last a few days. Then she would call her mom and ask her to wire enough money to start a new life somewhere away from Eric and his friends. She didn't ask to be vampire queen, and if it meant sleeping with a creep like Eric, she most definitely didn't want to the job. Strange how a one-night stand has so thoroughly changed my opinion of Eric. As a vampire, he was oh-so attractive, but as a mistake, he's lost all appeal. Craving blood was bad enough without losing her self-respect.

Slipping out of the bathroom, she scanned the room for anything she may have missed, not that she had brought much with her. She double-timed it to the door, praying she had not taken too long and Remy was still gone. She flung open the door, then took a step back as she stood face to chest with the giant stranger who had awoken her earlier. She looked up and up and up until she finally came to a well-trimmed beard, full lips and blue eyes that were bright enough to rival Eric's.

"I sent Randolph for food," Remy said. While Trisha stared at him, he stared at her. "That a sheet? You'll need to pay for it. Marge and Carl can't afford for you just taking it."

"I left my credit card number at the desk. They can charge the sheet to my bill. I don't steal."

Remy and Trish looked at Eric's car simultaneously.

"The car doesn't count. If he hadn't taken advantage of me, I wouldn't have run." Trish regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth.

"Eric don't seem the type, but no matter. That's your business and his." He motioned for Trish to step back into the room. "Food's on the way. Might as well get comfortable."

Trish did not look forward to being closed back up in the cramped room with Remy. He was coarser than most of the men she knew, not that she knew many outside of work and family. His grammar was rough. The fingernails on his oversized hands looked chewed off but clean. His clothes were also clean but worn. He'd left the faded brown plaid flannel shirt untucked and it hung down over his barrel torso.

He sat in the only chair the room had to offer, leaving Trish to make herself comfortable on the unmade bed. She found it hard to comfortable in an unfamiliar hotel room while sitting on a mussed bed, especially with someone like Remy sitting across from her. Not that she found him particularly attractive, yet his mere presence filled the room with more than just his size. He exuded an earthy air of self-sufficiency and ease within his own skin. While Trish fought not to squirm, not to give in to the antsy feeling that crawled over her, he looked as comfortable as if he sat in his own living room.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, Trish abruptly stood and started making the bed, beginning at the far side of the bed from where Remy sat. He got up to help as if it were the most natural thing for a man his size to do. His motions mirrored Trish's, and they put the bed in order within minutes.

A knock at the door announced the arrival of Randolph, who carried a picnic basket and a grocery store plastic bag.

"Randolph is my second, like Eric's yours,"

Remy explained.

"Ma'am." A kind smile lit up Randolph's round face as he handed the basket and bag to Trish. "My wife didn't know what you liked to eat so she sent a little bit of everything. She also sent some of my daughter's clothes. Remy said you'd be needin' a change. They might be a little big on you, but I suspect they'll do until you can get back home. Hickory Creek doesn't have a mercantile."

Trish felt her face go red again as she adjusted the sheet a little higher with her free hand. "Thank you, Randolph. Thank your wife for me, too. I'll see to it your daughter's clothes are returned."

Randolph left and Trish spread the feast out before her. Ham sandwiches, fresh tomatoes, potato salad and apple pie. Trish's mouth watered as she took a bite of the sandwich before remembering her manners. "Please, help yourself. I'm famished."

"Thank you, but no. Can't stomach food since I turned a few years ago."

"Eric said eating was a choice with vampires."

"It depends on the lineage. Stalworth vamps can eat. Our sire felt he could gain more power on a blood diet so his preference passed down to his offspring."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think. You seem so..."

"Human? I'm human, just not a living one. Makes no difference. I always ate too much anyway." His smile made his eyes light up until they twinkled. "You'll turn, too, I expect. Most do, after a time. The blood craving gets too strong. Makes you do foolish things. Besides, 'til you do you'll continue to age. No point in growing old if you don't have to."

"How did it happen? How did you turn?"

"Randolph's daughter Lizzie was just a little thing. She'd gotten herself lost up near Cavern Lake. The search party I led found her on the far side of the lake, clinging to a tree like it was her last hope, and it was because there was a black bear at the base of that tree just waitin' to turn her into dinner.

"When Lizzie saw me, her grip slipped and she started skidding down the tree. Well you know how it is with us. We've got a lot of speed and strength so I thought I could take on the bear 'efore it got to her. I grabbed that bear around the middle and hung on for all I was worth, not noticing he had brought along a friend to his picnic. I got swiped across my back before I knew what'd happened. I let go of the first bear to find myself in the middle of a bear hug between the two.

"Lizzie made a beeline to the rest of the search party, but the bears did a good job of killin' me before the men carrying the guns could get them off me. So that night, my wounds healed and I turned full vampire. Happens that way with living rulers. We retain our natural lives 'til a mortal injury takes away our choice. I've even heard some of them commit suicide to force the change. Anyway I haven't had a solid meal since.

"Is Helen's ham as good as always? Smells good."

Trish swallowed, then responded. "Excellent. Thank you. How has it been, you know, since turning into a vampire?"

Remy shrugged. "This is a small community. Not much happens here that everyone doesn't know about. Most of the citizens are vampires, familiars, or kin to a vampire. My momma's been a vampire since I was six. My daddy wasn't. I grew up knowing the ways of the vampire so when I was chosen king, it was no big surprise. I kind of expected I'd turn either by accident or by plan before I hit forty. Seemed only natural to turn while I was in my prime. The bears got to me when I was thirty-eight. If it hadn't been the bears, it would have been a four-wheeling accident or a car wreck. I never was no good at being careful.

"What about you? I take it you had no idea before the choice?" Remy asked.

"I didn't even know there were vampires. One minute, I was going to a wedding... I'm a professional wedding planner—and a good one at that—the next I was sitting in the middle of nowhere waiting for my boyfriend to pick me up. It wasn't until later that I even started to remember what happened. I still don't remember all of it. Mostly just the queen biting me and then all the touching." Trish colored again as she flashed back to the Collective gathered around her as she lay naked in Eric's arms. Hands stroked her, tweaked her nipples. Strange lips and tongues glided over her own, trailed down over her soft flesh. She squirmed as her pussy heated from the memory.

She looked up from her apple pie to see Remy watching her.

Solemnly, he said, "Ain't no shame in the flesh, Patricia. Your people need you. They can feed off your sexual energy just as easy as they can blood and your energy will satisfy them a lot longer. Remember that when you feel their hunger. That's why it's so important for you to choose a mate. The time will come when your sexual activity may have to sustain your entire Collective."

"Call me Trish. Everyone does," Trish said. "Listen, I don't like the idea of people losing blood to feed others, but I also don't feel comfortable sharing my bedroom activities with a bunch of strangers." Or friends, for that matter.

"Once you get to know the people who make up the Collective, you'll see things differently."

"Maybe, but I really don't want to know them. I

just want to disappear."

"Because of Eric?"

"Yeah." Trish nodded.

"Eric acted as the old queen's second. You have the right to choose your own champion, but it could lead to dissension within the ranks. Collective politics are tricky even for seasoned vamps."

"What is a second?"

"A second in command. Someone to help you rule. Someone to depend, but you still set the laws, not him.

"You are the only other vampire I've even talked with. How am I supposed to choose a new second or mate or whatever?"

Remy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can't tell you what to do. I grew up with my people, but I would think the first step would be going back."

"Do you have a queen?"

Remy chuckled. "Not me. I've never found a woman who could stomach my company that long, but it's not for a lack of trying. I inherited a whole Collective full of matchmakers."

A hard knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Trish didn't need Remy to open the door to know Eric stood on the other side.

"I think I'll change clothes now." She made an escape to the bathroom, avoiding Eric a little

longer and allowing the men to talk.

Trish took as much time as she could without feeling like a lowlife coward. By then the discussion in the other room had died down. Randolph had provided her with a red scoopnecked T-shirt that read *Life's a Bitch* and a pair of yoga pants that were only a size too big. She pulled the drawstring tight then folded down the waistband. At least the heels matched the shirt. She could have looked worse.

She left the bathroom clutching the folded sheet to her chest and surprisingly found Remy waiting for her alone.

"Where's Eric?"

"I convinced him it would make a better impression on the Collective for you to return under your own power, rather than under his arrest," Remy said.

The problem remained that Trish did not want to go back. She wanted her old life. She wanted to sleep in her bed with her poodle Kip. She liked her job as a wedding planner, and she found life with Russell comfortable.

"You look like a deer caught in the headlights," Remy commented.

"It's just that I feel like I'm a Roman about to be fed to the lions. I don't even have a sword and shield to protect me."

"Sure you do. You're the queen. What you say

goes, and if anyone gives you any trouble, you've inherited the strength and speed of your predecessor. She was a tenth generation queen. You could whip my ass if you took a mind. My Collective only goes back five generations."

"Even Eric?" Trish asked.

"Hell, that boy ain't got nothin' on you that you don't let him have, including that fancy car out front."

"Still, he knows the Collective and they know him. I don't have anyone, not even my mother." Trish looked up at Remy with her best coy look. "Too bad you can't be my second."

"Well..." Remy cleared his throat and suddenly found his hands very interesting. "No. I can't do that, but if that king position's still open, I wouldn't be opposed to applying. We could combine the strength of our Collectives." He cocked an eye in Trish's direction.

Trish looked at the big man as if she didn't quite grasp the meaning of his words, then her eyes lit up with comprehension. "Oh, Remy, I appreciate the offer, but I don't know you. I would like to think of you as a friend, someone I can turn to for advice."

Remy stood and walked to the door, talking to Trish over his shoulder. "Ain't important. Was just an idea. 'Course I didn't expect you'd take me up on it. Me being a big galoot and all, and I can tell, you're used to nice things. All I've got to offer you is a cabin in the backwoods and my protection. Of course, you don't need my protection." He smiled. "Could be I could use yours."

Trish smiled for the first time in days. "Maybe."

* * * *

Remy watched Trish pull onto the highway and disappear down the road. What was I thinking, suggesting she accept me as king? I wouldn't even accept me as an equal to a lady like that. She needs someone who'd feel comfortable wearing suits and eating French food.

He walked over to his beat-up pickup truck and climbed in, turned on the ignition, then just sat there, unsure of where he was going. God, when the sheet dropped and her breasts came into view, all I could think of was crawling into bed with her. Nipples puckered into tight little buds, creamy skin, full lips and those eyes begging me to protect her. Hell, I'm worse than some teenage boy who gets turned on because some girl winks at him. For all I know, this woman is playin' me for a fool, looking for a way to take the Macon territory.

He squirmed in his seat and adjusted his cock as it grew firm and demanding in his pants. He decided to go home to the cabin and shifted the truck into gear. He had been staying with at his folks' place for the past week or so while tending to Collective business. There always seemed to be at least one feud going on, requiring his intervention. I don't think so though. She's scared. Whatever happened between her and Eric's got her spooked. It's not bad enough that fate threw her into the vampire life. He's got her thinking she needs him to survive. There's no way she can rule a Collective that size if she can't stand on her own two feet.

He blinked at the thought of Trish off her feet. His eyes continued to scan the road, but he saw little of his surroundings. Instead, he pictured Trish's naked limbs wrapped around him as he held her in his lap. Her supple lips parted in a breathy gasp when he drove his cock deep into her wetness. Her muscles tightened around him, squeezing and releasing without so much as a rock of her hips.

His pulse quickened and he wiped a hand across his face, determined to push away thoughts of the woman who had instantly turned him from an articulate man into a bumbling fool. True he had never attended college, but he'd studied—during the long winter months when ice clung to everything there was little else to do than study.

He might as well have tried to put out a forest fire with a squirt gun. He pressed his hand against the firm length throbbing beneath already damp pants. He wanted to close his eyes and will away his longing, but he didn't relish the thought of rolling the truck into a gulley or running head-on into a semi. So he focused. As much as his unwilled daydream would allow him, he focused.

In his mind's eye Trish smiled at him, her hands buried deep in his hair, pulling his head to her breast where a tight, red-budded nipple waited for his lips. His mouth watered at the thought of twirling that bud beneath his tongue while he lifted Trish's lithe body until just the tip of his cock teased her tight pussy only to spear her again.

A horn blared ahead of him, successfully knocking him back to reality as quickly and effectively as thoughts of Trish had brought beads of sweat to his brow and brought his body alive. He swerved left, out of the oncoming lane and the path of a screaming red semi hauling a double trailer.

Overcompensating, he hit the ditch, nose first. A stand of slender pines brought him to a jolting stop. His head cracked the windshield, and for a brief time, he slumped over the steering wheel, wondering how much of the blaring in his ears was caused by the pickup's horn and how much from the bang to his head. What he did know had to do with Trish. The woman was bad news. If a brief meeting could fuck him up that bad, could damn near make him come in his pants, then further contact could mean nothing but trouble.

He wiped the trickle of blood running from his

Casey Pendelton

hairline down his temple. *Damn, that kind of trouble, I could learn to live with.*

Chapter five

of Damien as she paced the expanse of her sitting room. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and ran her hands down her red-silk-clad arms, easing the goose bumps that had risen there. No matter how hard she tried, she hadn't been able to relax since returning to the lodge six weeks earlier. Nothing like living in the lap of luxury, surrounded by a horde of living dead to keep you on edge. Oh wait! I'm the leader of these walking corpses. Even better! Half of them won't even acknowledge my presence, the other half can't go to the bathroom without asking my permission. Talk about going from single and carefree to the ultimate parenting trip in one easy step.

Her black-spike-haired assistant sighed, rolled his heavily lined eyes and reiterated, "Eric said he was conducting business out of the country and couldn't possibly come back now at the risk of the financial security of the Collective." "And what business is that?"

"He didn't say, but my guess is he is in the Cayman Islands dealing with the Collective portfolio. Each member of the Collective is required to contribute ten percent of his or her personal income to the Collective. We use those funds to operate the lodge, pay your living expenses, along with your staff's, and ensure there are funds available for any emergencies that may arise with lesser-blessed Collective members. Additionally, each Collective is required to contribute to the treasury of the World Council.

"We've gone over this a million times before, Trish," he said with a dramatic flourish of his hand before collapsing onto the sofa. His black Tshirt and torn jeans clashed with the delicate floral print.

In fact, he clashed with everything Trish owned. When Ms. Fine, the pristine Jacqueline O lookalike, had first introduced her to him, she assumed he was a joke. No one who dressed like a street kid and slouched, flopped and shuffled through the lodge could actually be a competent assistant.

"And in the meantime, I'm just supposed to sit here and wait. Never mind I have people coming to me day in and day out asking for my advice and I can't tell them shit until I learn all the rules associated with my position, which you can't tell me because Eric forbid it." Or that I feel their hunger pangs and the way they pull at the core of my body, like being in a constant state of need and arousal. Just the thought dampened the crotch of her silk panties. "And for some reason, even though I outrank Eric, I don't have the authority to request you to teach me what I need to know in order to function?"

"You got it. Eric is my sire. He turned me, which means I am subject to his direct orders. Anything he didn't leave orders regarding, I'm all yours."

"Like telling me how Collective finances work?" Trish asked.

"Exactly. I can discuss Collective finances in a general way, but can't provide you with any information that would help you change how those funds are used or collected."

"And there's no one else here who can do the job?"

Damien chewed at a hangnail and spit it out before continuing. "Not anyone I can think of. The old queen trusted Eric with everything. The only reason I know anything is because I did the translations from the ancient texts for him. Eric can do a lot of things, but foreign languages are beyond his grasp. Me? I'm a natural."

"Where are the texts now, or the translations?" "Fric—"

"Right, Eric put them away for safekeeping." *From me, no doubt.*

Since her return, she'd had time to meet and learn the names of most of the members who lived on the property. Ms. Fine, the lodge manager, had introduced Trish to Damien, her Eric-appointed personal assistant, and to Alberta, her personal maid.

Damien looked more like a punk rocker than a personal assistant, but at least he had given up calling her *Your Majesty* and handled the few tasks she had assigned him competently. Alberta, on the other hand, reminded her of a blonde Amazon warrior who didn't know a thing about clothes—or more importantly shoes. Alberta appeared better suited to a career as a bodyguard than a maid, always working out and constantly flexing her manly muscles. Trish almost had a stroke the first night when Alberta had causally tossed her red snakeskins on to the closet floor.

Both companions were likeable but of little use in matters of politics. Trish felt like she had been elected President, but someone had taken away her veto stamp and the big red button that could make the world go kaboom, not that she wanted to blow up anything. All she wanted to do was the job forced upon her without screwing things up.

"Listen, why don't you go shopping? Eric said you liked shopping," Damien suggested.

"I do like shopping but not all the time!" Trish couldn't believe the words came out of her mouth.

Unlimited funds, unlimited time and Trish was already shopped out. Shopping just did not hold the same excitement when it was unlimited and she had done nothing to deserve it. True, being forced into the position of vampire queen did earn her some buying power, but she would feel better about collecting if she could at least pretend to fill the position.

Once since her return, Eric had called to speak to Trish. The call had lasted less than a minute.

"Are you ready to declare me king?"

"Eric, I don't even know you."

"You know enough. You need me. Whether you like it or not it's the truth, and the sooner you accept it the better."

Since then, Eric had checked in with Damien or Ms. Fine, always cutting the call short before she could speak with him. Even a blind man could see he was blackmailing her by withholding the training she needed until she agreed to his terms. Now she'd had enough. She knew enough about these people to know they deserved better than treatment as pawns in some power play. Maybe Remy was wrong. Maybe he did have something to offer her. He was the only other vamp she knew who might be able to help her.

"Damien, get the king of the Macon Collective on the phone and don't give me any bull about not having the phone number. If the Collectives are organized under one World Council, you can get it."

Damien gave her a cockeyed grin as he slowly got up from the couch, "Now you're thinking."

The quiet Suburban ride from the Green Acres Travel Lodge to Remy's cabin was a relief after listening to Alberta's endless tirade about Trish going off and leaving her in one of the cramped, run-down cabins. Trish had tried to leave her at home, but Alberta took her job too seriously to be left behind. It had taken both Remy and Randolph to convince Alberta she would be interfering with Council business if she were to continue from there to the cabin with them. Even so, she refused to go home and leave Trish's travel arrangements in their hands. "If Eric finds out I left your side, it will be my hide, I tell you," Alberta said.

"Eric? If I hear his name one more time, I'm going to throw up. If it wasn't for that conceited, power-hungry bloodsucker I wouldn't be here in the first place," Trish said.

The dirt road leading to the cabin was in good condition, but still rough enough to send Trish grabbing for the dashboard for fear of sliding out of her seat. The Suburban climbed higher and higher up the mountain, following the twisting road for a good forty-five minutes before they came upon a clearing and an A-frame cabin.

"This is it," Remy said as he shifted into park. "It's not fancy, but we'll have some privacy while I give you a crash course in vampire politics. Really not that much to it, but I wanted to get you alone for a while to see if I can't change your mind about taking me as your king." He smiled as shock registered on Trish's face.

"Remy..." Trish started as Remy got out.

He came around to her side of the truck and opened her door, his smiling face just inches from hers. "No worries, Patricia. I won't try nothin'. My momma would have my hide, king or not."

It was too late for misgivings. Besides, down below the nervous jitters and even below the unexplainable physical attraction, Trish trusted Remy. If he had wanted to rape her, he would have done it that first day. Moreover, this trip had been her idea.

From the exterior, Trish found the cabin unimpressive—a standard A-frame with a window on each side of the door. Remy opened the door for Trish and motioned her through first. Trish expected southwestern décor, typical bachelor pad messy and not much more than a living room, bedroom and kitchen. She'd quickly resigned herself to sleeping on a smelly, uncomfortable couch during her stay. Instead, the cabin door opened into the top floor of an expansive two floor home. The main floor had a centered-out opening

surrounded by railing, which allowed her to see down into the great room below. To the left of the front door, she saw stairs butted against the wall that led downstairs to a massive great room, which featured a mammoth stone fireplace garnished with an array of deer and antler heads. fireplace shared space with overstuffed leather furniture and masculine odds and ends. including a pool table and a hot tub, which was wedged into the corner farthest from the stairs. Above the pool table, an oblong stained glass light fixture hung from brass chains. The décor was southwestern, right down to the Native American rug hanging over the stairs and the blankets folded over the railings like huge flags.

Across the open expanse, Trish saw another door.

"That leads to the kitchen. Safer to have it on the first floor," Remy said.

Several coat pegs jutted out from the wall to the right of the front door. Farther down the hall, a leather chaise stood against the wall.

"The bedrooms are downstairs." Remy led Trish down the stairs, carrying her suitcase while she toted her overnight bag.

"Remy, this is amazing. No one would ever guess how big it is from the outside."

"I started building this place right out of high school. My dad gave me a hundred acres as a graduation present. Didn't finish it until last year though."

"You did all the work yourself?"

"Well, Randolph helped some. A man can't do everything by himself, but you should know that."

Yeah, I should know that, Trish thought. In her capacity as a wedding planner, she had quickly learned that a smooth event called for delegation and a group effort. From florists and caterers to the photographer and minister, everyone had a job to do. Building a house wouldn't be any different.

Remy led Trish through the great room to a hallway beneath the west wall, then opened the first door they came to. "This is the guest room. You'll find the bathroom next door. There's another guest room across the hall, but it's never been used."

Trish stepped into a bedroom that still felt roomy even with a big man like Remy at her back. The headboard was fashioned from logs. A wedding ring quilt, all in blues on a white background, covered the bed and lacy white pillow shams finished off the homey effect. A dresser, small writing table and giant wardrobe completed the room.

"The other doorway from the great room leads to my rooms."

"This is beautiful, Remy. What made you think to build your home down rather than out or up?"

"This is God's country. It didn't seem fittin' to take up any more space than needed. Besides, I don't have to worry about daylight getting to me here and belowground housing means the temperature stays naturally comfortable yearround. Low utility bills.

"I'll leave you to unpack. When you're done, I'll be in the kitchen. Randolph stockpiled the kitchen as soon as he heard you were coming. I haven't cooked in a while. Could take some time to make dinner."

"Oh, I can do it. You're already doing so much for me."

"No, ma'am. You're a guest in my home. I won't have you doing the cooking."

It didn't take Trish long to unpack. She had only brought enough for three days of backwoods education. It seemed hardly worth the effort until she opened the wardrobe where the fresh scent of cedar and a garment bag tagged with her name greeted her. She opened the attached envelope to find a message from Remy. A gown fit for a queen. Please accept my invitation to attend a reception in your honor tomorrow evening. The scrawl was refined, elegant and so unlike the Remy she thought she knew.

Her own Collective hadn't done anything special to celebrate her return to the lodge. The second night there Ms. Fine, the housekeeper, had called for quiet and introduced her to the dining room attendees, most dressed in ripped jeans and black T-shirts like Damien. Two seconds later, they had returned to their conversations and meals, her presence all but forgotten. Even those who had scheduled meetings with her had treated her as if she was just filling in until someone better came along, but they were too desperate to wait.

No man had ever purchased clothes for her before. Shoes, yes, but never clothing. Trish smiled and unzipped the bag to find a deep emerald velvet gown inside. It looked close to her size and she couldn't help but try it on.

To her elation, it fit perfectly. With an empire waist design, the skirt flowed from just below the low-cut bust then fell in an ever-widening circle until it reached the floor, dramatically flowing behind her in a semi-cathedral train.

A rhinestone pin at the waist and an inconspicuous loop on the train allowed her to pin the train at her waist, creating a lovely drape and making it easier to walk without tripping. Trish chewed at her lower lip, wishing the room contained a full-length mirror and regretting she had not packed her black designer open-toed heels. In fact, the dressiest shoes she had packed were the little pink flats that went with the pink sweater and cream-colored slacks—definitely inappropriate for such a lovely gown.

Thinking the bathroom would at least have a small mirror, Trish crossed the room to the door, carefully holding the train up. She opened the door as Remy raised his fist to knock. Once again, Trish found herself looking up and up and up into one of the most interesting faces she had ever seen.

Awed, Remy thrust a pair of shoes at Trish, swallowed and said, "I forgot to leave these."

The Bruno Magli mules wouldn't have been her first choice but damn close. "You didn't have to do this," Trish said, suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

Remy didn't move. His gaze wandered over her creamy skin and the swell of her breasts. Desire flashed in his eyes before he remembered himself. Clearing his throat, he said, "Well I'd better be going."

As he turned to leave, Trish remembered her goal. "Oh, do you have a full-length mirror? The gown is so lovely I couldn't resist trying it on."

"In my room."

Trish rested one hand on Remy's strong arm for balance as she slipped on each heel. The shoes fit as well as the dress.

"A perfect fit. How did you know my size?"

Remy shrugged. "I don't know. I've always had an eye for those things, I guess."

Trish took his proffered arm and he led her

through the great room to his rooms. The bedroom was large and included a seating area, complete with two overstuffed chairs and matching ottomans. A simple table and lamp stood between the chairs. The table held a stack of books. The king-size bed was similar to the one in the guest bedroom. The bed linens were deep rust with a large leaf design worked through them. Through the two open doors leading off from the room, Trish saw a bathroom and a home office.

Beside the wardrobe stood a full-length mirror. Trish's reflection stopped her in her tracks. She was lovely, even through her own eyes. Her auburn hair and the emerald green complemented her complexion. She looked like a princess out of some ancient fairytale.

Remy stood slightly behind her, sharing the vision. "You are as I imagined," he breathed. He put his hands on her arms, caressing her. "Wait, there's one more thing."

He went to the large wooden chest on the dresser and returned with a chain draped through his fingers. Trish brushed her hair to one side as Remy fastened the chain around her neck. A blood red amulet shaped in an ancient Celtic pattern rested in her cleavage.

"Oh, Remy, it's lovely!"

"It's an heirloom." Remy's hands encircled her waist. "You'll come with me to the reception?"

"How could I resist, especially after all the trouble you've gone to?"

Trish turned around to look up at the big mountain man, his hands remaining at her waist. This close she could smell his scent—masculine, naturally rustic, like his home. She had been grateful to him before, for all the kindness he had shown her when she felt so alone, but now she felt the spark of true affection for him growing.

In many ways he reminded Trish of her father, although the two men were opposites appearance—her father a small, balding man, clean-shaven and favoring his Norwegian ancestors. Both men possessed a quality of quiet dominance, flying below the radar of many who company of more the sought outwardly expressive individuals.

She laid a hand on Remy's bearded cheek and answered him. "Yes, Remy, I'll go to the reception with you." Trish rose on tiptoes, Remy leaning down slightly to accommodate her, and laid a soft kiss on his warm lips.

Simultaneously, as if struck with a sledgehammer, Trish felt a psychic invasion pierce her brain and Eric's voice lording over her. No way this hillbilly is going to usurp my position as king! Get your ass back home before I'm forced to deal with both you and this fucker.

Chapter Six

Remy felt Trish's body being ripped from his grasp by a supernatural force, but managed to hang on and keep both of them from flying forward and crashing through the mirror and wall. Trish lay limp in his arms, blood trickling from her nose. Remy cradled her easily on one arm while patting her cheeks with his free hand.

"Trish, Trish. Talk to me, Patricia."

Trish was unresponsive. Remy picked her up and carried her to his bed. As he leaned over to lay her on the bed, Trish mumbled something unintelligible.

"What did you say, hon?"

"No, the dress..." Trish managed to whisper before passing out.

* * * *

When Trish awoke, the room was dark except for the lamp on the table between the two sitting area chairs. Remy sat in one of the chairs reading, a pair of glasses perched on his nose. Her head felt like a tornado had moved through it.

God, kill me now. She put her hand to her head and groaned.

Remy looked up, then removed his glasses before moving to sit beside her on the bed.

"How are you doing?" Remy asked.

"What happened?" Trish moaned.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"Eric..." Trish groaned as she tried to sit up, realizing once again she had lost her clothing, but this time grateful that the gown had been saved from the mass of wrinkles that sleeping in it would have caused downgraded her embarrassment.

Remy quickly helped Trish into a sitting position, leaving one arm draped protectively around her as he settled them both against the headboard.

"Better?" Remy asked.

"Except for one hellish headache, yes."

"Has he ever made contact with you before, I mean on a telepathic level?"

"Yeah, several times before he disappeared. Why? Isn't that normal?"

"No, it isn't. He shouldn't be able to do that. Leaders of each Collective are immune from telepathic communication within the Collective, even if you have turned some of the members yourself. It is meant to protect you from just this kind of an attack.

"We have a historian. I'll have him look into this and see what he can find out. If nothing else, we can contact the Council. Have you met with the Council yet?"

"No. Was I supposed to?" Trish asked.

"When I was chosen, the Council requested my presence within the week—a formality more or less. It doesn't make sense. I'd guess they don't know about you, but what purpose would Eric have for withholding that information from them?"

Nausea overcame Trish, and she fought to free herself of the covers and run for the bathroom. The best she could do was tumble over Remy's legs and vomit on his bedside rug. Remy held her and made reassuring noises as he held her hair away from her face. When she finished, he helped her lay back, then rolled up and carried the ruined rug into the bathroom, returning with a wet washcloth. He folded the washcloth and placed it on Trish's brow.

"Better? Can I get you anything?" Concern clouded his eyes and his brows furrowed, reminding Trish of the look her father would get when paying the bills.

"Cold," Trish managed through chattering

teeth.

Remy pulled the covers up around her shoulders, then went to the wardrobe and brought back a wool throw, but still she shivered. He placed a hand on her brow.

"You aren't feverish, but you are flushed and your eyes are glazed. I don't like this," Remy said.

"Remy, what's wrong with me?"

"I don't know, honey. I'll call a doctor...just hang in there, I'll be right back."

* * * *

He'd gotten through to Dr. Delaney and was dialing Randolph when Trish's screams startled him into dropping the phone and darting back into the bedroom. Trish sat up in bed, staring in horror at the blood gushing from fresh slices at her wrists.

Remy ran to the bathroom for more towels and had the bleeding stanched within moments. He said a silent thank you for his superhuman speed and first aid skills as he returned to his home office for his phone, calling Randolph.

"Randolph, I need you. Bring backup." With that, he slammed down the phone and returned to Trish, who shivered under the blood-soaked covers.

Remy pulled out fresh covers and proceeded to

change the bed around her, carefully moving her only when necessary.

"You want to tell me what happened?" he asked in a hushed tone, trying hard not to scare her as much as finding her bleeding in his bed had scared him. This uptown girl with her soft lips and a certain naiveté had found a place in his heart. If he lost her now, before he had a chance to convince her he was the right man for her, he didn't know what he would do. He did know Eric would pay for whatever part he played in Trish's condition.

"Eric said I needed to learn a lesson, then I felt this horrible pain across my wrists and there was so much blood." Tears rolled down her face, staining the rust-colored pillowcase. "How can he do this to me? I've never done anything to him and I didn't ask for any of this."

Remy's vision went black with fury as he considered all the ways Eric would pay. No one deserved treatment like this, least of all someone like Trish. Even a blind man could see she was not a threat to anyone—physically or otherwise. Hell, she still had no idea how much physical strength and ability she possessed. He hoped he was around when she did reach her full potential. It would be a sight to see—a new queen coming into power, growing confident in her role as leader and as close to indestructible as any being on the

planet. So unlike the woman in his bed now, who looked like an injured deer ready to take flight if only she were able.

She would live that long. He would see to it. Even if he did not find Trish irresistible, no one insulted him by attacking a guest in his territory. Eric would pay. He would pay big time.

Dr. Delaney arrived with Randolph and six lumberjack-sized vampires trailing her. Remy entrusted Trish to the doctor while he took the men in the kitchen to set up a plan of defense. Fortunately his cabin backed up to a cliff, so the men only had to set up front and side perimeters and they had the advantage. This was their mountain. They knew every bush, every boulder on the property. If Eric decided to come for Trish, he wouldn't get far.

* * * *

Dr. Laura Delaney was a round woman in her late fifties. She walked with a permanent limp, and her abrupt manner prevented many people from arguing with her. By the time, she unwrapped the bandages from Trish's wrists, the bleeding had stopped and only stark pink scars remained.

"Well now. You must be the new queen of the Stalworth Collective. Remy said you came from old blood, but from the way these cuts are healing, he doesn't know the half of it. This is impressive. Can you tell me what happened, in detail, if you will?"

"I don't know. One minute, I was talking to Remy and the next I felt as if I was the victim of a hit and run accident. Later, Eric's voice filled my head and then I passed out. When I came to, I'd entered a bad remake of *The Exorcist*.

"God, I can't go through that again. It has to be worse than death, this...possession by some demon."

"Um-huh, sounds like this Eric of yours is either magi or has employed one. Not many can do magick on a vampire, especially one with your powers. I'd bet, if you were trained, he wouldn't have gotten far. No matter. I can cast a protective net around you. Sounds like Remy needs one, too, but unless you can power it, I doubt it will hold."

"Power it? Magick? I don't understand. I thought Remy said you were a doctor," Trish said.

"I am a doctor. I earned my medical degree at Stanford in 1957. I'm also a vampire and priestess in a local witches' coven. Our coven has been around since the 1600s and relocated here around the time of the French and Indian War. Gives me a bit of an advantage over the average bad guy and doesn't hurt when curing my patients either." A warm smile lit up Dr. Delaney's face, reminding

Trish of a female version of a kindly old elf who hung out with flying reindeers and preferred to spend his winters in a cold climate.

"I don't know how to power a net," Trish said, her eyes wide as she tried to make sense of way too much information. *Ignorance is bliss. I'd pay money for ignorance right now. No one in their right mind would ever believe me if I told them any of this...this vampire magical possession stuff.*

"Well, there's a couple of ways to do it. I can take some of your blood and use it in the spell. Chances are good that it will provide you with the protection you need, but I'm not sure about Remy. His blood isn't as old as yours. Could be if this Eric can't get to you, he'll turn around and attack Remy. He's made it clear he sees Remy as a threat. If that were the case, a mating between Remy and you would create the ultimate shield over both of you. I can't think of any magic that could break a bonding shield of your power."

"Remy hasn't done anything wrong. He only offered to help me at my request." Trish pushed the hair back from her face with one hand. What have I gotten him into? "Oh, this is all my fault. I don't know what to do."

Dr. Delaney busied herself tossing the bandages in the trash and gathering up her medical equipment. "Well, if I were you, I'd consider looking at a way to protect both of you for now and lookin' at Remy as a permanent mate. Even if

Eric drops this campaign, the combining of two Collectives would make you one helluva power to be reckoned with."

"But I don't love Remy. Shouldn't he find someone who loves him?"

"Honey, I've known Remy since he was a baby. I've never seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you. My guess is he loves you enough for both of you." Dr. Delaney sat on the edge of the bed and took Trish's hand. "Remy is a special man. He could have any woman he wants. It's his right as king. I've only seen him take one member to his bed and that was only because her injuries were so severe that merely sharing blood wouldn't heal her. He was as gentle with her as a child, even when his own blood ran hot and he was on the edge of reason, he held back. If he has chosen you, I'd at least urge you to think it over, whether there was a threat to your safety or not.

"But for now, we need to protect you from further injury. So far, Eric's done little more than scare you. Chances are he's just testing his powers, and when he gets what he wants from you, or decides you're dispensable, he'll kill you. I can cast a temporary protection spell. It may slow him down for a little while and give you a chance to build your strength and decide what you want to do. I will need your permission. I don't practice magick on anyone without permission."

Trish thought about it for a long moment. "I don't have much of a choice, do I? Do it. I owe Remy that much."

As Dr. Delaney raised the shields, Eric reached out to Trish one more time. What do you think you are doing, Patricia? This won't work. If you cut me off, I'll just take it out on the hillbilly. Think about what you are doing. I created you and I can—

The shield snapped into place, cutting off Eric. Trish looked around, feeling the reverberation of telepathic connection bounce off the his metaphysical barrier now surrounding Seconds later, a roar came from the upper floor of the cabin. Without a thought to her condition, Trish sped past Dr. Delaney and took the stairs two at a time, reaching Remy even before his own men could round the table to where their leader now lay in a heap on the floor. Blood poured from both ears and his nose. He had his eyes rolled back in his head. He gasped for breath as his body convulsed

At that moment, Trish knew what she must do. Just setting up shields would not be enough. Eric was like a bad rash that wouldn't go away on its own. He would have to be removed, eliminated, even if it meant becoming someone she wasn't...like a vampire queen. The thought stunned her. For the first time she understood that her new role was about more than just being a figurehead and decision-making. It was about

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sacrifices and putting the needs of others above her own.

Chapter Seven

Remy and Trish kneeled on their bare haunches, facing each other in the middle of the floor of the emptied-out great room floor. Dr. Delaney had drawn a pentagram on the floor around them. Candles lit the darkened corners of the room.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Remy said. "I admit it. I had my eye on you since I first sat there and watched you sleep, but I intended to date you, to give you a chance to grow to love me."

"I know, but your safety is more important. Eric almost killed you." Trish kept her eyes downcast, not able to bring herself to meet his gaze. He had seen her naked twice now, but this was different. This was ritual sex, sex to protect them and unite them against whatever magick Eric threw at them. Not only had she gone from being faithful to Russell to accidentally—however accidentally thinking reality is a dream made it—sleeping with Eric and kneeling naked before Remy. Even so,

she found her current situation breathtaking.

Across from her, a strong alpha male looked at her with more longing than anyone ever had. So much had happened in the last few hours and so much of it was her fault, and yet not once had he said one unkind thing to her. Not once had he reprimanded her or reminded her how much depended on their successful union. Instead, he had done his best to romance her at supersonic speed, touching her casually at first, later with more familiarity, as if they had been planning this for months instead of hours.

Dr. Delaney had instructed them on what to expect while Randolph had returned to Hickory Creek to pick up Alberta to act as a witness for the Stalworth Collective. When the ritual was completed, Remy would be her king and she his queen. It wasn't exactly marriage. There were no vows of fidelity, no bridesmaids, no minister. Their union would be a bond of fornication, a passing of blood and orgasm. It would act as the first of two, one that Trish had never experienced and found nerve-racking. Yet, she couldn't deny the underlying sense of anticipation.

In the next room, Dr. Delaney's ritual drums kept a steady beat to the pounding in Trish's heart. Randolph and Alberta sat in the shadows, the perquisite witnesses to the joining ceremony. Later they would leave the couple in privacy but not before the first act of mating. The reverberations of Remy and Trish's actions would be felt throughout both Collectives, their orgasms feeding the Collectives and uniting their power, but tradition still called for eyewitnesses.

"Look at me, Trish." Remy's hushed voice held the tenderness of a friend, the caress of a lover.

Slowly Trish looked up at the man in front of her. His hands rested on his knees, his penis lay flaccid against his leg and his torso was lightly furred, thicker across the chest. His eyes met hers and held her gaze.

"Touch me," he requested.

Trish reached out her right hand and hesitantly placed it on his bearded cheek. His skin was cool, his beard an enticing forest of coarse hair springing from his jaw and chin. She traced her fingers through his beard from ear to lips, such soft lips on such a masculine man. Remy captured a finger between his lips, tasting her with the tip of his tongue. Trish's breath came a little quicker. She eased her finger away and continued her exploration, now with both hands, rising to her knees to reach him better. Her hand rested over his heart, feeling the beat. She closed her eyes, listening as his heartbeat and the drumbeat melded together.

Tentatively she leaned forward, intent on capturing a kiss. Remy met her partway. She

watched him watching her. Trish kissed him as softly as she had in the bedroom in what seemed like days earlier, but in reality, had been a matter of hours. Trish took the lead and when her tongue flicked out, he willingly opened his mouth and let her enter.

The kiss deepened and Trish inched forward until her hard nipples brushed against his chest. Only then did Remy touch her. With a growl, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her lithe body against his. The friction of his chest hair against her aroused nipples sent shocks through her. He seemed tense, as if waiting for her to pull away, but she didn't. Instead, she leaned into him, her hands in his shaggy hair, holding him in the never-ending kiss.

Remy rolled with Trish in his arms until they were stretched out on the floor. His bulky frame lay next to hers. His hand ran down her back to cup her ass, pulling her in tight against his growing cock. Even then, she sensed he would stop if she but whispered the word, but Trish was beyond changing her mind. Her mind swirled with the lovely colors of arousal and the flashes of Collective members dropping what they were doing to tune into her vibes. She could see through Alberta's eyes as she sat in the corner watching them, feel Alberta's nipples harden, the tug at her core as she fed off of Trish's growing

need. She flashed on Damien lying on her sofa, his pants undone, stroking himself, his hips gyrating against the air. With each beat of the drum, her visions shifted from member to member and yet her mind never strayed far from Remy.

She reached between them, her hand finding Remy's cock, now hard, long and thick, so thick she could barely close her fingers around him. She considered how he would feel inside her, and the thought made her clit throb and juices slide down her slit. A moan escaped her. She slid her hand down the length of Remy's shaft, finding his sac tight and kneaded his testicles.

Remy's hand covered hers, "Slow down, darlin'. Too much of that and I won't be able to control myself."

Trish pulled back, resting her hands on his chest, looking into his face, realizing she didn't want him to hold back. More than anything, she wanted this man inside her. With the speed only a vampire or Superman could manage, she rolled them until she sat astride Remy.

"Lose control, Remy," Trish said with breathless anticipation, rubbing her wet pussy along the length of his cock. She inched forward, seeking the angle that would allow him to slip inside her unassisted.

As quickly as she had gained the upper hand, she found herself on all fours with Remy kneeling behind her.

"Are you sure, Patricia?" Remy asked.

In answer, Trish pressed her ass against him. Remy adjusted her forward, his cock teasing her wet pussy, his fist wrapped in her hair, holding her head down, her ass in the air. He pushed inside her, slowly at first, testing to make sure she could take him without injury. As he stretched her to capacity, Trish cried out and pressed back against him, feeling his balls teasing her cunt, feeling her hair straining at the roots. Remy pulled out slowly then slammed his cock back into Trish's wetness. Agonizingly slow, he repeated the process, slamming his cock into her hard enough to jar her.

Trish grunted with each new stroke. Some wild beast rose within her, blinding her in an erogenous red haze of passion. She ground her teeth, clenching her jaw shut because she knew if she screamed out in passion she would lose herself to the moment even more. More than anything she wanted to stay forever on the verge of this great climax building within her. Here she was safe and pampered and freer than she had ever been before.

No one was telling her what to do, what not to do, whom to love or what was proper. She had spent her entire life leading by example. She showed her clients how to prepare for their weddings and truly worked at being a good, civilized person who did what society expected of her.

She matched him stroke for stroke, daring him to give her more until she could hold back no more. She let out a primal scream, giving up the last shreds of civility she had managed to hold onto.

"More, Remy, fuck me harder, now!" Trish demanded.

* * * *

Remy's whole world fell apart. He was no longer the loner, waiting for the right woman to come along. Trish was the right woman. Behind the classy lady façade, a passionate woman who was his sexual equal hid, buried beneath years of propriety. She was the woman he would give anything to spend the rest of his life with, but there was no lifetime ahead of them, at least not romantically. What they had was a business relationship. As much as he enjoyed her body, as much as he might wish it were not so, Trish was from a different world—a material world where everyone used the right fork and played the stock market. There was no way she would be happy living in the cabin, spending more time looking at

the stars than shopping in malls. He was a fool if he thought otherwise. Once they were safe from Eric, Trish would go back to the Stalworth Collective and he would stay in Macon territory.

All he had was tonight, the feel of her wet pussy wrapped around his cock and the smell of her fragrant perfume mixing with the scent of their sex. Never would anything smell so intoxicating as Trish in his arms.

* * * *

Remy held her by the hips and plunged into her again and again while Trish chatted her mantra of "Fuck me, fuck me." As a sudden wash of electricity surged through her, she screamed and reared back. Trish felt her eyeteeth lengthen as she reeled with each wave of pleasure that rolled over her. Remy offered her his wrist, which she bit into like a snarling animal. His free arm wrapped around her chest, his fingers rolled her nipple back and forth while her body spasmed. She was barely conscious of Remy's own release until she felt his fangs pierce the side of her neck. The steady draw of blood coincided with the throbbing of the shaft buried deep within her.

Beyond caring, she closed her eyes and watched in her mind's eye as a couple fucked on the hood of a red Corvette beneath the moonlight.

The male vampire—Trish suddenly knew his name was Martin and hers was Dominion—held Dominion's hands pinned in one of his. She struggled against him, simultaneously begging for more. Her high-heeled feet wrapped around his waist, holding him deep inside her while he howled his pleasure. The howl vibrated through Trish and she tightened around Remy. Spasms racked her body again. She rode the orgasm coursing through her until it subsided into a dull throb.

Slowly her senses returned. She lapped at the spilled blood at Remy's wrist, watching as the wounds healed before her eyes. Remy's cock was still inside her, but he no longer gyrated as his own orgasm had subsided. She leaned back against the mountain man, exhausted limbs no longer capable of supporting her.

* * * *

Time was short. Dawn would be upon them soon and they had yet to create the sexual energy necessary to fully power the protective shields they needed to protect them from Eric's telepathic attacks. Time barely existed for the two lovers to reposition themselves for a loving kiss before Dr. Delaney returned to the pentagram.

Randolph and Alberta eased out of the room

quietly, their presence no longer required and neither eager to intrude further on their leaders' privacy.

Dr. Delaney chatted as she added a strong mixture of herbs to the cauldron brewing to one side of the room. She left a small cup next to the exhausted lovers, then returned to her drums where she would speak the words to turn their sexual energy into a metaphysical shield. On the way out, she reminded Remy and Trish of the time crunch they faced.

* * * *

Remy and Trish exchanged a look, silently questioning whether the other was ready to continue to set down the groundwork on which the shields would be built. With a nod, Remy pulled Trish into his arms, passionately kissing her lips and the side of her neck, lapping at the remains of his earlier bite. He kissed her breasts, rolling each nipple in his mouth until it was hard and aching. His large hands completely covered her sumptuous mounds, kneading the flesh until Trish no longer knew the line between intense pleasure and sweet pain. In the morning, she might be bruised, but right then she didn't care.

"God, I love your breasts—such perfect creations. Since the first time I saw them at the inn

I've wanted to taste them."

Trish pulled his head back to her lips, loving the feel of his thick hair in her fingers, reveling in the way he ran his tongue over the ridges in the roof of her mouth. She wasn't certain what she had expected from him, but it wasn't this...this passion, this feeling of being so in sync with another individual, especially one she barely knew.

With a final series of soft kisses, she spoke, her words falling from her lips to his. "I don't know if I can do this, but I'm willing to try. We can't wait any longer."

"You need time to prepare. I don't want to hurt you," Remy said.

"Remember, I'm a vampire, I'll heal and I trust you. I trust you more than anyone." As Trish said the words, she realized just how much truth they held. When Dr. Delaney had told her anal sex traditionally powered the spell, her heart had stopped. She had questioned if it had to be powered that way, but Dr. Delaney had assured her they did not have time to experiment with other methods. Now that she had been with Remy once, she knew that if she could ever enjoy anal sex, it would be with him—not that her enjoyment was what mattered. This shield meant survival.

As he kissed and caressed her, he dipped two fingers into the cup Dr. Delaney left behind. Trish

lay across his lap, one leg bent. Her inner thighs, still wet with Remy's seed, were accessible to his probing touch. Remy ran his finger up her slit, circling her clit and back down, dipping his fingers inside. Trish moaned and spread her legs wider. Taking more of the sweet-smelling concoction from the cup, Remy rimmed her anus gently, slowly dipping his finger inside. Trish immediately tightened up. Her previous relaxed position gave way to tension.

"Shh, baby, relax. I won't do anything you don't want me to do." Remy held her close to him, rocking her until she relaxed again.

"What can I do to make you more comfortable?" he asked.

"Kick Eric's ass so we don't have to rush everything?" Trish said with a twisted grin.

Remy responded in all seriousness, "Gladly, sweetheart. One way or another he'll pay."

Remy called to Dr. Delaney for a couple of pillows, positioned Trish as best as he could with her ass in the air and began again. He rubbed her back and soothed her as he once again massaged the ointment along her tight hole. As he slid his finger inside, Trish once again tightened up. He didn't move his finger until she began to relax again. As Remy slid a finger in and out of her virgin hole, Trish began to wonder why she had ever been afraid. He removed his finger and

moistened it again, this time easing two into Trish's ass. She moaned, but didn't tighten up. Slowly he slid the fingers in as far as he could and splayed them.

"Oh my," Trish moaned, wiggling her ass as she adjusted to the new sensation.

Remy worked his fingers in and out of her bum until Trish's hips began to pump and her hand disappeared between the pillow and her mound.

* * * *

He coated his cock liberally, hoping like hell she could take his girth without being hurt. "Let's try this, baby. I can feel the sun nearing. Remember what Dr. Delaney said. Push out as I enter. It'll lessen the pain."

Adjusting himself between her legs, Remy let the head of his cock tease her anus as her tiny pink bud pulsated. He pressed the head against the rosette trying to ease his way in. "Push, baby, push harder."

* * * *

Trish pushed, trying her best not to tense up, to concentrate on how good his fingers had felt, not to mention, the growing arousal in her core, brought on by his fingers and the nagging thought that she was about to do something taboo with a man she barely knew.

As the head of Remy's cock cleared her anal rim, she cried out. A million tiny needles flew through her head, each tipped with pain and pleasure in an awesomely erotic mixture that could never be trapped on paper or fully memorized. She had never dreamed of experiencing such a high.

Remy immediately went still. "Should I pull out?"

"No, God, no," a breathless Trish answered. She put her head down on the cool wood floor and breathed in and out, focusing on the cock in her ass and the reason for this unexpected excursion into the wicked world of anal sex.

"Now...slow...now," Trish said.

Remy followed her instructions, holding his breath as he eased deeper into her ass. Trish felt the tingles previously confined to her head spread throughout her body, and when Remy's cock throbbed, she could have flown through the roof on the sheer magnitude of that simple movement. Remy continued until his thick cock was buried to the balls, then eased himself out until only the head remained embedded within her. As he slid back into her tight rear entrance, Trish moaned and leaned back to meet him, giving him the permission he needed to continue unfettered by

fear for her safety. In the next room, the drums picked up the pace. Remy matched the beat as his thighs slapped against Trish's ass.

It wasn't long until Trish rocked against him, her breath ragged as an orgasm built within. With each stroke, her passions flamed higher, beyond anything she had ever thought to experience, let alone survive.

"Fuck me, Remy! Fuck me!" she screamed out as the verge of her impending climax overwhelmed her sense. Remy complied. Dr. Delaney's chanting floated through the room. The energies and images of the combined Collectives overwhelmed Trish's senses. She craved blood—red, hot, human blood. In answer to her craving, her fangs elongated.

* * * *

Remy experienced his own version of heaven and hell as the thinly held control he had worked so hard to maintain gave way and his seed shot into Trish's tight anus. He bellowed her name into the empty cavern he called home. The pulsing cock in her ass acted as the catalyst setting off Trish's own orgasm, and she slammed into Remy's legs, holding his cock deep within her.

She regretted not having someone to hold onto and feed upon in front of her.

A dome of metaphysical power erupted over them, shielding them from anything harmful that may come. In the next room Dr. Delaney's chant ended and the drums went silent as Remy and Trish collapsed, still connected in an exhausted heap, sharing the vision of their self-created shield glowing like a bubble and reflecting the candlelight.

* * * *

On her way out, Dr. Delaney dropped a blanket over the sleeping couple and left word with the human guards to close the shutters over the windows.

Chapter Eight

Trish woke up in a cocoon of human flesh as Remy's massive frame spooned hers. For a long time, she lay there wondering what would be the best way to extricate herself from his embrace. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the shadowed luminescence of the protective shield arching over them. Her entire body ached like she had been thoroughly fucked. She smiled. She had been, by the most intriguing male.

She was stiff from lying in the same position all night. Nothing unusual. She usually slept like the dead these days. More than anything, she wanted a shower and to brush her teeth before greeting her new mate. *Mate*. The word sounded foreign, but she knew she had to learn to accept it. It had been her decision, ultimately, to join forces with Remy over whatever magick Eric was using to terrorize her and harm Remy.

"Good morning." Remy's deep voice resonated in the empty room. He loosened his grip on Trish enough for her to turn onto her back and look up at him. The candles had long since burned out, and with the shutters closed, both vampire leaders had to depend on their supernatural eyesight to share an embarrassed look. "Are you okay?"

Trish nodded. "You?"

"I'm better than okay. You were amazing. I'm just sorry about the way it happened. You deserve better. Better than a forced union. Better than me."

His words confused Trish, but she had bigger questions on her mind. "So now what happens? Do the Collectives merge into one and carry a hyphened name like Stalworth-Macon?"

"I've been thinkin' on that. Seems to me, the Macons and Stalworths are as different as day and night. I can't see the Macons willin' to move to the lodge or the Stalworths willin' to live off the land here in Macon. Best answer is each Collective continues as is. You run the Stalworth vamps and I'll stay with the Macons. We need each other, then we've got an alliance, but no point in creating friction by combining the two. Something happens to me, my people use the traditional ritual and choose a new ruler. He nodded. "Same goes for you. I don't inherit your people and you don't inherit mine."

Trish nodded. She had friends whom she knew would never like each other so she kept them separate. It made sense. "Don't we share energies with both groups now?"

"Yes. No way around that." He shrugged. "Most days, it doesn't mean a hill of beans, but if we come up against trouble, we can use the energy of one Collective to aid the other. 'Course something happens to one of us, the ritual binding us dissolves."

"And what about us?" Trish asked, her heart pounding in her ears.

He slipped out from under the blanket and carefully tucked it in around Trish. "You don't have to worry. I don't expect you to stay with me. Like I said, you're Stalworth. I'm Macon. We don't mix."

His expression looked so painful that Trish reached out to touch him.

Remy froze.

"Remy, it was my decision. I expected sex with a stranger to be horrible, but you made it special. Of course, I would rather have gotten to know you first and enjoyed time with you in private, but you couldn't have been kinder."

As if she had not said anything at all, Remy continued, "I'll stay out of your way. The guest room is yours and there's a lock on the door." He disappeared into his room, leaving Trish alone.

What just happened? she wondered as she stood up and waddled toward the guest room with the blanket wrapped around her. She looked over her shoulder at Remy's closed door as she passed it. Confused and alone, an ache tore at her heart.

As soon as they had dressed, Remy and Trish met on the deck to resume her lessons in Collective politics. For six hours, she worked diligently until her cell phone rang.

"Trish, all hell's broken loose. You've got to get back here!" Damien babbled hysterically.

Trish's heart skipped a beat. "What's happened?" She stared across the table strewn with books and papers that separated her from Remy.

"Eric's back and he brought some old dude and an army of mercenary-looking cusses. They're locking this place down like a fortress. The entire Collective's been called back to the lodge. No one can leave or come in without Eric's personal approval.

"And Trish, he's sent away our blood supply. We have members who haven't eaten solid food in decades. Even if they can eat food, fresh blood is like an addiction. We might not need it to survive, but we'll be fuckin' zombies within a week without it."

From the look on Remy's face, he could hear the call and didn't like what he was hearing. "Tell him we'll be there tomorrow night."

Trish relayed the message to Damien, assuring

him everything would work out. She only wished she felt as certain about the outcome.

Remy disappeared into the cabin, leaving Trish to pick up the study materials they had brought out to the deck to go over beneath the moonlight. An evening of studying and Trish had barely skimmed the surface. She had learned enough to know treason meant a death sentence for Eric. The Council took vampire-against-vampire seriously. Trish understood the death sentence for the vampiric versions of murder, treason and sex crimes. What she couldn't understand was how far they took their power. Hitler and his concentration camps resembled a roughing-it vacation compared to some of the sentences passed down against rogue vampires who openly flaunted their bloodlust to the public or who turned children before they reached puberty.

A Collective ruler acted as a local extension to the Council. The ruler answered to no one but the Council and had the authority to carry out the laws of the Council without benefit of trial. The only times the Council became involved with local politics were in the case of crimes committed by the ruler or in the case of crimes between Collectives, when an outside mediator might prevent an all-out war.

Trish found it mildly amusing to read the fine print stating Council law was subject to change without notice at any time. An out clause, similar to so many contracts she had read in the human world.

When she returned to the house, she found Remy unpacking a collection of weapons from pantry shelves. The rifles, archery equipment and knives, she recognized, but there were also several strange-looking devices resembling wire hangers and pop bottles that she didn't.

"What are those?" she asked.

"The bottles contain a mixture of holy water and explosive. Homemade vamp-bombs more or less. The wires are used for up-close combat. With my strength I can take off a man's head real quick and quiet-like. May need them to get inside to that asshole Eric. It's him I want."

"Shouldn't I handle Eric? I mean, he's my problem and I am stronger," Trish said softly.

Remy stopped what he was doing and looked at her with frustration written across his face. "Ever killed a man? Do you know the first thing about combat?"

Trish shook her head.

"Time you learned." Remy roughly grabbed her arm and led her outside. "You'll have to come with us and I don't want you gettin' hurt. I might not be able to protect you all the time." He let go of her arm and moved the picnic table out of the way, freeing up space on the large deck, then went

into a crouch. "Now come at me."

"I can't hit you."

Remy straightened up. "That's my point. You're a lady. Wouldn't hurt a fly unless it hurt you first. If these guys are mercenaries, waiting for them to attack first could be too late."

"But that's different. They're the enemy. I can do what I have to do." *I think*.

"No, you can't, Trish. It ain't in you. You were born to be taken care of, not to fight."

Trish squared her shoulders and set her lips in a straight line. Tension created a dull ache between her brows. "Those people are my responsibility whether I like it or not. I can't stand by and do nothing and I can't ask you to do it for me."

Silence fell between them as the wind gusted.

"As of last night, they are my people, too," Remy growled, "and you are my mate. You don't have to ask me to do anything for you. It is my obligation, my right to protect you, and I'll be damned if you will stop me, woman."

In a blur, Trish rushed forward, hitting Remy in the solar plexus with her shoulder. A gush of wind escaped Remy as he suddenly found himself on his ass several feet back from where he originally stood. Trish stood over him.

"I said I could do it. I'm not a weakling and I don't let others fight my battles." I don't think.

Hard to judge considering this is the first battle I've ever been involved in. "Now teach me enough to keep me from getting my ass killed."

Trish spent the rest of the evening learning defensive tactics and how to hone in on her vampire powers, learning not to think like a human anymore, but rather like a powerful vampire. She now knew she could outrun, overpower and even use mind control to outwit humans and lesser vampires. Remy finally city girl with admitted, for a no experience, Trish learned fast. She had knocked him on his ass more than once when he wasn't expecting it and he was a big man. When it was her turn to go down, she never complained, barely uttered a curse and always jumped right back into action

As dawn approached, Remy helped her up from where he had flipped her onto the deck. "Good work. That's enough for tonight."

"Did I pass?" Trish asked, still holding Remy's proffered hand.

"Yeah, you passed. Now we need to get some sleep. We'll need all of our energy for the battle."

The mated monarchs stared at each other for a long time before Remy let go of her hand and turned toward the cabin. "I'm taking a shower."

Trish watched him walk off, wondering what

she should do. He expected her to go to her room, but he was her mate. A part of her said she should go to him, convince him she wanted him, that the whole ritual wasn't about politics or protection. Sometime during the last evening, he had gained a place in her heart and she wanted to be with him more than anything. She felt safe with him, and somehow just being close enough to him to feel his aura reenergized her. Right now, she needed that.

He had practically accused her of being weak, taunted her into becoming the strong queen she could be. A strong queen also would be an equal with her mate.

With renewed determination, Trish followed Remy into the cabin. She reached the top of the stairs as the door to his bedroom closed behind him. Trish took a deep breath and opened the door just in time to see him pull the sweaty T-shirt over his head and ball it up in his fists. He turned and saw her watching him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You said I'm your mate, your partner. You made love to me last night. You could have just fucked me, stuck to the ritual, but you took the time to make it special. Now you keep pushing me away. Why?"

"I don't force myself on women. I can't hardly see where you'd be wanting to make a life with me. Figured last night was just a business arrangement." Remy looked at the shirt in his hands, avoiding her face.

Trish changed her tactic. "Remy, do you care about me at all? I mean, can you see staying with me, maybe even loving me someday?"

Remy's head jerked up as he met her gaze. "Could I love you? Girl, I've wanted you ever since I saw you sleeping that first time, so innocent. Fragile. A living princess. I even offered to become your king. No questions asked. You could have been a mass murderer for all I knew. I've never done that before. I've had several tempting offers through the years, but until you..."

Trish moved toward him as he spoke. "Then why is it so inconceivable that I might want to be your mate in every conceivable way?" She touched his cheek, tears pooling in her eyes. "Don't push me away. Other than my father, you are the only man I've known who has treated me like I am important, not because of what I can do for him or what he can do for me, but just because."

Remy put his hand over the top of the hand Trish had rested on his cheek, then turned his head to place a kiss on her palm. "Are you sure, Patricia? I couldn't stand it if this isn't real."

Trish rose on tiptoes, pulling his head down to

her. Their lips met in a passionate kiss and Remy's arms wrapped around her, holding her close as he lifted her off the floor. They moaned in unison as the kiss deepened, their tongues dancing while the fires in Trish's pelvis flamed.

As the kiss tapered off to a series of soft pecks, Trish answered him between kisses. "I'm sure, Remy."

The shower streamed down around the amorous couple locked in a steamy embrace.

"Could you grow to love me, Trish? I mean over time."

Remy's wistful tone brought tears to Trish's eyes. What was it in his past that made such a good man think any woman couldn't fall in love with him? She wanted to say she already loved him, but she wasn't sure if what she felt was love or a mixture of gratitude and desire. Earlier, she would have sworn it was love, but now she doubted herself. So much in her life was not what she had thought. All she knew is she cared for him and wanted the twinge of affection growing within her to have a chance to mature naturally.

"I'd like to try, Remy. With all my heart, I'd like to try."

With ease, the mountain man picked Trish up, supported her with one hand under each cheek of her ass and slid her down over his hard cock. She clung to his neck and moaned.

"Make love to me, Remy, like it should have been our first time—slow, sweet and private." At least as private as it can be with both Collectives so aware of our actions, feeding on our desire.

The warm water beat down on them and the steam thickened as the couple danced to their own music, their bodies pressed together and their lips exploring each crevice, each soft surface of the other. Their soft moans and cries of pleasure were drowned out by the water pelting against the tiles. Both were oblivious to Eric's magick probing their shields, looking for any weakness, any way to destroy the moment, the love growing between them.

Trish liked the feel of his hands beneath the cheeks of her ass. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he lifted her and eased her back on the shower shelf. The smooth chilly surface of the natural stone shelf cooled her while his hard cock sliding up and down her wet slit heated her blood. She watched as he guided his cock into her channel slowly as if they had all the time in the world. She pulled him to her, tightened her legs around his waist and milked him by constricting and relaxing the muscles of her pussy.

Trish wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his lips down to hers and fed on the taste of his tongue playing along the roof of her mouth. Remy's arms tightened around her as he pumped harder and faster, his balls bouncing against the inside of her thighs. They shifted until Remy supported her with one arm and cupped her breast with his free hand. He ran his thumb over her sensitive nipple again and again, alternating between stroking and tweaking the sensitive nub. The shower spray heightened Trish's senses until she squirmed on the shelf, seeking leverage so she could match Remy stroke for stroke without sliding off.

Remy eased her legs from around his waist and slid them up his body until her feet rested on each side of his face while he continued to pound into her, pressing her body back against the shower wall, her ass resting on the show ledge. As Trish screamed out her climax, Remy slammed into her one more time and reached his own explosive ending.

Their heavy breathing mingled with the water pelting around them as they stayed wrapped in each other's arms.

A convoy of ten SUVs, each packed with weapons and vamps trained to fight and kill, pulled into the woods half a mile from the Stalworth Collective lodge to divide into strategic groups and to make last minute weapons checks. Trish hoped they had stopped far enough from the lodge to avoid detection. Eric did not need to

know they had brought along a small army.

The menagerie of men and women who piled out of the vehicles all had two things in common—they were loyal to Remy and they took it personally when anyone broke Collective law. They weren't too keen on Eric blood-starving his people either.

Randolph, Alberta and a bodacious blonde they called Henny would go in through the front door with Remy and Trish. The rest of the group was assigned strategic posts where they would wait for the signal to move in. They couldn't let Eric know they had been tipped off to his arrival without endangering Damien. There was no other way to plan the takeover while minimizing the casualties. Eric would be suspicious if Trish came back without Remy. If they attacked without knowing what was happening in the lodge, it could mean a death sentence for both Remy's people and the vamps inside.

Alberta had provided the group with a layout of the lodge and assured them she wasn't turned by Eric. Eric had lost her loyalty when he had turned against his own Collective. While Remy and Trish were skeptical, they felt they had no choice but to trust her just as they had to trust Damien's call for help the night before was real. Henny was their secret weapon. The buxom blonde sounded like she had the IQ of a kumquat

and dressed like a high-paid escort. What strangers didn't know was she was military trained and could take down most men and vamps twice her size without breaking a sweat. She also would act as the telepathic link back to the Macon vamps positioned outside the lodge, something Remy, as king, could not do. When the time was right, she would send out the signal to strike.

The five main players climbed back into Remy's Suburban and drove up to the front door of the cabin. The remainder of the group disbursed to their assigned posts in the woods around the lodge. Trish kept her mouth clamped shut to prevent her teeth from chattering as she stared at the lodge. Every light in the place must have been on, but not a soul—alive or undead—stirred. Henny adjusted her black leather halter-top, while Randolph and Remy helped Trish and Alberta from the vehicle.

Remy sniffed the air. "There's enough gunpowder in there to blow this place to hell."

Although Alberta was the larger of the two, she cowered behind Trish. "I smell fear and hunger."

"But can you communicate with anyone?" Trish asked. "Can you reach Damien?"

Alberta focused on the window to Damien's room. Shortly thereafter, the light blinked. "He's in there, but he can't respond to me. I don't know

why. It's like he's been put under a psychic binding."

"He must be able to receive your messages or the light wouldn't have blinked," Trish said, then looked at Remy. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Remy nodded and took his place at her side. "When the time comes, Eric is mine."

The front door had been left unlocked and unguarded. The five in Trish's party entered, on alert for the sneak attack they anticipated awaited them. The common room and stairs were deserted. The group spread out, each checking the status of side rooms as they came to them. The rooms were just as deserted as the main entry.

Alberta led the way to the throne room, certain Eric would be waiting for them there—and he was. He lounged on the throne that rightfully belonged to Trish, and an odd elderly man wearing a black tunic and a pentagram stood to the right of the throne. Eric held the leashes of the two nubile female vampires who cowered in tears at his feet. A number of square-jawed militiamen standing at attention lined each side of the room, each holding an M3 submachine gun.

"Good of you to join us, Trish. I've been expecting you and your backwoods man."

"What's happening here, Eric?" Trish asked. Eric held his arms open in welcome. "What does it look like, Patricia? I'm holding a little reception in your honor. Isn't that what you want? A little recognition as monarch, however temporarily you may hold the position?"

"Is that a threat?"

"No, that has been the plan all along. You see, I specifically targeted you as successor to the crown. I've had you, among others, tailed for months, watching you crawl after that wretched creature you thought to marry. And after careful consideration, I determined you were pathetic enough to easily manipulate into choosing me as king. However, you've ruined that part of my plan so now I have a new plan. I think you will find it interesting."

Eric tugged on the leashes attached to the two scared women at his feet hard enough to jerk them off balance and out of his way. He rose and walked toward Trish's group, the women forced to scramble after him. Eric handed the leashes to Trish.

"A little wedding gift for you." He nodded and two soldiers stepped forward.

Trish screamed as a barrage of bullets sprayed the two young women and blood splattered her clothes and face. She would have collapsed had Remy not put an arm around her and held her upright. It took her a few minutes to realize she was the only one to react to the murders. The soldiers and the vampires stood firm. *If they can do it, so can I.* She wiped her tears and squared her shoulders, vowing Eric wouldn't get the best of her.

"What's your point, Eric?" Her voice wavered, but at least she stood up to him.

"My point, Patricia, is I may not be able to hurt you, but I can destroy this entire fucking Collective—and I will. You know I will."

"What do you want?"

"I want what is rightfully mine. I have carried this Collective for centuries and yet I can never be anything more than a second unless I manage to be chosen as king. That is where you came in, Trish. As king, I could have represented you at Council. The Council is one vote away from doing away with that archaic ritual and rightfully allowing each Collective to choose the strongest among them as leader instead of falling weaker and weaker under the leadership of simpering imbeciles such as you."

"Is that what this is all about—a pissing contest?" asked Remy.

"Lieutenant, kill his second," Eric ordered as calmly as he might order a meal at a nice restaurant.

"No!" Trish screamed as both she and Remy rushed to protect Randolph. Between the two of them, they were able to enclose Randolph in their shield, but a deflected bullet hit Alberta in the heart.

"See how it works? Bullets bounce off you and kill others." Eric's voice went stone cold. "You shouldn't have crossed me. Drop the shields and I'll release the Collective members and send these armed gentlemen back to whatever rock they crawled out from under."

Remy and Trish exchanged a look of doubt that Eric would make this so easy.

"You doubt me?" Eric asked as he looked from Remy to Trish. "Well, I can't say as I blame you. There is a catch. My friend Marius here," he waved a hand at the elderly gentleman standing beside the throne, "is an authority on all things magick. He assures me the protection spell is reversible, and if I simply remove Remy from the picture—in a purely fair battle, I assure you—Trish will once again be free to select a new mate. While I don't particularly care for hand-me-down sluts, in this case, I'll make an exception."

"What's in it for him?" Remy asked, nodding toward Marius.

"Why, that's easy. Marius gets Trish to use as his own private power generator. He has created a most interesting perpetual youth spell, which he intends to share with those more fortunate individuals who can afford his fee, but he needs Trish to make the spell work.

"Oh, she'll continue to reside here, spend her days shopping as usual. She'll still act as a figurehead to the Collectives. Yes, she will inherit the Macon Collective as well, although I don't know what she wants with a bunch of inbred hicks. I may do her a favor and put them out of their misery, or not. What do you think, Marius?"

"Sparing their lives may make her more...cooperative."

Trish found Marius' lecherous grin less than reassuring.

Eric nodded. "You may be right."

"And if I kill you?" Remy asked.

"Oh, well then, Marius has been instructed to kill her. Something gruesome, like a head explosion. Kaboom! Either way, I win."

"No deal," Trish said. "I won't let you kill Remy."

Remy touched her arm. "Wait. How does Marius tap into Trish's power?"

Eric's face lit up in a demonic grin. "I'm so glad you asked. The same way you did. She will make herself available for a good ass-fucking on demand. And if she decides not to cooperate, she can watch her people die just like she did today."

"So our choices are death or degradation?" asked Trish.

Eric templed his fingers. "Yes, I'm afraid that is about it, your death or someone else's."

Remy and Trish looked at one another, wishing they could talk, touch and take a moment to discuss their options. The options were limited. They could save their people through the sacrifice of their own lives or chance the destruction of many.

"Oh and if you are thinking of signaling your men to attack, I wouldn't. The cellar's wired with explosives. It is either my way or we all end it right here, right now. Well, you will end it here. Marius can teleport the two of us a good distance away with the mumble of the final phrase to a preset spell. With my ties to this place dissolved, I can always start over using Collective funds to finance my own freelance network of vampires. There are plenty out there who do not follow Council wishes."

"Don't appear we have much choice. Send Henny back. She doesn't belong here. I'll fight your battle," Remy said. "I'd like Randolph to stay 'til it's over."

"And I want the vampires here set free," Trish interrupted. "You let them go and I'll cooperate."

"Oh, be realistic, Patricia. I release my prisoners, and this hillbilly and you will fight to the death. I need you alive."

Trish found it hard to believe she had once found Eric attractive. Now, he reminded her of a snake with eyes glazed with hatred. There had to be a way around this, a way that didn't lead to anyone dying, least of all Remy. She needed time to think, to devise a plan.

"How do we drop the shields?" she asked.

"I have a sacrificial knife dipped in a potion that I created myself. I will hold the knife, and you will simultaneously run your palms down the blade as I speak the proper words. As the blood that binds you runs down the blade, the shields will fall," Marius said.

"What guarantees do I have that you won't immediately kill Remy?" Trish asked Eric.

"Oh, I suppose my word won't do, will it?"

"No. I trust him," Trish pointed to Marius, "more than I do you. The ceremony will take place in my rooms after the soldiers are gone. You can keep your hostages. You retain control of the trigger to the explosives, but I want the soldiers gone. Send Henny with them. When they board a plane out of the country, she will communicate it to Randolph. As soon as Randolph gets the word, Remy and I will do whatever you want."

Eric considered her offer as Remy stared at Trish, trying to determine her motives.

Eric nodded. "Done."

Chapter Nine

Trish gave Henny a hesitant nod as the soldiers led her out. I know you can't hear me, but eliminate them. I don't want Eric to be able to call them back. Logically, she knew she was wasting her mental powers. A ruler could not telepathically communicate with her subjects, but the fact Eric could use telepathy on her told her logic wasn't always right. She could only pray Henny would do the right thing once they were outside. She refused to meet Remy's eyes, still unsure exactly what she had in mind, but knowing it was better than watching him die. When the outer door slammed shut, she turned back to Eric.

"Do we just stand here or can I go to my room? If we are going to do this, I'd like to change into something less," she looked down at the black slacks and sweater she wore, "last year's style."

Eric snickered. "How like you. I can't let you trot off with Remy in tow, but I will allow you to change. Remy and I will...discuss...the rules of

combat."

She knew Remy was safe until she returned. The metaphysical shield created from sex and blood would see to it. She forced herself to walk, not run, from the room and up the stairs to her suite, praying the entire time that Damien would be still be in his room. As soon as she entered her suite, she sped to the connecting door and found it locked. She tapped but received no response from Damien. Trusting her vampire powers, focused her hearing on what was in the next room. The sound of a single heartbeat. She rapped lightly on the door and muffled moans greeted her ears. The heartbeat sped up. She put her shoulder against the door and pushed, praying the noise of the splintering wood wouldn't travel downstairs and to the opposite end of the lodge where Eric held Remy and Randolph prisoner.

In Damien's room, she found her assistant bound with chains and gagged. He lay in the center of a sacred circle of power that was so strong Trish could feel it reverberate against her shields. On his forehead, a red and gray incense smudge stained his skin. The work of Marius, no doubt. Probably some sort of spell to keep Damien from using telepathy to communicate with Alberta. But who flickered the lights?

As quickly as the thought occurred to her, she sensed motion behind her and twisted out of the way as two muscular arms grabbed for her.

Turning, she came face to face with a dead man walking, a zombie lacking a heartbeat, but capable of following the instructions of his master. The zombie mirrored Remy in size. He was gray, not just his suit and tie, but complexion and colorless eyes all bled together into a walking monument to the early cinema.

She found it unnerving the way he looked through her rather than at her. As he marched toward her again, she practiced one of the maneuvers Remy had taught her and shoved out with all her strength, hitting him in the center of the chest. The punch knocked him back through the wall into her suite with all the finesse of a wrecking ball. He didn't come back for seconds.

So much for stealth mode. Assuming her cover had been blown by the shattered wall, Trish took a running start at the force field surrounding Damien and easily burst through it, her own shields protecting her from the stinging shock normally felt when crossing over, according to the books she had read at Remy's cabin.

She removed Damien's gag.

"Shit, what took you so long?" Damien asked.

"We don't have much time. Can you get to the cellar?" Trish asked while pulling apart the chains binding Damien as if they were made out of bread dough rather than steel.

"Yeah."

She wiped away the smudge on Damien's forehead. "It's wired with explosives. Get everyone out. The soldiers are gone. I'll do what I can to stall Eric. And, Damien, I know Eric turned you, but you'll have to fight him. He'll kill you if you let him." A passage she had read the previous evening came back to her. "I know what might help." She offered him her neck. "Feed. Hurry. We don't have much time. If my blood is old enough, I may be able to override his hold on you. At the very least, my blood will make you stronger, more capable of fighting him off."

Damien looked at her as if she was crazy. "Are you serious?"

"Do it, Damien."

Like awkward teenagers, Trish and Damien did a dance of where to place their arms, Damien finally settling on bear hugging her. "You sure about this?"

"Dammit, can't you follow a direct order just once without questioning it?"

Damien smiled. "You'd think, wouldn't you?" His tongue lapped at the pulse on the side of her neck. "This may take a minute. Performance anxiety." He sniffed the blood pumping beneath her skin, smelled the power it held and, beyond all else, her purely feminine scent.

"We don't have a min—" Trish stopped short as Damien's fangs pierced her skin. She had never been feed upon without the benefit of arousal before. It hurt like hell. Tears welled up in her eyes and she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

It seemed like Damien fed forever, but it couldn't have been more than a few seconds before he drew back. "Damn, woman, what kind of elixir do you have running through your veins? Much more of that and I'll be permanently addicted."

"Just go, would you?" Trish pushed him toward the window, which he opened and leaped out of with no regard to the fact he was on the second floor of a very large building.

Now for Eric. Trish dashed to her room and grabbed a scarf to cover the fresh bite marks. Fortunately, anything went well with black. No point in tipping her hand any more than she already had. She tied the scarf in place as she dashed for the stairs, where she stopped short at the sight of Eric waiting for her.

"What have you done, Trish?"

"I'm afraid I broke a wall. You'll have it repaired, won't you?" The cold edge in Trish's voice sounded foreign even to her.

Eric removed a remote control device from his pocket and deliberately placed his finger over the control button. "That's an automatic death sentence for the Collective. You and Remy might survive, but everyone else here will be destroyed.

Not a vampire among them can survive being blown to bits."

Trish shrugged. "Your choice. You can push that button and become a big fish in your own little pond or we can go back downstairs and continue as planned. You can still gain the political power you've always wanted within the Collective and the Council."

Eric hesitated then took his finger off the button. "You'll drop your shields? Open your mind to me? Willingly take me to your bed as mate?"

"You defeat Remy and I will do whatever you want so long as no harm is done to my people and the fight is fair but if you double-cross me, I'll die before I let you or Marius anywhere near me. I've been doing my homework. I know how to destroy myself in such a way that I can't be turned."

Silence hung between them as Eric contemplated his options. His hunger for power won out.

When Eric and Trish returned to the throne room, Trish looked hard at Randolph, hoping for some sign that he had heard from Henny. His responses were sparkling eyes and a mischievous grin. That was good enough for Trish. It was nice to know something was going right and the soldiers were no longer in the picture. If Damien could get the Collective members out of danger,

the advantage became theirs. Removing the protective shield would be to their advantage, it would free them to make the physical contact necessary to eliminate Eric and his slimy counterpart, Marius.

"Well now that we are all here," Eric said, "I think it's time to get this show on the road. Marius, there's been a slight change of plan. The shield removal ceremony will take place here. Trish has...ah, negotiated new terms."

"Anything I need to know?" Remy asked Trish as she took his hand.

"Trust me. That's all. No matter what happens." She could hear movement in the cellar, whispering, the call for wire cutters. She looked at Remy and Eric to see if they had heard it, too, but Eric was too busy helping Marius create a circle of power on the hardwood floor around them. Marius asked Remy and Trish to kneel across from each other, then anointed a foot-long blade while Eric held the hilt of the knife.

"Your hands, please. Place one on each side of the blade. When I nod, you must each run your hand down the double edge until a stream of blood pools at the guard."

Marius chanted rapidly in a foreign tongue, eyes closed. His voice echoed in the large hall.

Below their feet, the imprisoned vampires stirred restlessly. The voices of Damien and a vamp called Sarge rang out clearly to Trish's ears. She couldn't believe Eric was unaware of what was happening.

"Shit, Sarge, I don't know which wire to cut. Cut them all," Damien said.

"Boy, I could blow us all up. Let me think about this a minute. I was an explosives expert in 'Nam, but that was a whole lot of years ago."

Marius nodded and Remy and Trish grabbed the blade, feeling the finely honed edges cut into their hands. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but Trish didn't flinch. She needed to be free of the shields to do what she wanted to do, which was fire Marius' spell back at him. The shields fell in one seamless swoop.

"Red, blue, green. That order. I hope those soldier boys studied the same specs I did." Three snips. "Now! Go now!" Sarge yelled out loud enough to be heard by the vampires upstairs.

Eric and Marius turned toward the noise of the stampeding vampires as Trish struck Marius, her hand making contact with his chest just over the heart hard enough to knock him across the room, where he hit a marble pedestal. He hung there for a long moment, eyes bulging, clutching his chest, before sliding to the floor. Trish listened as the last beat of his heart faded, assuring her Eric could no longer depend on Marius' magick to punish her.

A mob of recently freed vampires stormed

through the door, led by Damien wearing a black T-shirt splashed with the word *Demon* and a muscle-bound man in fatigues, presumably Sarge. While Eric was off guard, Remy grabbed him by the neck with his still bleeding hand, lifting Eric until his feet dangled over the floor.

Eric gasped out Damien's name and reached toward him, but Damien just smiled.

"That's some blood cocktail you gave me, Trish. Now instead of Eric pulling my strings, he's just a nasty tickle in the back of my throat." Damien's dark eyes blazed with hatred. "I'd kill him myself, but it looks like Remy's got a previous claim."

The front door banged open as Remy's team, led by Henny, entered the lodge, surprising everyone.

Eric stopped clutching at Remy's hand on his throat long enough to lay karate chops on both sides of Remy's head, hard enough to jar Remy into loosening his grip. In a flash, Eric leaped across the room, burst out one of the picture windows and disappeared into the dark. Damien and Remy were right on his heels.

* * * *

"Like hell..." Remy muttered as he flew out the window after the fleeing Eric. This was going to end now, tonight. There was no way Eric would

have the chance to terrorize Trish again. She was his woman now, he took his responsibility seriously, even if she would never lie with him again. Who could blame her? Eric had it right. He was nothing but a hillbilly.

Ahead, Remy heard Eric crashing in the brush. Behind him thundered the footsteps of another. Friend, he hoped. While he was a big man and capable of taking on any other vampire in his Collective, the Stalworth bloodline was stronger, older. If it had not been for the infusion of Trish's blood and his own fury to fuel him, he had no doubt Eric would defeat them. Fighting two Stalworth vamps would take more power than he possessed. He would have to rely on his wits, and in the process, Eric might escape.

Keeping his gaze on the trail of disturbed limbs and flying debris in Eric's wake, Remy swung wide, hoping to get a glimpse of the person following him. The lighter, quicker Damien fell into pace beside him within seconds. As Remy recognized him, the two exchanged swift nods and continued after their prey.

Eric's path led up the mountainside. The forest thinned out until only scrub brush and boulders lay between Remy and Eric. Between twists and weaves, Remy caught glimpses of a terrified Eric scrambling for his life, showering Remy and Damien with loose pebbles. Twice Eric disappeared, his trail no longer apparent, but Damien was still able to track him through the blood ties running through his veins. As long as Eric stayed within a hundred miles, Damien would sense his presence, feel his blood pulling him toward Eric.

The full moon crested the horizon. A tree, already stripped of its foliage, stretched its limbs outward, waving a warning in the breeze, but the desperate Eric appeared heedless as he lumbered forward. A cry escaped him as he appeared to trip out of sight, his arms whirling through the air.

Remy took this as his cue to pour on the speed and catch up with his adversary before he could regain his footing. A startled Damien scrambled after him, doing his best to catch up with the bigger man before it was too late. He finally grabbed Remy's arm and pulled him to a walk just short of the tree.

"Remy, no!" Damien yelled.

Remy was twice the size of Damien. In fury, he tried to fling the spike-haired, pierced younger man off him, but Damien held on, more for his own life now than for Remy's. Three feet ahead of them the mountainside dropped off into nothingness.

"Cliff, cliff..." Damien managed to exhale, breaking through the thundering roar in Remy's head.

As if coming out of a self-induced daze, Remy stood still and stared at Damien, then looked in the direction where Eric disappeared. "You don't think..."

From somewhere below them a muffled whimper streamed upward.

Holding onto the tree's trunk, Remy leaned over the cliff edge into the darkness. "Huh. Figures. He's caught up in some tree roots."

"What do we do now?" Damien asked from where he now lay on his belly, looking over the ridge.

Remy shrugged, "Let nature take its course."

"Yeah but he's not natural. There's no telling if the fall will actually do the trick."

"Could just let daylight get him."

"Yeah but it looks like more dirt than rock right there. Could be he could bury in deep enough to survive," Damien said.

"You've got a point. I suppose we'll have to pull him up and kill him later. Course no one said we have to do it right now."

* * * *

Trish found a roomful of loyal Collective members looking to her for direction. The housekeeper, Ms. Fine, smoothed her platinum blonde hair into place and walked up to escort Trish to her throne.

Randolph took his place to Trish's right and the impromptu gathering witnessed Trish's first chance to take her rightful place upon the throne. While she regretted that she had left the emerald dress at Remy's cabin, she did her best to look regal in the black slacks and sweater.

Resting her hands on the arms of the chair, legs crossed at the ankles, she looked out over the crowd. Many looked on the verge of collapse as fellow members held them up. Now was the time for leadership, to make Remy proud and fill the role she had been chosen to fill.

Her voice rang out, loud and clear, with more confidence than she felt. "Ms. Fine, arrange suitable accommodations for everyone and arrange for the feeders to return." God, I can't believe I just said that. People. Feeders. "Organize a group of volunteers to share blood with those who are too weak with hunger to wait.

"Randolph, organize search teams to aid Remy and Damien in tracking down Eric. I want him returned alive, if possible. While Council law doesn't call for a trial and proper sentencing for treason, I do. And, Randolph? I need to speak with the Council as soon as possible. As soon as Eric is captured, please work with Damien to make it happen." She wondered if she was breaking protocol by not depending on the Stalworth vampires to clean up the mess Eric had

made, but she knew Remy would feel more comfortable with his own people searching for him. Besides, many of the Stalworth vampires were in bad shape and needed to be fed. Better they nurture their own for now.

"Yes, my lady," Randolph replied with a courteous tilt of the head.

"Last, Sarge, we owe you our deepest gratitude. May I ask one more favor from you?"

The gruff Sarge came forward and knelt on one fatigue-covered knee before her. "As you wish, my queen."

"I don't trust Eric. Please lead a team through the entire lodge and grounds looking for any other nasty surprises he may have left for us. Begin with my suite. And, Sarge, there is a nasty looking zombie up there. I'd rather not see him again."

Within minutes, the group had been organized into teams. Macon and Stalworth vamps worked side by side, some arming for the hunt while others fed the weaker vampires.

Henny reported directly to Trish. "I don't know if it was wishful thinking on my part, but I could have sworn I heard you tell me to eliminate those soldier boys. I know I shouldn't have been able to read your thoughts, but it sure felt like it."

"Really? All I could do was hope you would know what to do when you got them away from the lodge, but if it's true, if I can communicate with more than just Eric —"

The return of Remy and Damien preempted her thoughts. Eric, much worse for wear, hunkered between them. Trish tried to spot what she had found attractive in Eric, but it was gone. The confidence, the stylish pride was gone and the Adonis looks had been marred with a bruises and abrasions. Not even the crazed blue eyes reminded her of the man who had charmed her in her mother's home.

"Damien led us right to him. While your blood protected him from Eric's demands, it enhanced his ability to track his maker. Good thing, too. Eric was clinging to a tree root about a hundred feet above a rocky ravine. Falling might not have killed him, but it would have hurt like hell and the wolves and mountain lions might have finished him off before he could heal," Remy said. "I thought long and hard about finishing him off, but he's done more to betray you than me. It is your right to decide his fate."

Trish met Remy's eyes. "No. It is our right. We rule together." She held out her hand and Remy took it, knelt in front of her and laid his head in her lap. She stroked his head, thankful she had someone so strong, so loyal as Remy to share this experience with.

Chapter Ten

"pamn it, Damien, keep looking. You must have missed something," Trish said as she paced the length of her office. At the rate she was going, the room would need new carpeting before she had held office a full thirty days.

"I'm telling you there's nothing here. I've checked every account. They're all empty. We can't even afford to pay your shoe bill." Damien's spiked head stayed bent over the keyboard, his fingers tapping away as he spoke. "That son of a bitch either lost all but a few grand playing the futures market or transferred the money out of Collective accounts. I'd fry the bastard if I were you. It's what the Council would do."

Trish threw up her hands. "The Council! Sabine and Nathan are due here in five days and I can't even afford to hold a proper reception." Sometimes she really did think ignorance was bliss, but Remy had opened her eyes to how important ceremony was to the vampire way of

life, especially when dealing with the Council. Council support meant the difference between being left alone to rule in peace and finding your every move scrutinized by outsiders. The Stalworth Collective could even be forced to act as sanctuary for exiled vamps, many of whom were maddened by too much power and too many years of living beyond everyone and everything they knew to be real.

The human mind is a fragile thing. It may be able to accept man feeding on man for survival, but too much change, too much innovation thrust upon a simpleton who does not care to change with the world around him is as destructive as the most lethal of drugs. While most Collectives took the insanity of the few in stride, others were quick to cast off their undesirables—the insane, rebellious and simply unfit—to the care of others and the Council was quick to oblige, for a price.

Damien finally turned away from the computer, watching Trish pace from over his shoulder. "Tell Remy. He'll front you the dough."

Remy. Sore subject. Remy had gone back to Hickory Creek the same night he captured Eric, against Trish's wishes. She had done everything but beg him to stay with her, but he said his place was there and Trish knew her people needed her at the lodge. That was ten days ago. She had not

heard from him once. What was it about men and telephones? Humans or vamps, they both seem to think of a telephone as a last-minute device, used only in emergencies. She could not recall the number of times she had been left waiting for a late Russell to show up when a simple phone call would have clued her in that the round of golf had gone long. Now Remy would not reach out and reassure her that he still wanted her, missed her touch as much as she missed his.

His absence created an ache within her like no other. She couldn't imagine any cruelty beyond knowing such pleasure at the hands of another just to find it ripped away so suddenly. True, she was not married to him, and in the vampire world, lovers were common, but she could not picture herself with anyone else. At least now, she was willing to admit she could call someone to her bed and he would be expected to obey, even Remy, but that was not the way she wanted it. To force him back into her bed would be unbearably humiliating. If he did not want her then she would have to live with his decision, at least for now. Now if only her body would listen to the logic her brain had so conveniently thought up.

"Remy has his own life to lead. We'll find a way out of this without him. I'll get a job if I have to." How can I ask him for money when I can't even ask him for his love?

"In all seriousness, Trish, you already have a

full-time job. I've seen how much you do around here, listening to anyone who wants an audience with you, making sure the new vamps have everything they need." Damien went to her and put his arms around her. "Have you considered letting the Collective know about our financial straits? There are those who may be willing to chip in if they only knew we needed their help. They all know how much you've already done for us."

Damien chucked Trish under the chin, urging her to raise her head and look him in the eyes. "I, for one, would move the world for you. How Remy can keep his hands off you is beyond me. If I thought you would have me, and Remy wouldn't kill me..." Damien smiled. "I would gladly do anything and everything for you, in the bedroom and out."

Trish colored and extracted herself from his arms, "Damien, don't..."

Damien high-stepped it back to his computer. "Oh don't mind me. I'm still reeling from that royal blood of yours." He grinned and winked in Trish's direction.

Trish let it drop, but Damien didn't fool her. She knew he had a crush on her, but she had promised herself to Remy, for better or worse. She wrapped her arms around herself and tried to forget how good it felt to sleep in Remy's arms. It

was better to forget. She chanced a glance at Damien. The young punker had the mental aptitude of a genius but his company was a poor substitute for Remy. Even so she would have been better off falling for him. But then looking at her past choices in men, it was obvious she couldn't be trusted to make her own decisions when it came to relationships.

As if on cue Eric's voice entered her head. If you would only listen to me, you wouldn't have these problems. I told you, I am the man for you. Now look at you. Alone, again, and needing a savior.

The monies are not all gone. I have stashed sufficient funds to last the Collective many lifetimes over. Release me and it is yours. I'll forgive everything, even the death of Marius, and if you like, I will gladly eliminate Remy, as I did Russell —

"You did what!" Trish didn't realize she had said the words aloud until she saw Damien's head whip around in her direction.

"Huh?" said Damien.

"Nothing. I have to see Eric. Let's go."

"What for? He's nothing but bad news."

"Damn it, Damien, can you do anything without questioning me first?" Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her body shook so hard she couldn't keep her teeth from chattering. If Eric had killed Russell, she wasn't sure what she would do, but she knew it would not be pretty. She had to look Eric in the eyes, had to be certain.

Damien led the way down to the cellar where they held Eric in a small cell normally reserved for vampires gone mad. Trish had never been in the cellar before and was strangely surprised to find it well lit and more akin to a finished basement than a dungeon from some B-rated movie. There was no water slowly dripping down roughly hewn stone walls, no torture devices hanging from the ceiling, nor any pathetic creatures chained to the walls, begging for water and a crust of bread. To the contrary, it reminded her of any of a number of finished basements Trish had visited in her lifetime – cream-colored walls and recessed lighting chased away shadows. A bank of washers and dryers lined one wall. Shelving units filled with carefully labeled boxes and plastic tubs filled most of the open area. Below the stairs, a hallway led to a series of small rooms, including Eric's new prison.

Sarge sat in a straight back chair propped against the cell wall. He jumped to his feet as soon as he saw Trish. "Your Highness," he said with more reverence than Trish felt she deserved.

"I want to see Eric."

"As you wish."

He opened the cell door. Eric lounged on a cot on the far side of the room. A sink, table and chair were the only other amenities. On the table a rare steak, baked potato and salad remained untouched.

Nice to see he is eating well, Trish thought as the bitter taste of hatred coated her tongue. "Is it true? Did you kill Russell?" Trish wiped at the wet streaks running down each side of her face.

"So nice of you to visit me, Patricia."

Trish fought not to knock the smug look off his face. "Just tell me what I want to know."

Eric examined his fingernails for imagined imperfections. "I get so lonely down here with only Sarge for company. His repartee is limited to weapons assembly and chokeholds, but you," Eric's gaze passed over Trish as if he was remembering every curve of her naked body, "You have so many more delightful options to offer."

"Why you..." Damien growled and took a step around her, reminding Trish he was there.

She grabbed Damien's arm and held him back. *This is between Eric and me.* She didn't realize she had only thought the words until Damien stared at her in astonishment.

"I heard that," Damien whispered.

"So did I," purred Eric. "Our little queen is full of so many surprises."

"Damien, wait for me outside."

"You expect me to leave you in here with him, alone?" asked Damien.

"Yes, Damien, I do. I expect you to do whatever

I tell you. Period. Got it?" Trish snapped. The tears were gone and for the third time in so many days, she felt like a different person—more confident, secure in her own abilities, as if she were a warrior trained to face conflicts and win.

As Damien walked out scowling, Trish once again addressed Eric. "Is it true? Did you kill Russell?" Trish was quickly growing tired of repeating herself.

"Wouldn't you rather hear about your mother?"

The words barely escaped Eric's mouth before Trish had crossed the room and hauled him to his feet by his shirtfront. She'd never noticed before how pasty his skin looked. Of course most vampires were pale, at least those who didn't take advantage of the in-lodge spray-on tanning booths, but Eric reminded her of the waxy mannequins on display at cheap carnival horror houses.

Eric smiled. His breath reeked of old celery and feta cheese. *She's safe, for now. You didn't expect me to forego a backup plan, did you?*

With a sudden jerk, Trish slammed Eric into the stone wall behind him. Rubble fell around him as he slid into an unconscious heap on the cot.

"Sarge," Trish yelled. "Let me know when he comes to." Trish whipped around and stormed back upstairs, Damien on her heels. "Get my

mother on the phone. If you can't reach her, we're taking a fieldtrip into the city.

Damien drove the sports utility vehicle like a pro racecar driver while Trish redialed Russell's cell phone one more time. She'd spent the entire trip dialing first her mother then Russell. If anything had happened to either of them, she didn't know what she would do, but it wouldn't be pretty. Moaning from the backseat announced Eric had regained consciousness again.

Trish glanced at him over her shoulder. A combination of log chains and padlocks prevented his escape and a ball gag kept him from taunting her out loud. His telepathic nagging was why Trish kept knocking him out from time to time. Remy may have been right. She may not be capable of killing, but she damn well could keep Eric from driving her insane. She hoped he'd take the hint and keep quiet this time.

Their first stop was the Penobscot residence. Damien stayed with Eric while Trish let herself inside. Her mother wasn't anywhere to be found, but a note written in Eric's unique scrawl lay on her mother's bed.

I will have my way, Patricia. Eric

Trish – passive, people-pleaser Trish – saw

more than red. She saw every color in the rainbow as she tried to put together two cohesive words in one sentence. Her head exploded into a nuclear bomb of metaphysical power strong enough to shake the house.

* * * *

Outside in the vehicle, Damien watched wideeyed as the wind picked up and swirled into a wind tunnel. As quickly as the wind whipped into a funnel shape around the house. it moved toward the SUV, forewarning Trish's arrival as she stormed outside. Damien swallowed and stared, mouth agape. Trish stopped next to the vehicle. The whites of her eyes glowed, her auburn hair floated around her like a cape.

Trish gripped the latch to the back door of the SUV and used it to rip the door off the vehicle, flinging it across the neighbor's yard, where it wrapped around a barren elm. She hefted the chain-laden Eric out of the backseat with one hand wrapped around his throat. Eric's eyes bulged as he tried to scream.

* * * *

With her free hand, Trish cupped his scalp, creating a human conduit from his brain to hers.

At the speed of light, she rifled through this thoughts—childhood memories of riding horses with his twin sister, the fear that came with turning into a vampire, the location of hidden Collective funds and library materials. She fast-forwarded through to the death of Russell, how Eric took pleasure in draining Russell's life force, then sinking the body in a local lake, cinderblocks used as weights. Trish kept digging, storing what information she could use, dismissing the rest. Finally her mother's image surfaced. Eric was lying. Her mother was dead, disposed of as so much garbage at the local waste center, a corpse acting as nutrients for maggots, flies and other small scavengers.

Trish roared in pain and anger. She instinctively squeezed Eric's throat. Her mind was so clouded with the most amazing mind fuck of pure power compounded by her grief that she was barely aware of her actions. It felt like someone anointed her with godlike status and the omnipotent powers that went with the title while simultaneously ripping her heart out.

She was only vaguely aware of the images flashing through to her from her Collective. Back at the lodge, Ms. Fine headed a table of six staff members. All were lost in a comatose state, their eyes empty, their bodies locked in mid-motion. Across town, a young Hispanic—a newly changed

Collective member—held a young blonde close to him, his lips just grazing her skin, but as hungry as he had been just moments before he couldn't move, couldn't respond to the girl's moans. Back at Remy's cabin, Randolph and Dr. Delaney became human statues before Remy's eyes, no longer responding to his questions or capable of free will. Only those who had shared Trish's blood—Damien and her mate Remy—remained coherent, focused and capable.

Trish fought the blinding urge to destroy Eric, not simply end his undead existence, but rip his body limb from limb until he was nothing more than a bloody memory. The harder she fought, the faster the tornado swirled around the SUV, virtually enclosing the vampires in a raging wall of flying debris. Trish blinked, body shuddering, then threw Eric back into the vehicle with such force the SUV rocked from the impact.

Eric lay crumpled, slumped in an unnatural position, half in the seat and half on the ground. His occasional blinking and incoherent mumbling were the only signs of life. Even his thoughts, as they filtered to Trish, were hoarse and broken.

She's the one... The one... I've created...after all this time.

Chapter Eleven

The power surged through her, out of control with no outlet, no concerted purpose. Trish's nerves were raw, each one a stinging reminder that had she not met Eric her mother would still be alive. Her emotions ran from one end of the gamut to the other, a jumbled mess of fear, anger and desire. Each time she blinked, she flashed on another Collective member—Sarge slumped over the wheel of his Jeep, a young black woman wearing a purple halter dress crumpled on a parquet floor, Ms. Fine face down on the conference table.

All over the Stalworth and Macon territories, vampires lost power as Trish went into overload. The winds grew in intensity. The tornado expanded, picking up Trish's family home and hurling it skyward. She watched it disappear, but without her mother, the house no longer felt like home.

Trish knew she was an out-of-control

phenomenon capable of destroying the entire city and both Collectives in one almighty step. She squeezed her eyelids shut, attempting to force the power back into the Collectives, but the harder she concentrated, the more intensely the power surge spiked through her. Her back arched until only her toes touched the ground. The velocity of the surrounding winds held her in an upright position.

As soon as Trish quit fighting the energy and allowed it to flow through her, she found she could once again think and stand on solid ground. She looked at Damien, who had shrunk back into the cab of the SUV. He was the answer. He would take her where she needed to go—to her mate, to Remy. Every instinct she had screamed out for Remy's touch. She knew he could help her control the power just as he had helped her create the energy needed to shield them from Eric.

"Trish, we have to find a place to stop. The sun is coming up and I for one don't want to fry. If it wasn't for this freakin' storm you've brewed up, I'd already be toast," Damien said, dividing his attention between the blacktop and Trish's profile.

"Sunlight won't hurt me." Trish's dead voice barely broke a whisper, but she didn't notice. A million sights and sounds filled her mind, all swirled together in a mind-blowing kaleidoscope so intense she could no longer see the road in front of her. Above all the noise and visions, Trish had an overwhelming urge to see Remy, to touch him. Remy would make it better.

"Well, unless you're ready to drive this fuckin' thing, you'd better come up with a plan because my ass will turn extra crispy when the first sunray shines over the horizon. I won't be much good as chauffer if I'm a pile of ash."

For the first time since entering the vehicle, Trish turned her head to look at him. "Pull over."

As soon as they came to a stop on the shoulder, Trish hopped out and opened the back door. Seeing Eric's chained body sent a vile shiver of hatred through her. She fought the desire to hurt him as much as he had hurt her. Instead, she flung his body down the embankment, where he landed with a splash in the mud.

"Bury him," she said. "Deep. I want him alive when I come back."

"Hey, what about me?" Damien asked.

"My blood will protect you."

"How do you know?"

She stared through him, no longer limited to reading his thoughts. She absorbed him like a snowball absorbs more snowflakes. His life, his physical makeup were as much a part of her memories, her knowledge, now as her own were. "I just know. Just like I know your hair is really

blond and your mother's maiden name was Demetrius."

"Shit!" Damien stumbled down the embankment and easily hefted Eric on his shoulder even though Eric was a bigger man weighed down by chains and locks.

Ten minutes later, Damien staggered back into the eye of the wind tunnel to find Trish behind the wheel of the SUV. The first sunrays streamed through the windshield. Damien shrank back from the sun instinctively, waiting for the first slashes of fire to rend his skin from the bones. When it didn't happen, he looked in awe at his first sunrise in fifty years.

Once the sun rose, the tornado-like conditions surrounding the traveling vampires subsided into a gusty wind. While Damien relaxed back in his seat and tried to take in all the daylight visions, he had missed for so long, Trish cried in silence. She cried for Ms. Fine and the staff members who had died with her in the now sunlit conference room. She cried for the young couple who died in each other's arms, where they had been making love on a grassy knoll before she had somehow sucked the life force from them. And she cried for the sixty or so other vampires who had lost their lives due to this phenomenon that had taken control of her. Her only solace was they had died peacefully

unaware of the transgression committed against them.

The stream of tears streaking her face had dried into salty trails by the time they reached Hickory Creek and the power surge flowing through Trish had internalized, creating the sensation of a throbbing time bomb buried deep within the pit of her stomach. She was tired and antsy to get to Remy, soon. Newly developed instincts told her she had to get to Remy. He was the key to stopping whatever it was that had started with learning Eric had killed everyone she had ever loved.

She sent out a silent scream to Remy, begging him to call off the armed guards she sensed surrounding the cabin. She also picked up six vampires staying with Remy, two in each of the spare bedrooms and two in Remy's room. Remy slept in a recliner in the great room, stretched out beneath a wool blanket featuring a giant grizzly's head. Trish wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on, remain conscious and suppress the power instead of lashing out in a blaze of the destruction she knew herself capable. She gripped the steering wheel and considered pulling over, letting Damien drive, but she had come this far and she wasn't sure what would happen if she didn't have a purpose, a way to leach the powers within safely.

Trish glanced in Damien's direction. Had his lips always been so supple? Had he always possessed bedroom eyes and such an obvious bulge in his raggedy black jeans? She pictured him naked—tall, slender, imagined his cock erect, slender, slightly curved with just a drop of dew moistening the tip. Her mouth watered and her clit throbbed against her pants seam.

The front tire dipped off the edge of the pavement, forcing Trish's attention to return to the stretch of asphalt before her. She jerked the vehicle back onto the road.

Damien grabbed for the dashboard. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Sorry."

Trish spotted the dirt road turn off that led to Remy's cabin and let out a sigh of relief. If she could keep her shit together just a little longer, she'd be home free. The SUV bounced up the rutted road. Trish refused to slow down. With the back of her hand, she wiped at her glazed eyes.

* * * *

Damien held onto the dashboard for dear life and considered putting on his seatbelt. If the vehicle flipped, it might not kill him, but he didn't relish the thought of the broken bones and lacerations he might suffer if Trish crashed the blasted SUV

down the side of the mountain. He considered himself lucky to have made it thus far without injury, considering Tornado Trish had acted like a woman possessed since stepping out of her mother's house. Now she looked more like a walking corpse than the eye of the storm that had surrounded them for so long. Her once-golden glow had faded to a sallow yellow overlay on a washed-out form. Eyes glazed, knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel, her driving abilities had degenerated from dangerous to downright madness. The road resembled little more than a narrow path through the brush.

On the verge of flinging himself out of the careening truck, Damien sighed in relief as they entered the clearing in front of Remy's cabin. Two humans carrying rifles stood guard on the front porch. Damien's heightened vampire senses picked up two more hiding in the tree line.

Trish didn't slow down until she had crossed the clearing. She slammed on the brakes and broke left, letting the SUV slide to a stop, showering the humans in a spray of gravel and debris. The horn blared as Trish slumped over the wheel.

"Remy! Open the fuckin' door," Damien yelled as he sped around the automobile and swept Trish up in his arms before the guards recovered from the hailstorm of their arrival. She weighed nothing in his arms, but the power that poured off her engulfed him, nearly knocking him on his ass from the sheer force of it. He marveled that she had held up as long as she had.

From the cabin, he heard the click of the locks. The door opened as Damien cleared the porch steps in a single leap. He stepped inside the dark cabin, blinded by the sudden change in lighting. The door slammed shut behind him, and Remy relieved Damien of his burden before his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"What happened?"

"I don't know for sure. One minute she's looking for her mother and the next all hell breaks loose—a fucking tornado of uncontrolled power, throwing shit all over the place. Then she said you'd know what to do and here we are."

"The power is pouring off her in waves. I've never felt anything like it," Remy said, shifting Trish more securely in his arms. "I have no idea what to do for her."

"Well, you'd better do something."
"Let's get her downstairs."

* * * *

Remy led Damien downstairs and laid Trish on the sofa. "All the bedrooms are filled. My people have fallen unconscious. I suspect it is somehow connected to what is happening to Trish." "I've not felt the touch of a Stalworth vamp since this started. It's as if she's draining them. As if she's absorbed their power, but has no way of disbursing it, kind of like a conduit that's been capped off on one end."

"A conduit...yes. There's something in the ancient texts about Collective conduits, capable of focusing the powers of the entire Collective, but these...anomalies always acted as wartime weapons. The last recorded incident happened during the time of the Roman Empire. The Romans attached a Germanic village protected by a small vampire Collective. Rather than give up their human servants to the Romans the vamps released a conduit on them. Virtually annihilated an entire regime in one continuous wave of power said to resemble a windstorm of unsurpassable destruction.

"But I don't know how to create a conduit, let alone what to do with the harnessed power. To my knowledge there is no ritual or remedy other than destruction and death to the enemy."

"But Trish has no enemies other than Eric and she didn't kill him. She had him in her grasp and could easily have destroyed him, but she didn't." Damien scratched his head, then fell back in the recliner Remy had been sleeping in.

"Our Patricia is no killer. She doesn't have it in her. I don't know how to help her other than contact the Council or try to revive her. If she knew to come to me, could be she can tell us why."

As if on cue, Trish moaned and rolled onto her side, reaching for Remy. "Remy, help me."

Remy dropped to his knees and allowed her to pull him into her embrace. "Just tell me how. I'll do whatever I can."

In answer, Trish tugged his head down to hers and kissed him as if he offered her the only source of breathable air. As their lips touched, power gushed out of her open mouth and into his in such an intense wave that Remy's eyes rolled back in his head. His brain seemed to explode into a million visual particles. He put his hands on Trish's shoulders, trying to break free of her hold, but to no avail. The kiss continued, deepening, Trish's tongue invading his mouth as she pressed her body to his.

* * * *

Alarmed by Remy's frantic struggle for freedom, Damien jumped to his feet and rushed over to the pair. Once there, he had no idea how to proceed without getting his ass kicked by either his queen or her consort, but if he did nothing chances were good Trish would kill the vampire king. Even in the short time since the kiss had begun, Damien could tell Remy was on the receiving end of whatever was hurting Trish, and he wasn't taking it well. He now hung a limp mass in Trish's grip, and she seemed unaware of her effect on her mate.

"Oh shit, I know I'm going to regret this." Damien tried to pry apart the lovers. The waves of power rolling off the couple tortured him as thoroughly as an attack of army ants. He yelled, praying he could somehow gain Trish's attention and jar her back to conscious thought. "Trish! Let him go. You're killing him. Do you hear me? You're fuckin' killing him."

Out of sheer desperation, Damien picked Trish up around the middle and tried to jerk her free from Remy, his actions tossing her across the room and into the wall as she suddenly let go.

"Oh fuck!" Damien yelled, rushing to Trish's side. "Are you all right? I didn't know what else to do."

* * * *

Trish looked at him, the whites of her eyes glowing. "I can release the power through Remy, complete the circuit without destruction. Give the power as I receive the power, feed the power back to the Collectives, a circle of energy. It is vampire ritual, to feed off the passion of the queen." Her voice resonated in the cavernous surroundings.

Her mind reeled with ancient knowledge, so much so that she could barely put into words what she needed to survive. She relied on actions and hoped Damien and Remy trusted her enough to help.

Damien reached out to cradle Trish in his arms, to comfort her while he told her Remy was of no use to her right now, that he was on the verge of destruction, but fear held him back, fear of the power, of what she could do to him.

As if reading his thought, Trish said, "He's not gone, merely stunned. Help us. Help me save our people."

Damien nodded, then looked around the room. "Hang on." He had no idea how to help Trish and Remy. He had to trust that Trish knew what she was doing.

He moved the coffee table and recliner to one side of the room, then took two of the Indian blankets adorning the walls and stretched them out on the hardwood floor. He hauled first Remy and then Trish onto the makeshift pallet, flinching as his hands came in contact with Trish's charged flesh. "I swear, if I survive this you're going to owe me big time," he muttered.

The couple now lying side by side, Damien was in a quandary as to what to do next. Remy still lay unconscious. If he understood what Trish had planned, the two incapacitated people would need to do the nasty in order to revive the Collective members and relieve the power charge currently building within Trish. He shrugged and decided to take it a step at a time and pray he wouldn't be forced to do something questionable, such as insert Remy's Part A into Trish's Part B while the two remained unconscious. He liked kink as much as the next guy, but this wasn't Damien's idea of a fun-filled threesome. Hell, the way he saw it, his role was little more than a puppeteer.

He made short order of undressing Remy, who wasn't his type to begin with, and combined with the fact the big man would most probably beat the shit out of him when he returned to his senses, he had no plans to dally. He just couldn't see Remy as swinging both ways and enjoying another man's touch. Trish was a different matter. Damien was torn between fearing her - she could whip his ass before the power surge, now if Remy was right, and Damien was pretty sure he was, she could annihilate him with a thought-and erotic curiosity. If the taste of her blood and the shared images of her nights of passion with Remy and Eric were valid indicators, Trish's body and her sensuality were beyond the scope of Damien's experience.

His hands shook as he unbuttoned Trish's black blouse and laid it open, revealing a lacy red demicup bra. Trish's breasts were soft tanned mounds, what many men might consider just enough—a handful. He undid her pants and slid his hands under her hips, easing the heavy denim past the curve of her ass. A string of power curled up his forearms as the tips of his fingers grazed her bare flesh. He broke contact, rubbing his hands down his pants legs. The sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead and upper lip.

With care, he quickly removed her shoes and socks and pulled her pants down her legs, delighted to find her panties matched her bra. He had known she was an immaculate dresser but had never allowed himself to consider what lay below the designer clothes and high-priced shoes. She had always been his boss—his attractive boss, but his boss nonetheless. Now he had the overwhelming urge to run his hand over her flat stomach and down her tan thighs. He contemplated his chances of surviving such an exploration.

"Touch me, Damien."

Surprised, Damien looked up to see Trish watching him, her eyes calm pools of wonder reassuring him he wasn't dreaming.

"I mean it. Remy is in no condition to help me right now. We're running out of time. If we are to save the remainder of the Collectives, to save ourselves, it must be now. Make love to me, Damien. Those who are left will feed off my passion, that includes Remy, and he is key to stopping this unending drain on Collective energies."

Damien silently debated his chance of surviving a full-on sexual encounter with Trish, but in the end, it didn't matter. He knew himself to be a selfish bastard, but not to the extent of destroying the only family he had known for these many years.

"Lord help us if I'm not foolish enough to do this."

Chapter Twelve

"Undress for me," Trish said in a husky voice that belied her weakened state. She felt Damien's concern, knew he feared sex with her would lead to his death. She more than anyone wanted to avoid any further needless destruction, of both man and vampire. She had acted foolishly, attacking Remy as she did. With all her recently acquired intuitive abilities, she had not foreseen what the power of a mere kiss would do to him. Had Damien not intervened when he did, Remy would be dead. She would not repeat her mistake with Damien, even if it cost her own life.

* * * *

Damien visibly gulped for air then pulled his skintight T-shirt up his chest, baring his slender yet muscled frame to Trish. He reached for the back edge of the shirt and pulled it over his head before freeing his arms from the sleeves. His gaze remained locked on Trish, watching for any sign of how he should proceed. He shifted his weight from foot to foot as he used toe to heel to slip off his loosely laced running shoes. He fumbled with his belt buckle. His hands now shook as badly as when Trish had created the earthquake conditions earlier. Good sense told him to run, fast and far, as far as he could get from this woman, this freak of nature, but watching Trish watch him made his breath come in short waves, his heart beat erratically and his penis twitch to life.

Glancing over to the still-unconscious Remy, he felt confident his cock was, if not as large as Remy's, at least adequate for Trish's needs. Even after all the years and the many lovers who had shared his bed, Damien couldn't totally buy into size did not matter. Size mattered, at least to him.

His black, well-worn pants hung loose on his hips. As soon as his belt and zipper were undone, they fell to his feet. He stepped out of them, sockless and without the binding effects of modern day briefs. Had he been in a better frame of mind he would have made a smartass comment about preferring to hang free or living life *au naturel*. Instead all he could do was swallow the cotton balls accumulating in his mouth and drop to his knees next to his queen.

"Touch yourself," Trish whispered. "Earlier, while we were driving, I was so aroused, so wet

thinking of Remy, of what needed to be done, but now I'm tired, so tired..."

Damien ran his hand down his chest over his lean stomach to his cock. He wondered if he had it in him to come to a full erection right now, with so much riding on his performance, with a living machine of destruction lying so close by. Even a woman as lovely as she may prove too little stimulation too late to do them any good.

Wrapping his fingers around his flaccid flesh, he did what he had done so many times before, moved his fist up and down, eyes closed as he envisioned a phantom lover doing the work. Only this time the phantom lover had a name and a face and she wore a red bra and matching panties.

Trish's voice echoed in his head, I need you Damien. I need your cock firm and your body willing. I won't hurt you. I can control this. I can use this power to give pleasure as much as pain, all I need is a little relief. You can give me that relief. I saw you stroke yourself when I was with Remy, the way your breath came in short bursts, your eyes closed, your head thrown back. Just now, I felt your attraction to my body. Just think how my flesh will taste under your tongue, how intoxicating my blood smells coursing through my veins. It can all be yours.

I know your deepest fantasies. I can see them, hear your heart beat faster as you think of my moist lips wrapped around you. I know what you really want is to feel my fangs grow, piercing your feather-soft shaft as I

suck you dry.

You want me, Damien. I know you do. Trust me, Damien, trust me and come to me.

Without thought or actual knowledge that he had moved, Damien found himself astride his queen, his mistress, his cock at her lips as he cradled her head in his hands.

* * * *

Trish moaned and opened her mouth for him, allowing him access to the same orifice that had so recently incapacitated her mate. She strained for control, transfixing Damien with a trance strong enough to turn any discomfort he might feel from her power surge into excruciating sensuality. Her arms rested on Damien's thighs. Trish closed her eyes and concentrated on the warm shaft invading her mouth. She sucked Damien's cock deeply then let it slide out again until all she held only the head between her moist lips.

Damien groaned and set the pace. Trish heard his silent pleas for her teeth, the drawing of blood. His excitement bled into Trish's subconscious, fueling her tired mind and body. She couldn't deny her attraction to her assistant but a part of her also felt guilt he was not Remy. She closed her eyes and focused on Damien, breathing in his scent and making it her own.

With exquisitely slow progression, Trish felt her

own desire rise out of the ashes of her exhaustion. Her eyeteeth grew, scraping the velvet sides of Damien's penis. Trish felt the combined sensation of her teeth and mouth and the buzz of pure energy push Damien to the brink. He cried out and pumped his hips in an erratic rhythm. Trish felt his cock throbbing, begging for release. As the first drops of his seed touched her tongue, Trish tilted her head until she could get a clean bite into the bulging vein running along his shaft. She gulped down semen and the coppery delight of his life's blood. Moaning, she fought against the sudden onslaught of dizziness as she struggled to remember when she had last fed on blood or food.

Outside, thunder rolled through the air and the wind gusted into a fury. Tree limbs swayed to near breaking point and lightning cracked. The human guards struggled to find cover against the growing storm.

Feeding acted as a catalyst. Trish no longer needed to act on intuition to save herself and the Collectives. She now *knew* what to do as sure as if her brain had been uploaded with the instruction manual to this gift she had been given. She knew of the three paths—choices—for living as a Collective conduit. If she chose not to use the energy for the purpose it was meant, as the ultimate weapon of destruction, she could release the energy back into the air and earth, creating

natural phenomenon ranging from earthquakes to tornados and hurricanes and recreating the landscape from mountains to valleys, canyons to flatlands. Once the energy levels were under control she could retain her gift, ruling with the knowledge she had the power to destroy anyone who stood in her way. The downside was she stood a huge chance of destroying herself in the process. Human bodies were not created to process more than one life force for long.

She could share the energy she had now with Remy, teach him how to control it, to use it and together they could rule, relying on each other to act as a relief valve in case the events of the last couple days ever repeated. Or she could include Damien in her plans. As a triad of conduits, they would no longer be answerable to the Council and they would have the resources to do a lot of good for all of mankind—alive and undead. It seemed like a fair trade considering they were predators and humans were their main source of nourishment.

As Trish drained the final drops of cum from Damien's now flagging penis, he struggled to remain conscious. Remy now lay on his side, his head resting in the crook of his arm as he softly stroked Trish's pubic bone through the silky red panties, her hips gyrating naturally, pushing against his hand. But now, now that Trish once

again felt in control and revived, she became aware of his presence. She looked into his mind and saw his acceptance, his understanding of the position he had wakened to find his mate and her assistant in.

She urged him to continue, to touch her as a lover might as she reached over Damien's thigh to stroke Remy's balls and cock. Her mind busily reconstructed the power surging through her into a pleasant sensation for Remy, as she had done for Damien. The exhausted Damien barely noticed she had moved. Trish grinned and relayed the image of Remy ripping her panties off her hips to Damien. As anticipated, Damien jumped in shock, scrambling away. Trish was Remy's woman and Damien wasn't sure the bigger man wouldn't take his head off for touching her. After all, this wasn't a planned thing. No threesome rules had been established. No permissions given. This was sex on the fly and Damien was the odd man out.

Remy nonchalantly took notice of Damien's hasty exit, then returned his attention to seducing his woman with soft caresses. His already moist cock urged him to take her, to possess Trish physically as she had so thoroughly possessed his heart since their first meeting. He dropped a line of kisses along her hip and thigh while his hands urged her to spread her legs wider. She complied, rolling onto her side to give him easier access to

her wet center. He moaned as his mouth found her clit, the sound vibrating against her flesh and sending her reeling.

Across the room, the spooked Damien had relaxed and once again felt his sexual desire growing, until he could no longer resist touching himself. He prayed she would invite him back, that he might touch his mistress as Remy did, as she deserved.

Trish eased into position, her lips a whisper from Remy's hard member. She breathed along his shaft before lapping at his balls with catlike strokes. Slowly she worked her way around each ball then took each one in turn into her mouth, rolling them in her mouth, tugging and sucking until she was rewarded with a growl from Remy.

In response, he increased his attention to her clit, methodically lapping at the hard nub while sliding two fingers into her wet pussy. He increased the pump of his fingers to match the rhythm of her tongue lapping at his shaft as she worked her way back up to the trickle of pre-cum rimming the head of his penis.

Trish marveled at the difference in flavor between Damien and Remy—the taste differed as much as the men. Remy tasted salty and full-bodied while Damien left a slight bitter aftertaste in her mouth. She relished the feel of Remy in her mouth. Before him, she had never really enjoyed

oral pleasures. It had always been a chore when Russell demanded oral sex.

* * * *

As Trish and Remy continued tending the needs of each other their passion grew, and with it, a visible bubble of light engulfed them, steadily growing larger, and the storm outside subsided. Damien backed away from the light, his renewed arousal forgotten as he found his back against the wall with no way to escape and the light pressing in on him. He closed his eyes and held his hands up in front of him in a feeble attempt to ward off the impending wall. Instead of crushing him as he feared, the light absorbed him, then shrinking back, pulled him with it until he knelt at the small of Trish's back.

Join us. We have the power of the many to disburse and retain. You will be our second, a reckoning force in your own right. The voice was neither Trish's nor Remy's, but a melding of both.

Damien looked to Trish and then to Remy. Remy stopped what he was doing, removing his head from between Trish's legs. He solemnly stared at Damien as if weighing Damien's worth. "I trust Trish." He nodded his approval and returned to tasting Trish's sweet juices.

Shocked but unwilling to turn down this oncein-a-lifetime opportunity to be part of something bigger, Damien rubbed Trish's back, marveling at the sparks flying off her skin and floating off to be absorbed into the bubble. He felt no pain, only the tickle of desire haunting him, urging him to continue. He leaned over her body, sliding his tongue along her stomach and outlining the underside of her breast, lifting the weight of her breast then letting it settle back into place before lapping at it again. Each time he repeated the process his tongue slid higher on her breast until he sucked her nipple into his mouth.

* * * *

Trish sucked in her breath, momentarily stunned by the feel of Damien's mouth even though she'd known he had rejoined them. She lay back, her hand still working up and down Remy's shaft as she acted as the go between, feeding the images and desires of each sexual partner to the other until all of their thoughts floated through all three minds simultaneously. She could taste her juices on Remy's tongue as she felt Damien's mouth tease her nipples until she was on the verge of climaxing, while processing Damien's fantasy of fucking her ass while Remy fucked her pussy. As the thought occurred she knew Remy was also turned on by the idea, but insecure about sharing her with another man, even if it meant becoming

something bigger, more valuable to both their Collectives and mankind.

She rode Remy's tongue while clasping Damien's head to her bosom. All she needed was a touch, a stroke, a tease more urging to explode into a thousand pieces. Remy complied with the unspoken thought by inserting his finger into her ass and fucking her with tongue and finger.

A red haze stole over Trish. Her back arched and she cried out as her body convulsed against Remy's mouth. She wrapped her hands in Damien's hair and jerked him from her breasts. He settled for trailing nibbles and kisses across her stomach. Remy removed his finger from her pulsating ass and lapped slowly at the juices oozing from her pussy.

Trish smiled and stretched and felt intoxicated on her new role as a demi-god surrounded by her vampire concubines, temporarily forgetting the men could read her thoughts as well.

"Hey!" both men exclaimed, now looking at her instead of administering to her waning desires.

Trish grinned. "Sorry. This will take some getting used to."

"I'm no woman's concubine," Remy said.

"No, darling, you aren't. You are a loving and masterful mate and no matter what happens, I'll never forget it, but it is fun to fantasize, isn't it?"

The trio exchanged long looks, then slow-

growing smiles emerged on Damien's and Remy's faces.

An awkward silence ensued, each man instinctively trying to block his thoughts from the others. Only Trish retained full access. She knew they were both willing to follow where she led, but they didn't know each other well enough to proceed any further than necessary to accomplish the transfer.

"Thank you both for saving my life. You did, you know, save my life and many Collective lives. We've already lost so many to the morning sun... It's my fault, but I didn't know, didn't understand, until now.

"You were right when you guessed I'm a conduit. I can collect the life energy of all Collective members tied to me and focus it for destructive means. As a side effect, it is also the reason vampires who have shared blood with me can survive the sunlight. I thank God Eric never bit me. It would be the irony to end all ironies to have that jerk profit from what he has done to me."

"How did he do it?" Remy asked.

"Letting me know he killed Russell and my mother was the catalyst, but it only worked because he had carefully chosen me as the new queen. For years now, he has researched the making of a conduit. He had traced the genealogy of the earliest conduit and knew I was a descendent. It wasn't hard to find someone to tweak the spell that was cast on the mosquito that bit me and made me queen.

"The only thing he didn't anticipate was his inability to control me. He was sure I would choose him as my mate and share the power. Instead he's buried beneath the earth awaiting darkness to make a break for it." Trish shrugged. "By the time he does, I will have recovered enough to find him anywhere just as easily as I read his mind, and when I do..." The whites of her eyes glowed in anger.

"And I have made the decision to share my abilities with you. As a triad, none of us will be all-powerful, and we can better use the power for good instead of evil." She grinned, feeling like a comic book character.

"Can you do that? I mean, we aren't all descended from the same line, are we?" Damien asked.

"I have the ability and the knowledge to do whatever I want now."

Chapter Thirteen

Damien spooned Trish, stroking her body to a fever while Remy resumed his position with his head between her legs, his shaft between her lips. Twice now, Trish had reached a quick, subdued climax, as if too exhausted to give more. But this time, Remy was determined it would be different. This time when she came for him, she would come again and again until he felt full life energy returned to his people. Trish was so close, so wet and yet so distant.

"Damien, on your back. Trish, kneel over him. I want your ass, woman." Remy's words were less a demand than they were an orchestration of events.

* * * *

The group shifted position. Trish looked down into Damien's eyes. The brown orbs usually sparkled with mischief, but at that moment, were clouded with raw need—need for a good fuck and

need for love and acceptance. Unless Remy changed his mind, Trish couldn't help with the fuck, but she could and did love Damien as more than a brother and less than what a long-term lover deserved. She brushed her lips along each eyelid and then his lips.

Remy knelt behind her, spreading her legs with his. Damien's legs rested between Remy's. He teased her already moistened anus with his finger before pressing the head of his cock against the tight bud.

"Open for me, darlin'," Remy said.

Trish closed her eyes and concentrated on recreating her first night with Remy. Damien's warm breath teased her lips while Remy slowly entered her backside. The now-familiar charge bolted through her body as she adjusted to accept Remy's girth. Beneath her, Damien rested his hands on her shoulders, supporting her as she backed further onto Remy's throbbing shaft. Damien arched his back until his tortured cock brushed against Trish's mound.

As much as he wanted to fuck her, Damien controlled his desire, rubbing Trish as Remy enjoyed her anal pleasures.

Trish moaned and her body rocked. She knew what Remy wanted. He wanted his people fully reenergized. They would always be his first priority, but she would come in a close second. As hard as it was for her to believe, Remy loved her. She now understood he had left her out of fear that she did not care for him as well. As soon as they settled this conduit business, she meant to show him he meant more to her than a business deal or bargaining tool.

She felt Damien's cock slide, wet with pre-cum, along her lower belly while Remy picked up the pace. She struggled to breathe evenly.

"I can't hold on much longer... So tight, and I want you so much," Remy said through gritted teeth.

His mere words were enough to push her over the edge. Her eyes grew wide and she salivated. "Harder...more...give me more." The last of her words came out muffled as her fangs stretched her mouth wide. Remy had been so thoughtful to offer her a meal this time.

She struck like a snake, sinking her teeth into Damien's neck, setting off a succession of rolling orgasms culminating in a three-way mosh pit of ecstasy.

Six vampires left the cabin as soon as dusk set, leaving the trio alone to complete the conduit binding ceremony. In many ways, it amazed Trish more conduits had not been created over the centuries. Remy, Damien and she sat cross-legged in a circle around a single candle. The candle

served as a focal point more than anything else. Trish could have all the knowledge in the world but, without practice, some things wouldn't come easily, and she had no desire to repeat the ritual needed to create a triad.

As she spoke the sacred words, Remy and Damien fed on the enriched blood seeping from Trish's gashed wrists. Trish swayed, struggling to remember the words, relieved she had Remy and Damien there to support her, to help her maintain her position within the circle. The ancient words flowed quickly, succinctly from her tongue. She spoke with more confidence than she felt. She found it reassuring that the ends justified the means but was concerned how someone such as she, a woman who considered designer shoe shopping an extreme sport and who knew so little about courage could possibly be considering such a warped existence as vampire superhero. After all, by definition vampires were predators, parasites feeding off humanity. Could they really use their powers to do good as well? Oh God, I made the transition from wedding planner to vampire. I've accepted that I am part of a parasitic breed, a group of people who just barely qualify as human. Can we really make a difference? Can we seriously use so much dark energy for good? It's never been done and yet I know I can feel the potential.

Without conscious thought, the trio levitated, rising higher and higher until they floated in

midair, even with the first floor. As Trish spoke the final words, the words binding them together, allowing none of the three to act against the will of the majority, the front door flew open. Into the light stepped a man and a woman, both dressed in black leather, disdainful expressions mirroring one another.

"Stop! This mustn't happen," screamed the woman as she threw a power surge in their direction, spinning the trio in midair.

The men looked up from Trish's bloody wrists, curious, but not overly concerned by the interruption. With their newly rendered powers came the knowledge they were invincible. Whatever or whoever came through to door was no threat.

"Sabine, Nathan, we weren't expecting you yet," Remy said. With a shared glance of consent, the triad glided to the first floor landing and alit gracefully within feet of the early visitors. The Council representatives weren't due for another evening.

"What have you done, Remy?" Sabine asked.

"How does it concern you?" Trish asked, stepping forward, taking her place as the rightful leader. The heady feeling of supreme power gave her the courage she so often felt she lacked.

"You didn't think the Council wouldn't notice such an enormous power flux?"

"I really didn't think about the Council at all. My hands were full of more pressing issues, like the survival of our Collectives."

Sabine shook her shoulder-length golden hair. "You must be Trish." She measured Trish and her sour expression said she found Trish wanting. "You must reverse this process and come with us now. The Council will want to manage the use of your powers. You have not been properly... inducted...into the ways of vampira."

Trish ran her fingers through her mussed hair and stood a little taller. A few weeks ago, standing naked between two equally nude men with whom she had just had sex would have had her running for cover. Now it just didn't seem to matter, no more than this petite blonde's demands mattered. The only things that mattered were the survival of her Collectives and the balance of power—within the triad, the environment and the society as a whole. In fact, against those three issues the wishes of a Council that was unable to control her seemed rather inconsequential.

"We were expecting you tomorrow evening," Remy said. "Accommodations were arranged at the Stalworth lodge. If you leave now, you can still make it before dawn."

Nathan arched a brow. "Are you suggesting we aren't welcome?"

Remy held his arms open and looked down and

around at his companions. "As you can see, we aren't prepared to accept visitors."

"Reverse the process, Trish," Sabine demanded. Trish let silence fill the air before answering.

"The process can just as easily be reversed tomorrow as today. I recommend we take some time to consider the...consequences of such rash actions as threatening the sanctity of Council and Collective relations. The results could be detrimental for everyone involved. Especially in a time when it could just as easily be mutually beneficial for all to remain loyal to the common good."

What the hell does that mean? Damien asked.

"It means Trish thinks she is more powerful than the Council," Nathan stated matter of factly.

"How did you—" Damien began.

"How did I hear your thoughts? Do you honestly believe the Council is without certain abilities?" Nathan asked.

Nathan's shoulders filled the doorway. His black coat floated around him. He kept his arms crossed in front of him. While he might have been twice Sabine's size, he presented the lesser threat. Sabine's wide stance and open arms reminded Trish of a spider—fragile-looking but capable of springing on her enemy and reeling him in slowly on her sticky web of half-truths. And Trish's instincts told her that Sabine never told the whole

story about anything.

Trish was so tempted to read Sabine's thoughts and find out what the Council really planned. She wanted the knowledge and time to consider of how much value the Council might be in her future plans, other than the obvious. Fewer enemies meant fewer unnecessary headaches.

"You know, this has been a long day for all of us. You've obviously traveled with the sunset around half the world to get here this early in the evening. I've not slept in two days and we have a little errand to run before daybreak. If I give you my word, we won't do anything drastic, destructive or not in keeping with Council bylaws, can we agree to go back to our original plan and meet tomorrow evening? We have an elegant reception planned, which we can follow up with a formal private meeting to discuss all of this...this conduit business," Trish suggested.

Sabine and Nathan traded a long look before Sabine nodded. "On your word of honor, we will wait."

* * * *

She didn't kill me. I still have a chance to redeem myself. As soon as she understands the gift I've given her, she'll thank me. Eric stumbled through the woods, branches swiping inconsequentially across his dirt-encrusted face. I'll get the recognition I've

always deserved. All I have to do is get back to the lodge and clean up. I'll have Ms. Fine ice a bottle of champagne and we'll celebrate, then I'll snap Damien's backstabbing neck, crush Remy's heart with my bare hands and Trish will be all mine.

Eric tilted his head as he heard the distant sound of traffic coming toward him on the highway paralleling his path. "Ah, my ride is here." He picked up the pace and veered toward the highway. "Can't keep my driver waiting. It would be impolite."

* * * *

Trish and Damien slept stretched out in the back of the SUV while Remy drove. Once Trish had helped him home in on Eric's heartbeat, tracking him had been a breeze. Now it looked like they were on a collision course with the rogue vampire. Good. I'm going to kill that son of a bitch. He had no right to play God with Trish's life. True, without Eric's interference he would never have met Trish and fallen in love with her. Still, Remy knew Trish would be happier living her old life. He could try his best for a lifetime and never make it up to Trish for everything she had lost, but he intended to try.

Out of the darkness, something big collided with the front fender with a loud screech of bending metal. "Shit," Remy yelled as he jerked the steering wheel and slammed on the brakes, trying to keep the SUV out of the ditch. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Remy saw a dark form lying in the road behind him.

"Huh? What happened?" Damien's tousled head peered over the back of the seat.

"Hit something. Probably a deer. They're thick through here this time of the year." Remy opened the driver's side door and put a foot down on the pavement.

"It's not a deer. It's Eric." Trish's tired voice came from somewhere in the dark recesses of the back. "He's crazy, you know. I mean totally demented.

"It really isn't fair. I can't even be angry with him now. He's ruined my life, killed everyone I hold dear and now I can't even blame him for it because he's lost his mind." Trish's sobs filled the interior of the vehicle. Remy and Damien exchanged a long look. "I mean, I guess you have to be insane to kill someone, but at least when he appeared normal and I didn't know any better I could pretend he was some calculating, chauvinistic villain. Now he's just a pathetic... creature."

Remy jerked his head toward the open door, signaling Damien to check on Eric. Damien nodded and got out. Remy sat there a minute,

calculating the best way to handle Trish. She wasn't like any woman he had ever known and the longer he knew her the more complex she became to him. Finally, he got out and walked around to the back of the SUV.

Remy's hulking frame filled the back. He scooted into a seated position with his back against the seat and pulled the sobbing Trish into his lap.

"Hush, you've had no time to grieve yet. Everybody needs that."

"I don't have any brothers or sisters, no aunts, no uncles. It's just me now."

Remy swallowed the lump in his throat and pushed back the urge to remind her she had him. He held her in his arms and reassuringly patted her back. Meanwhile he watched the scene erupt in the shadows behind him, thankful Trish's inner turmoil kept her oblivious to Damien and Eric's confrontation.

* * * *

By the time Damien had walked the hundred feet separating Eric from the SUV, Eric had recovered and risen up on one knee. The leaves and debris in his hair enhanced the crazed man's insane appearance. In a moment of clarity, he recognized Damien. "Traitor!" He leaped the few feet separating him from Damien and clutched at Damien's black T-shirt as the two men rolled to the shoulder of the gravel road.

Damien easily pinned the bigger man to the ground. His eyes spoke of the unearthly calmness he possessed while he calculated the pros and cons of respecting Trish's wish to keep Eric unharmed, as opposed to the logical decision to simply plunge his hand into the struggling vampire's chest and crush his undead heart. Even easier, Damien could merely think Eric dead and it would happen.

Damien sighed as he allowed his prey to wiggle free from his grasp. If Eric ran, he would let him live. If he fought back, he would die. The answer couldn't have been simpler if he'd flipped a coin. And killing Eric or letting him live did not concern him any more than deciding between heads or tails. On the other hand, Trish's wellbeing did.

Eric's roar telegraphed his intentions a second before he lunged at Damien again. Damien easily fended off the attack, simultaneously striking. His hand a blur, it plunged into Eric's chest and wrapped around Eric's pounding heart. Eric's eyes widened in realization as he froze in place, staring into Damien's blank eyes.

From the SUV, Trish screamed, "No!"

Damien blinked and closed his fist. Eric's

mouth gaped. For a long second, time froze, then Eric crumpled like a puppet with his strings cut. His chest slid off Damien's bloody wrist.

Damien looked to the vehicle to see Remy holding Trish to his chest. He didn't have to ask whether Remy agreed with his decision. The extra strength he'd garnered from the triad would not have kicked in if two out of three of the trio had not agreed to outcome.

Chapter Fourteen

The meeting with the Council members did not go at all the way Trish had pictured it. She had planned a grand affair—tuxedoed guests, the finest crystal, drinks served on silver platters, a gleaming chandelier twinkling overhead. Instead she sat at the head of a boardroom table dressed in a navy blue suit and wire-rimmed glasses that she did not really need but felt that they made her look more astute. After being caught with more than just her pants down in front of Sabine and Nathan, she felt she needed any advantage she could find to overcome that first impression. Remy sat to her right and Damien to her left.

Remy and Damien did not appear to have such apprehension. Remy wore his normal blue jeans, work boots and button-down shirt. Damien had conceded to Trish's demands to dress appropriately by trading in one of the many black T-shirts for a dress shirt and his best pair of black khakis—meaning the only pair that was not faded

to dull gray, were held together with safety pins, or featured unraveling rips. He had even traded in his tongue stud and several of his dangling earrings for something more subdued, like a thick coating of eyeliner that covered half his eyelids and whipped out into dramatic blaze designs to his temples.

When an exasperated Trish commented on his appearance, he only shrugged and said, "I'm having a dark day."

Their guests, who declined any part of a gala event, slouched at the far end of the table. Nathan had propped his size fourteens on the high-sheen mahogany tabletop. Neither Nathan nor Sabine looked particularly concerned about the recent course of events.

"I don't see how this changes anything," Sabine said while examining her meticulously manicured, inch-long red nails. "You are still answerable to the Council. We represent the Council and we insist you reverse the process and dismantle the triad."

Trish reached out her hands across the top of the table to her companions, who promptly placed their hands in hers, reassuring her that she had their support and showing Sabine and Nathan that they stood together.

"No," Trish said. "We respectfully decline. I did not ask to be brought into this underworld of immortal beings nor did I ask to have these abilities awakened within me but now that they are I feel it is in everyone's best interest that no one person have control of such power. We are all prone to human frailties such as greed, lust, ambition. As a triad we can balance out those flaws and keep any one of us from using the power out of negative emotion or purpose." She nodded her head, conceding her next point. "And without a way to drain off excess power you are correct—a conduit is a danger to everyone. Because I had no idea what had been unleashed from within me or the drain I affected on my people, I did more damage in one day than a small army might. It is possible, if left unchecked, I could have wiped out every vampire on the planet and millions of humans in the process."

"So you are trying to tell us that even though you are more powerful as three you are safer?" Nathan asked.

All three at the opposite end of the table nodded. "Exactly," Trish said. "And we feel we can use our power for good, to leach off the build-up slowly, over time, in positive ways." They exchanged sly looks as they thought of their last experience with leaching off the power and the pleasure they had taken in one another's arms. Sabine and Nathan stared at one another, asking and answering unspoken questions that Trish

easily overheard.

We can't trust her, Sabine thought.

Do we have a choice? You know the legends as well as I. Even if we could get the entire Council to come together against just the power of the one it is questionable we would prevail. As three...they are virtually gods, Nathan responded.

For a hanging moment, all was silent between them. Trish squeezed Damien's and Remy's hands, reassuring them the best thing to do was wait and let the blocks fall where they may.

We could use them, keep them within Council rule. An enemy kept close at hand is easier to control than one lurking in the brush. Sabine sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than anyone else.

Yes, Sabine, use her to your advantage, keep her too busy to concern herself with what you do not wish her to see. The thoughts were Nathan's.

Sabine nodded and addressed the triad. "Very well, we have a proposition for you then. We will vou, oppose provided vou yourself...loyal. To the south, in community on the Texas coast, an encampment of vampire hunters resides. These beings are unlike others who have hunted us. They are organized, well-financed and worse, they are a part of us. Vampires hunting vampires, determined to wipe out their own kind. We would like you to eliminate them before they grow any stronger."

"Stronger? How so?" Remy asked.

Nathan swung his feet from the table and leaned forward, "You are familiar with cults and brainwashing? Their leader, an ancient vamp named Cornelius, is a great strategist. He believes a dead enemy serves little purpose if instead he can be shown the light. He prefers to capture vampires alone, away from their Collectives, then hold them without sustenance until they are weak with hunger. He then hand-feeds them both blood and propaganda in such minute quantities as to barely keep the captives sane until such time as he is seen as their savior."

"Wait a minute, I'm confused," Trish said. "I thought you said their purpose was to destroy all vampires. This sounds more like he is creating an opposing force with intentions of survival rather than annihilation."

"We have it on good authority that Cornelius' followers are prepared to lay down their own lives, when the time comes, to ensure no more vampires terrorize this world." Nathan snorted. "Terrorize, indeed. We have spent centuries trying to blend in with our surroundings. Why, there are no more than a dozen vamps at any given era who even feed to the point of death and perhaps one of that dozen who is indiscreet enough as to leave evidence of his crime.

"It is the primary reason the Council was

created, to provide a set of laws by which we can live side by side with our mortal brethren."

An uneasy tingle crawled up Trish's spine. She homed in on Nathan's and Sabine's brainwaves, trying to pick up what they may not be saying but her attempt was unsuccessful. Either they were speaking the truth or were masters at blanking from their minds what they did not want others to hear. Then again, they had probably had plenty of practice, if everyone on the Council could as easily read thoughts as Nathan had Damien's the previous evening.

"What if we don't want to take your word for it?" Trish asked.

Sabine's steely gaze didn't falter. If she picked up on Trish's intended insult, she didn't show it. "You don't have to."

She nodded to Nathan who pulled a slender gray tablet out of a black attaché case by his chair. The group sat in heavy silence while the machine hummed to life and Nathan pulled up a video file. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped the screen around to face the triad.

A nondescript older man stood over a whimpering woman in torn clothing. The video flickered, the angle shifted and jumped to the man kneeling beside the woman, holding her face between his hands.

"My child, you have suffered more than any

being should be allowed. Let me end your pain."

With a sharp, effortless twist her neck snapped. Her tear-stained eyes went wide then froze as she slumped. His hands were the only thing keeping her from falling over in a heap.

Gently, the man lowered her to the floor and bowed his gray-streaked head as if in prayer.

The video flashed to static.

Everyone looked from the screen to Sabine while Nathan snapped the tablet shut.

"Elizabeta worked in a local bar. She followed Council protocol, never killing, never bringing attention to herself or our kind. Our spy, the one who smuggled out this film, said Cornelius' people took Elizabeta right before dawn while she walked home from work. They locked her in a cell for many days with no food, no blood—she could have sustained on either.

"Each day Cornelius visited her, prayed with her to relinquish her allegiance to the Council and join him in his war against us. When that didn't work, he resorted to torture until she turned into the wretched creature you saw. The rest you know.

"Two weeks later our spy was found outside the doors of a neighboring Collective. The skin had been torn from his body and his tongue removed. Attached to the stake through his heart was a note, a declaration of open war." She nodded to Nathan, who pulled out a sealed plastic bag containing the dried remnants of the note.

"We have sixty days to respond to their demands of total autonomy or they will go Collective by Collective destroying everything we have built."

Trish tried to find the truth behind Sabine's words but Sabine was as unreadable as a closed book. Trish hated what she saw, what she heard but she also had to wonder what Sabine was hiding.

Remy's deep voice resonated in the spacious boardroom. "Does he have the resources to carry out his threat?"

"At last count, he had more than five hundred vampires and mercenaries under his control. Many are old, familiar names to us," she shrugged. "Renegades who the Council ruled against in the past, their offspring and others, like Elizabeta, who were coerced into taking sides."

"What makes you think he won't live in peace if you just meet his demands?" Trish asked.

"Terrorists do not thrive on peace."

Remy nodded and leaned back in his chair with his arms folded across his chest. "Some men are just born evil."

Damien scratched the back of his head. "He's evil all right." He looked around and ducked his

head, suddenly enamored with his fingernails. "I've run across his name before. This guy's been bad news for centuries.

"Cornelius was born in the late sixteenth century into a royal family, the youngest son of five children. By the time he was eighteen he had proven himself in battle so thoroughly that his father put in him charge of his armies. Forty years later he disappeared, presumably a casualty of war. Soon after rumors of a lone warrior wiping out entire villages in some of the bloodiest massacres ever detailed in history spread through the countryside. For decades, his reign of terror continued and then as suddenly as the raids had begun they ended.

"At the end of the last century Cornelius reappeared as a gentler creature of the night. The records are filled with references to Cornelius' generous donation to academia and his remarkable work in the underprivileged worlds. This is the first I've heard about him returning to his old ways," Damien said.

"And once we have proven our loyalty? What happens then?" Remy asked.

"Then you continue leading the Macon and Stalworth Collectives as always. You pay tribute to the Council. You ensure the safety of your followers and, as long as you do not bring unwanted attention to our kind," Nathan looked to Sabine, "I see no reason for further interference. Do you?"

Sabine's eyes gleamed as she issued a final warning. "Know your place and you will be rewarded but if you display any illusions of grandeur I will personally fight you to my last breath. I would rather see someone like Cornelius destroy us one at a time. At least he has proven himself a warrior, not some upstart who thinks this is some sort of game."

Trish slowly rose to her feet, leaning forward on her clenched fists. "I assure you this is no game. I have seen more death in the past few days than I had ever hoped to see. Even more undeniable, I caused the deaths, including that of my own mother, maybe not directly but she died because of my association with a psycho like Eric and I am no one's puppet." No matter how logical the argument she would always count her mother and Russell as dead because of her. "We will do this one thing for you simply because it sounds like this Cornelius could be a worse answer for vampire-kind than the Council. But when this is done we will meet again, and when we do it will be to negotiate a treaty freeing us from Council rule. We do not need your protection, although it is apparent you need ours. I will not answer to an inferior.

"Remy, Damien." Trish did not wait to see if

they followed her. She knew they would. They worked as one unit now and she knew much of the anger she felt was not her own. The overwhelming need to hurt someone belonged to the same source that popped up at the most opportune times to guide her through situations that she was not prepared to handle, like knowing going to Remy would resolve the continuing build-up of power. She compared the sensation to possession by some pissed off poltergeist who held the user's manual to her conduit powers. On top of the foreign anger, she felt Remy's and Damien's anger pressing in on her.

Oh yeah. She needed to hit something.

Chapter Fifteen

"there alone," Trish said as she flipped her auburn hair out of the way so Remy could continue laying kisses along the side of her neck and along her collarbone. "What if he needs us?"

"Stop worrying. We've tested our bond. If Damien needs us we will know."

"Maybe we're being overly cautious with all this reconnaissance."

Remy slid the Egyptian cotton sheet down until her breasts were visible. He blew softly across her sensitive nipples and they immediately tightened to pink nubs.

"His idea. Let him be," Remy muttered before he closed his lips around a nipple and sucked her as if trying to consume her natural nectar.

Trish languished under his expertise for a moment before forcing herself to focus.

"But I can't *feel* him. How do we know he doesn't need us if we can't feel him?"

With a sigh, Remy leaned back on his elbows. "Everyone needs privacy."

Trish looked into his blue eyes. So tranquil. Remy amazed her. Even when he would rather be doing more intimate things he willingly stopped and acknowledged her concerns. She touched the side of his face, reveling in the softness of his beard.

He turned his head into her hand and laid a kiss on the palm. "I love you, Patricia Penobscot, frantic worrier and all."

Trish leaned forward and kissed him. Kissed him for being so kind. Kissed him because she craved his taste and most of all kissed him because she valued his voice of reason.

When Remy opened his mouth to her, she ran her tongue along the roof of his mouth and felt him mentally shiver. He sucked her tongue, pulling her deeper into his mouth. His hands wrapped in her hair.

They consumed each other until Trish remembered Damien—their third, her assistant and the man she had sent into the lion's pit alone. An inch at a time she withdrew, leaving a series of delicate nibbles on his lips.

With her head resting on his shoulder, she listened to his rapid heartbeat. He swallowed heavily several times then spoke, "Let's go for a walk on the beach. I've never been to the beach

before and the moon looks like it's right on the water."

Trish grinned. "I should get dressed first."

"It's two in the morning. Why? Not for me, I hope."

"I've never walked naked on the beach before." She did not add that until her association with the vampires she had never walked anywhere in public naked. Now, after everything that had transpired, nudity didn't seem so taboo.

"What else haven't you done on the beach?" Remy asked.

A soft blush rushed over Trish. She loved the way he made her blush. "What about the sand? Won't it get everywhere?"

Remy growled, his hand travelling down her back to rest on the curve of her hip. "If we're lucky."

With a giggle, Trish scrambled from the bed and headed to the French doors leading out to the deck and onto the beach beyond.

When she heard Remy's footfalls behind her, she picked up the pace until to the naked eye it would appear she flew. Even so she used but a fraction of the speed she sensed she was capable of. The wind felt good against her bare skin, stroking her all over with a fresh coat of the cool sea.

Her hair whipped across her face when she

turned to look for Remy a moment before he crashed into her and took her into a controlled heap onto the sand. The wash of the waves left a foamy reminder of the constant ebb and tide just a few feet away but the wave of her growing need for Remy was what held Trish's attention.

Her tongue played along her top lip as she wiggled down into the sand. In the process, she brought her hips into alignment with Remy's. The firm length of his erection pressed into her pubic region. His legs and arms rested on either side of her as he thoughtfully supported most of his weight.

"I thought you were worried about gettin' sand all over," he said, his breath a heady whisper over her lips.

"Not worried, just curious."

"Still curious?"

"Yeah, but not about the sand." She raised her head and nipped at his bottom lip.

"About what then?"

"About which way you plan to fuck me."

God, she loved the sound of that, the way the words rolled out of her mouth in complete synchronization with the sudden swelling in her lower regions.

Remy rose up and urged her to turn over and kneel with her rear to him. "I can't get enough of your ass," Remy said gruffly. "The smooth, firm mounds of flesh, hips the perfect size for a man's hands." He emphasized his statement by putting his hands on her hips and pulling her toward him until his cock slid between her cheeks. Slowly he glided up and down the silky smoothness of her ass. "I could come all over your back just from this."

Trish moaned and matched his rhythm, one hand going to her wet slit and then her clit. With a finger on each side of the nub, she stroked. Eyes closed, she envisioned her fingers working quickly over her pink flesh. The imagery combined with her own touch made her heady with desire. Whatever Remy wanted was all right with her. It all felt good.

As her breathing grew more ragged, Remy pressed tighter against her. His strokes came quick and hard. His cock throbbed against Trish's ass and she silently begged for more. More. More. Fuck me, Remy. I want to feel you inside me when I come. Please.

Remy didn't need her to ask twice. He slid inside Trish's pussy. "Oh God, you are wet."

Their bodies moved in unison, skin slapping against skin as the waves lapped against the shore. Trish sank her hands into the warm sand up to her forearms. Remy held her firmly by the hips and set the pace, perfectly attuned to Trish's desires. Soon she tightened around him, pulsating as she cried out. Two more strokes and Remy pulled out,

spurted on her ass and back. His big hands rubbed cum into her skin as she sagged forward to rest on her elbows, the sand a foreign substance beneath her cheek.

Remy sagged over her body, catching his breath for a moment before rolling them both over to rest in the sand, his still-hard cock pressed against her, reminding her that this was just a prelude to what the rest of the evening promised.

Trish lay wrapped in his arms, staring out over the tranquil phenomenon of the moon kissing the sea, when Damien's cry screamed through her head. Protective of her young cohort, as she thought of him even though his undead age far exceeded her living one, she looked at Remy with fearful eyes before disappearing in the direction of the city.

By the time Remy caught up with her, she stood in naked fury at the gates of Cornelius' compound. "If anything happens to Damien I'll flatten this place," she muttered through gritted teeth. She sensed he was alive and inside. She knew as well as she knew her own heartbeat that his raced.

Damn it, Damien. Let me in. Let me see what you see, she pleaded to no avail.

Her eyes glowed as she fought to control the power building within—the same power that her people were rapidly losing. She knew she walked

a fine line. The more she allowed her anger to consume her, the more she endangered the Macon and Stalworth vampires. While she had an unyielding bond with Damien, she had to remember to live up to her responsibilities as queen.

Now at her side, Remy spoke. "Remember the plan. Focus. We don't know why Damien cried out. We only have one shot at eliminating the threat without damaging the Collectives. We fail or we overcompensate because of our ties to Damien and we become no better than Cornelius. We can't afford to drain so much life force from our people. We can't afford another unintentional massacre like the first time you tapped into your conduit powers."

The best Trish could manage was a nod. In theory, it took triad majority to draw on the life forces of the Collectives, but in the fury of battle, who was to say the majority wouldn't push aside the costs in deference for the win? And now that they were a triad any two of the three could become the responsible parties to Collective deaths. Sharing the conduit abilities reduced the risks. It did not eliminate them.

With a thrust of her hands toward the gate, she pushed out the power, effectively obliterating the iron bars. The gate did not merely give. It splintered into barbed spears and shot through the air away from Trish and Remy. The barbs sliced into the interior courtyard, harpooning trees, compound walls and a pair of unsuspecting sentries. Their faces froze in forever empty-eyed shock as they fell back into the gravel drive.

As the ring of the metal thrumming through the air subsided, a whirling alarm sounded. A flood of spotlights filled the courtyard, which had been previously lit as any city street might have been against the darkness.

Trish and Remy walked toward the front the surroundings aware of unconcerned. Had a barrage of bullets rained on them or a footstep triggered a landmine, their shared energies as a triad would have protected them. With luck, Damien was equally protected, but Cornelius was an ancient vampire with more power than anyone could comprehend. Damien's research had turned up remarkable occurrences throughout history that mirrored their own abilities. Odds were Cornelius was also a conduit and capable of doing to Damien what no mortal man could. Odds were he could defeat their triad one member at a time, but together – together they were confident they could defeat him. They had to believe that to survive.

God help me! Damien yelled.

Damien's cry echoed through Trish's head. She panicked. Even knowing everything she knew, even knowing Damien was as close to indestructible as she, she panicked.

Trish screamed for Damien and pushed out power toward the building door. The ornate wood door crumbled inward, along with a good portion of the stucco wall. She walked over the rubble as debris coated her bare skin in gray. Only then did it occur to her that she was nude. Too late to change paths.

Inside, people scrambled away. The couple paid them no heed. Their concern lay with Damien, whose presence they sensed up the now crumpled stairs. Taking Remy's hand, Trish closed her eyes and willed them upstairs. Where the night had been still upon their arrival, now a gush of wind pushed in behind them and lifted Trish and her companion to the second story landing. As quickly as the wind had risen it subsided. Undeterred they continued their trek, a bit puzzled as to why none of Cornelius' people had even attempted to fight back. Puzzled as to why Cornelius had not lived up to his reputation and met them at the door with a bloody battle.

They walked down the long marble-laden hall until they came to a sharp corner. Turning the corner, Trish and Remy came face to face with a man wielding a sword that was almost as long as he was tall. His wild gray-striped hair flew about him. His red silk robe hung open over a black

gown. Hatred fired in his eyes and his sneer made it clear this was his home they had invaded.

With a warrior's cry, he charged, his sword crisscrossing in loud swishes before him. Behind him, a door flew open and a petite girl wearing purple silk rushed forward screaming, "Father! No!"

Remy stepped forward and put out an arm to hold Trish back. *Take the girl. He's mine.*

The sword slashed down toward Remy's head. He blocked it with his arm. Blood gushed as the blade sliced through skin and muscle to bone. Had Remy not possessed superhuman powers the blow would have taken off his arm right below the elbow. Instead, it bought him the time he needed to clock the old man upside the head hard enough to send him reeling through the wall to the rear.

The girl screamed and attempted to push past the advancing Trish. Trish grabbed her by the wrist and twisted her around until she held the girl securely pinned to her, one arm wrapped around the girl's neck and the other twisting the captured arm up into a position that guaranteed the girl would stop or suffer a dislocated shoulder.

Remy grabbed up a jagged two-by-four from the demolished wall as he crossed into the room where Cornelius now sat shaking the cobwebs out of his head. Remy barreled forward until the stillseated man showed surprising agility by sweeping Remy's legs out from under him. Remy countered with a backward elbow jab that caught Cornelius in the face. Blood spurted from his opponent's nose.

When Cornelius grabbed for his nose, Remy rammed the jagged stud at his chest, but the man twisted out of the way and the point passed between his side and arm, leaving a thin bloody trail on both body parts. He tossed the stud through a nearby window and simultaneously landed a booted foot in the middle of Remy's back.

Remy slid back into the hall. "Shit."

He looked at Trish while listening to the footfalls behind him. You tired of this game as much as I am?

Do it, Trish responded. The girl struggled in her arms, begging them to stop.

Remy rose to his feet and turned to face Cornelius. With a stern look of concentration, he pushed out with the power he shared with Trish, forcing all that energy forward into his assailant.

Behind Trish, Damien cried out, "No!"

* * * *

Back at the beach house, Damien cradled the girl in his arms in what might have been an affectionate act if she had not sporadically shifted from clinging to him like an injured lover into demon gear, surging toward Remy. At present, her head rested on his shoulder. Her sobs had softened until the triad could actually speak without yelling.

"You've got it all wrong. Cornelius was no more a villain than I am," Damien said. "Sabine must have faked the video. The commune is a haven for vampires—most are castoffs that have nowhere else to go. She had a personal vendetta against Cornelius. He was her maker and her greatest weakness. As long as he survived, he could always call her back to him."

"But I heard you cry out!" Trish exclaimed.

"Well, yeah. Violet," he said, as he nodded at the woman in his embrace, "has a way of doing that to a man when she's fucking him."

"How was I supposed to know? You had me blocked out."

"A man's got a right to some privacy. We agreed, remember? Need-to-know basis. I had three days to assess the situation—three days. If I'd had anything to report before then I would have let you know. Instead you overreacted and stormed in like some overbearing naked freaks of nature, killing people."

At that, the girl sprang to life again. "Murderer!" she screamed as she tried to escape Damien and claw at Remy with outstretched

hands. Damien grappled with her until he had her hands pinned in one of his. His free arm wrapped around her waist.

"Well, you could have stopped us you know," Trish said. "As soon as you heard the gate splinter, you could have broken away from your little," she motioned to Violet, "encounter and told me I was wrong."

"Violet is not an encounter," Damien yelled. He then took a deep breath and continued more calmly. "I couldn't. I didn't hear you."

"A deaf man could have heard us," Remy said.

"Maybe, but not an unconscious one."

"You slept through that?" Trish asked.

"Yeah, I did."

"No woman's that good," Remy said.

"Yeah, well, I suspect she drugged me. Not sure why." He looked down into Violet's upturned face. "Doesn't matter. I'll never leave her."

"You've seen the way she's acted here. She'll kill you in your sleep. We're better off locking her up," Remy said.

"No. She's likely to kill you. I'm not to blame for her father's death."

"We are one and the same," Trish reasoned. "If she hurts one of us, she hurts all of us."

"Then we'll just have to keep her away from you."

"You would leave us for her?" Trish asked, hurt

etched into her face.

"No. I would leave you for all of us. To keep you safe. To be with her. To keep what is left of the peace."

"But the triad..." Trish said.

"Haven't we done enough damage as a threesome? Like it or not, the Council used us and more people died. How many of our vampires were destroyed to kill an innocent man?" Damien demanded.

"Twelve," Remy admitted, failing to meet Damien's eyes. "Twelve did not survive."

"Even with the best intentions, we've got no right to play God. So it's best if I leave. If all of us just go back to our normal lives and leave things alone. We can't trust the Council to be honest," he looked from Remy to Trish, "and we can't trust each other enough to act in good faith."

Trish looked away. Any time Damien or Remy were in danger, she knew she would do it again. She would react out of fear and anger.

"Where will you go?"

"Nowhere. Someone needs to give these people the guidance Cornelius can't. They trust Violet and through her, they'll trust me. Dammit, I've never taken responsibility for anything in my life. Maybe it's time."

Damien looked older, like he had aged several lifetimes in hours. The determination on his face,

the logic of his words was more than Trish knew how to fight. They did owe these people something and good intentions or not she kept hurting people. Russell. Her mom. Even Eric's death had been her fault. If she had been paying attention, she could have stopped Damien and Remy from taking his life.

Damien also made a good point about their good intentions. In the perfect world, they would know a lie from the truth. Instead, they had to depend on instincts. Hers were flawed, so flawed. Maybe this could be a new beginning for her as well.

She looked at Remy, just looked at him, as if he were the last bit of sanity in her insane world. She knew the answer, knew what had to be done, no matter how much it hurt.

"You are right, Damien. We are dangerous. I thought if we shared the power we could balance each other out and reduce the odds of human error. I was wrong." Tears stung her eyes. "I love you, you know. Maybe not in the same way I love Remy, but letting go of you will hurt like hell."

Damien's words flowed out to the triad. She is my world. From the moment I saw her, I had to have her. From the moment I touched her, I knew there would never be another woman for me. He managed a smile for Trish. Yes, not even you, Trish. Your blood runs thick in my veins and I will always, always love you. However, you and I both know Remy will never

share you, not the way I want to share you. Besides, I deserve more.

"What did she do to you?" Trish whispered.

For a brief moment, Damien let down his shields and allowed Trish and Remy to share in Violet's glory. Trish saw the intimacy that raced between the couple, the rough, no-holds-barred way they grappled with each other. She sensed Damien playing with Violet as a child might a kitten, teasing her with the idea that she was in control because it made him happy and he enjoyed the way she lorded over him, controlling him with mouth and hands. Trish's own desires stirred as she watched Damien replay Violet's whip laying stinging lashes over his bare back. She knew Damien liked it rough, but it never occurred to her that he enjoyed this type of dominance and pleasure.

Eventually she closed her mind's eye to what she was seeing. She had intruded enough. *Enough. I've seen enough. I could never be this for you. She enjoys the power play. I do it because I have no choice.*

Damien nodded. "Now you see."

"Can we call you if we need you?" Remy asked. "I don't see the Council leaving us be just because you aren't with us anymore. There may come a time when it will take all three of us to defend what is ours."

"Yeah, you can call anytime. I'll be here for you the best way I can, but you've got to realize that I

want a life with Violet now. Good or bad, I belong to her, too."

Trish made a move to get up and hug her friend, but a snarl from Violet stopped her. She looked so much like Damien's type with blacker-than-night hair, eyes so dark and blue that they looked purple and triple eyebrow rings to go with the array of earrings and cuffs adorning both ears. The girl was vampire, Trish knew this from her brief struggle to contain her during Remy's fight with Cornelius.

She wished there was a chance that they could be friends. The look of death in Violet's eyes made it clear they would never be buddies. Trish's gut told her she would meet up with Violet again, and next time the dark princess would not be a tenth as easy to handle as she was now. Her gut told her Violet wanted Damien more than she wanted Remy dead. Good. As long as that was the case, they could avoid bloodshed. Even so, she would feel a lot better if she knew exactly what triggered the sudden interest in her assistant. The cynic in her said it wasn't love, never mind Trish had fallen in love with Remy in a matter of days.

"Trish. Let me go, please," Damien asked, tears in his eyes. "You've got Remy. Let me have my chance at love."

How could she say no?

Epilogue

Pressed in the emerald green formal gown Remy had given her, Trish fussed with her perfectly coifed auburn locks. She used the tip of her pinky finger to check the puffiness beneath her eyes. She had awoken crying with guilt. So many had died because of her. She had the opportunity to make up for it now, at least to society at large. She could also ensure her Collectives remained strong and protected from outside forces—including the Council.

The Council. Sabine and Nathan. Tonight they would come to a new compromise that included no more payments and no Council control. The last deal with the Council proved the triad was too susceptible to manipulation. If the Council was unwilling to compromise, Remy and Damien had convinced her to, in effect, declare war. On this one point, all three triad members agreed.

A tap at the door pulled her out of her reverie. "Come in."

Expecting her mountain-man mate or the new housekeeper Rachel, Trish gasped in surprise at the debonair tuxedoed gentleman who stepped through her dressing room door. The large, clean-shaven stranger had dark, wavy hair and the bluest eyes. The eyes, Remy's eyes. Had it not been for the eyes, Trish may not have recognized him. Without the camouflage of his full beard, Remy looked like a different man, with a square jaw and the hint of dimples in his cheeks.

"You shaved," was all she could manage.

"Yeah, I thought it was time to step up to the plate and look the part of king to such an illustrious queen." Remy looked uncomfortable, like he belonged back in his plaid flannel shirt and overalls, but beneath the discomfort, Trish sensed more.

Holding the train of her skirt over one arm, Trish went to her mate, her man, and cupped his face in her hands, urging him meet her lips. They kissed slowly and deeply, as if they had all the time in the world instead of just minutes before guests were expected downstairs.

"Um," moaned Trish. "I like it, but you didn't have to shave for me. I thought you were perfect the way you were, kind of wild, untamed...and yet so gentle." She smiled. "At least you were gentle until I wanted it rough and hard."

Remy smiled. The hint of dimples proved to be

distinctly charismatic. "Now you tell me," he teased.

"You never asked." Trish's eyes twinkled.

"Speaking of asking, I do have a question for you."

"Oh yeah?"

Remy dropped to one knee and slipped his hand into his pocket, pulling out a diamond solitaire. "You once told me you felt cheated because your involvement with vampires prevented you from living out your dreams of marriage and a family. If you'll have me, I'd like to give you back that dream. I'd like to marry you proper-like—white dress, bouquet, minister, the works. I can't promise you I can make you forget your Russell, but I'll do everything in my power to make you happy."

Tears sprang to Trish's eyes as Remy slipped the ring on the third finger of her left hand. She slid down to her knees, no longer caring what her actions did to the dress. All that mattered was Remy. In breathtakingly slow motion, she leaned in close to Remy until her lips brushed his. Again and again their lips touched, each time lingering longer as Trish's arms went around Remy's neck. Her fingers ran through his hair. She tugged him closer, deeper into her embrace.

Remy pulled back, "What about your dress?" "What dress?" Trish asked as she rolled the two

of them until she was on top of Remy. The green skirt of her dress draped over them like a tree canopy over the tender foliage on a forest floor. Her heeled feet pointed toward his, but her legs were nowhere near as long as his.

With slow grace, she ran her hands over his face, memorizing his jaw line, the bridge of his nose, the soft caress of his lips as he tried to capture her finger between them. After a time, she allowed him to suck first one, then two fingers into his mouth and mimic the way she had so delighted in drawing his cock into her willing mouth. She salivated, thinking about how much he must enjoy her mouth surrounding him. As much as she enjoyed sex as equals, she had to admit to an almost egotistical high when she thought about giving Remy head and how good it made him feel.

Trish moaned and pulled out her fingers, replacing them with her lips and tongue. It amazed her how well her mouth fit with his, as if they had spent forever kissing and caressing, lost in the sweet essence of each other's company. She wondered if they would still feel the same about each other after a decade, two, a century.

Her heart quickened and warm juices pooled between her legs, quickly soaking through her lacy black thong. She squirmed into position until her mound pressed intimately against Remy's hard cock through the masses of fabric that separated them. Pressing, rubbing, grinding into him until her clit tingled, Trish quickly found herself breathless and desperate to be closer to him, to feel his heated skin next to hers.

With a savage growl, Trish sat up, tossing her auburn hair, then grabbing Remy's shirt in her fist. As her eyes glowed bright, she tore open his shirt, exposing his lightly furred chest. Casually she smoothed the torn remnants to the sides and ran her moist tongue around first one and then the other nipple, gently lapping and tugging at each before kissing her way up the side of his neck. Her hands followed her path, memorizing the feel of him beneath her touch.

Remy's breath caught as she reached his earlobe and sucked it into her mouth, her body gyrating while she made gentle love to that one small bit of his body so thoroughly that goose bumps dotted his skin.

"Woman," Remy growled, "I... We will be late for our own reception."

"They will wait," Trish murmured in his ear.

"After all, what can they accomplish without us?

Besides, a woman must have her priorities..."

Remy reached behind her, unhooked and unzipped her dress. Trish rose up and let the bodice fall away from her bare breasts.

"God, you're beautiful. From the moment I first

saw you, when the sheet feel away from your body, I wanted to show you just how lovely you are." He cupped her breasts, massaging them slowly, almost to the point of worshipping them with his touch. "Marry me, Trish. Let me show you how much I love you every day for the rest of my life," he pleaded.

Trish smiled and kissed him softly. "I did say yes."

Remy shook his head.

"Yeah, I did. With all my heart, I did. You just weren't listening."

About the Author

Casey lives in a hovel in Middle America with her pet gargoyle, Rassmussen. She has an honorary degree in Overactive Imagination from the School of Second Childhood. She is an admitted chocoholic with a voracious appetite for peanut M&M's. When she isn't living in a fantasy world, she is feeding her interest in the ironies of human behavior. She enjoys reading the obituaries, restaurant menus and serial fiction, of course. In her next life, she hopes to return as a wealthy, well-kept woman with aspirations to conquer the world. Barring that, she'd rather be a penguin.